PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

SIXTH SERIES—VOLUME 346

HOUSE OF COMMONS

OFFICIAL REPORT

THIRD SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SECOND PARLIAMENT
OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN
AND NORTHERN IRELAND
FORTY-NINTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SESSION 1999–2000

COMPRISING PERIOD
13 March—24 March 2000

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13 March 2000

THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE THIRD SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SECOND PARLIAMENT OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 7 MAY 1997]

FORTY-NINTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES **VOLUME 346**

EIGHTH VOLUME OF SESSION 1999–2000

House of Commons

Monday 13 March 2000

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

HOME DEPARTMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Immigration Advisers

1. **Mr. Neil Gerrard** (Walthamstow): What progress he has made in curbing the activities of unscrupulous immigration advisers. [112572]

10. **Mr. Jim Cunningham** (Coventry, South): If he will make a statement on the steps he is taking to curb the activities of unscrupulous immigration advisers. [112582]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mrs. Barbara Roche): Under part V of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, the provision of immigration advice or services will be prohibited unless a person is registered with the immigration services commissioner; authorised to practise by a designated professional body; or exempt under the terms of the scheme.

We are in the process of appointing the immigration services commissioner, who will lead the body that administers the scheme.

Mr. Gerrard: May I welcome my hon. Friend's reply and encourage her to take a tough line with some of the people who currently give advice? In particular, will she ensure that solicitors are included in the scheme? I still come across far too many cases involving solicitors who give the most appalling advice at extortionate cost. Recently, a solicitor advised one of my constituents from Jamaica to apply for asylum, when that person had a straightforward application for a student visa. Of course, my constituent did not take the advice. Will my hon. Friend ensure that solicitors are covered and that nothing in the scheme has a damaging effect on the advice that is sometimes well given by small community groups?

Mrs. Roche: I am extremely well aware of the problem, both as a Minister and as a constituency Member of Parliament. I assure my hon. Friend that, since January, all legal aid work has had to be undertaken by quality-assured suppliers. I know that the Law Society has that in mind—it is one of the professional bodies included in the scheme.

Mr. Cunningham: Does my hon. Friend recall that, in 1992, the Select Committee on Home Affairs drew attention to unscrupulous immigration advisers? The Conservative Government had five years to do something about the problem, but they did nothing. What does my hon. Friend say about that?

Mrs. Roche: I certainly do recall that matter, because I was a member of the Committee; indeed, I was a member of its Sub-Committee. That Select Committee was chaired by a Conservative Member and recommended that the then Conservative Government should do something about the problem. They completely failed to do so, which resulted in the delay and has led to

unscrupulous asylum cases. Who was the Minister at the time? None other than the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe).

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): Is not the situation far too serious for such cheap jibes? Is it not true that monstrous profiteering, at the expense of the vulnerable and gullible, has to be stopped? People are gravely anxious about the steady increase in the number of bogus asylum seekers. The situation in many London boroughs is intolerable; there are neither the housing nor the schools necessary to cope. Will the hon. Lady give us hope that there will be some effective curb on unscrupulous advisers and that she will get a grip on her Department and bring the inflow to a halt?

Mrs. Roche: I am grateful that the hon. Gentleman gives me an opportunity to say something about unscrupulous immigration advisers, because the situation is deplorable; they serve nobody. However, the hon. Gentleman was a Member when the Conservative Government, whom he supported, were in power. They introduced the Asylum and Immigration Act 1996. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary moved amendments to that measure when we were in opposition to do exactly what we are doing at present. I do not think that the hon. Gentleman supported my right hon. Friend's amendments, but I welcome a late convert to the cause.

Mr. David Ruffley (Bury St. Edmunds): Is not the Minister ashamed of the fact that, owing to the Government's incompetence, the asylum application backlog has doubled to more than 100,000 since May 1997?

Mrs. Roche: One of the facts that the hon. Gentleman might like to consider is that the average time, when the previous Government—

Mr. Ruffley: Is she ashamed?

Mrs. Roche: If the hon. Gentleman would keep quiet for a moment, he might be interested in my answer. He asked a question and I shall answer it; what he is about to hear may be uncomfortable for him. First, there is the backlog left by his Government. Secondly, under that Government, the average time to determine an asylum application was 20 months; under the Labour Government, the time has gone down to 13 months—and it will go down even further.

Licensing Hours

2. **Mr. David Watts** (St. Helens, North): What plans he has to change the licensing hours for public houses and clubs. [112573]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Mike O'Brien): We have been looking at licensing hours as part of our review of licensing law. We shall shortly publish a White Paper setting out our legislative proposals for reform of the licensing system as a whole.

Mr. Watts: I thank the Minister for his reply. May I draw his attention to the fact that several private members' clubs are worried about the implications of the proposals? Would he meet a delegation from that group to try to resolve their concerns?

Mr. O'Brien: I have already met some representatives of private members' clubs to discuss their concerns. I assure my hon. Friend that I shall take on board the points that they made. When the White Paper is published, they will see that we have taken cognisance of their concerns.

Sir Peter Tapsell (Louth and Horncastle): As the media appear to have been briefed that it is in the Government's mind to introduce 24-hour licensing, will the Minister ensure that in his White Paper he sets out very clearly the measures that the Government propose to take to protect those private householders who live near pubs and clubs and who need to sleep between the hours of 10 pm and 7 am?

Mr. O'Brien: We think that there is a good case for greater flexibility in opening hours, but we need to take care that the new laws, which may well in due course come forward, take account of the interests of people who live near licensed premises as well as of those who would seek to use them. I certainly hope that, in due course, when we bring forward our proposals, there will be a proper balance between the interests of those who live near public houses or other licensed premises and want to ensure that they are not disturbed by unnecessary nuisance or disorder, and the interests of those who wish to use licensed premises in order, quite properly, to enjoy themselves.

Voting (New Technology)

3. **Mr. Ben Chapman** (Wirral, South): What steps he is taking to enable new technology to be used for voting in national and local elections. [112574]

12. **Jane Griffiths** (Reading, East): What steps he is taking to enable new technology to be used in national and local elections. [112584]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Mike O'Brien): The Representation of the People Bill includes provisions to allow local authorities to pilot innovative electoral procedures, such as electronic voting and electronic counting. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has been able to give provisional approval to six such schemes to be piloted at this May's local elections.

Mr. Chapman: While I welcome the piloting of electronic voting at the local government elections this year, if we are to make voting as accessible as possible, do we not have to go much further and consider all-postal ballots, mobile balloting and more flexible times and dates for voting?

Mr. O'Brien: I very much agree with my hon. Friend that we need to consider all those things. I hope that, under the provisions of the Bill, we shall be able to pilot many of them and ensure that there is greater access to

enable all those who have the right to vote to do so more easily. I hope that that will increase the number of people who participate in our democracy.

Jane Griffiths: Does my hon. Friend agree that, in the interests of democracy, we should all be concerned about the declining turnout at elections? Does he also agree that people will not understand the continuing Conservative opposition to measures to make voting easier and more accessible?

Mr. O'Brien: We have had varying degrees of support from the Opposition for our legislation. I believe that all Members of the House should be in favour of encouraging more people to go to the polling station and vote. It was with regret that we encountered some opposition to particular aspects of this legislation that could have encouraged people to exercise their proper democratic right to vote.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): While I welcome new technologies, does the Minister agree that some people—such as my mother, who lives in Lichfield—are quite nervous about using things like automated teller machine cards? My mother likes writing out cheques, and I am quite sure that she would like to be able to do the old-fashioned tick on the box—hopefully against my name. Does the Minister accept that, in this ruthless drive for new technology, he may well alienate older people who are frightened of using electronic devices? Or will this new initiative be as effective as the initiative announced in the first three months of the new Labour Government, when they said that they were going to introduce new electronic dispatch boxes? Like so many other promises, it has come to nought.

Mr. O'Brien: I think the hon. Gentleman is at least guaranteed one vote—or is he?—and, by the way, we normally put Xs, not ticks, on ballot papers. We certainly aim to encourage all people to vote, and we have taken precautions, in the legislation and in shaping the role of the Electoral Commission, to ensure that any spread of the types of pilot scheme that we shall now consider will be of the sort that will encourage people, especially the elderly, to feel comfortable with going into polling stations and casting their ballot. Therefore, I can assure the hon. Gentleman that, if he is to get only one vote, we shall want his mother to be able to vote.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Can the Minister put my mind at rest by reassuring me that voting will continue in person, that voting electronically will not be open to fraud and that it will be deliverable in villages and market towns such as Easingwold, Thirsk, Bedale and Boroughbridge in north Yorkshire?

Mr. O'Brien: We certainly want to ensure that the new pilot schemes will be safe from abuse by any of those who might seek improperly to use them. None of the applications being piloted this year involves systems such as internet voting, but we hope that, in future years, we shall consider pilot scheme applications that involve such innovations. However, we will want to be reassured that, even when we pilot them, they are secure in terms of the operation of voting and that we do not have problems with personation, improper voting procedures and electoral abuse. We want to be very careful and we hope that the Electoral Commission's role in considering the pilot schemes will assist us in ensuring that things are done properly.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): What will the checks be against electoral fraud when votes are exercised and counted electronically? At present, the parties can send their people to the counts to keep an eye on the votes and to see how they are stacking up. What will the equivalent system be so that the representatives of the parties can ensure that we do not have a fiddled franchise?

Mr. O'Brien: We certainly want to ensure that there is no fiddled franchise and that we have a system that operates in a secure manner. If we receive any applications—I must tell my hon. Friend that we have received none as yet—we will want to ensure that the checks that are carried out provide safeguards. I cannot give him a list of the safeguards that we might have to put in place, because we have received no applications yet. I suspect that electronic and internet systems are not suitable at the moment for carrying out such operations. However, we will not close our mind to such systems in the years ahead.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes). In many ways, he has been the parent of many of the very good ideas for a rolling register that are being introduced in legislation.

Probation Service

4. **Mr. John Bercow** (Buckingham): If he will make a statement on his plans to change the name of the Probation Service. [112575]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Paul Boateng): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the opportunity to announce that we have listened to the representations of members of the House and others. Community punishment and rehabilitation will still be included in the Criminal Justice and Court Services Bill, but in its aims for the service rather than as a name. We intend that the new unified service will be called the National Probation Service of England and Wales.

Mr. Bercow: My joy at that reply is literally boundless. May I tell the Minister that, in the light of the 87 objections to his proposals that have already been publicly expressed, I was minded to ask him whether he would be willing today to concede gracefully, to withdraw his silly plan and to earn the shower of plaudits that an omission of error would bring? He has done so, and I warmly congratulate him—at the risk of inflicting the gravest possible damage on his future political career.

Mr. Boateng: I am delighted to have brought a little joy into the hon. Gentleman's life.

Ms Oona King (Bethnal Green and Bow): I, too, was surprised at my right hon. Friend's response. I wondered whether rehabilitation within the community punishment service could not be called "Recompense", which seemed better than CRAPS, CARPS or the other alternatives.

Mr. Boateng: My hon. Friend has made her point.

Police Manpower

5. **Mr. Graham Brady** (Altrincham and Sale, West): What forecast he has made of the total number of police officers in England and Wales at 31 March. [112576]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): Following the passage of the Police and Magistrates' Courts Act 1994, the number of police officers at any one time is a matter for the chief constable of an area to determine within available resources. At the end of September 1999, there were 125,404 officers in post. Audited information on police numbers for 31 March of this year should be available at the end of June.

Under the crime fighting fund, funding is being made available from April 2000 to pay for the recruitment of an additional 5,000 officers over and above the number who would otherwise have been recruited. Pressures on police funding and their possible impact on police numbers are also being considered in the 2000 spending review.

Mr. Brady: I am grateful to the Home Secretary for that reply. Given that in Greater Manchester we now have 120 police officers fewer than we had at the last general election, and that in the past year the figures for recorded crime in Greater Manchester have risen by 10,000, is it not obvious that the Government are failing to deliver on their promise to be tough on crime and on the causes of crime? Now that we know that the Secretary of State for Education and Employment was only joking when he said that there would be no more selection in schools, will the Home Secretary tell us whether he was only joking when he said that he would be tough on crime?

Mr. Straw: We most certainly are delivering on our promises. I am not clear about the figures for rising crime which the hon. Gentleman mentioned, because the figures that I have show that there was an increase in Greater Manchester, but it was a very small one of 0.2 per cent., or 754 offences, and not 10,000.

As to police numbers, the hon. Gentleman will know that between 1993 and 1998, under budgets for which the Administration whom he supported were responsible, police numbers fell significantly. Unfortunately, they have continued to fall, not least because of budgets that we set at the level that the previous Administration had suggested. However, I am pleased to tell the hon. Gentleman that, as a result of allocations that we have made under the crime fighting fund, police numbers in Greater Manchester will rise by 378, and I hope that he will applaud that.

Mr. Ivan Henderson (Harwich): Is my right hon. Friend aware of the increases proposed for Essex county under the Government's crime fighting fund, which mean that there will be 23 extra officers next year, 40 the year after and 40 the year after that? Will he explain to both Opposition parties what increases and reductions mean? Will he also explain further to those parties the programme of civilianisation, because Essex police officers are having a job trying to explain it to Opposition Members?

Mr. Straw: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. As he says, over the next three years, we have provided allocations for an increase of 103 officers in the Essex police force. On the variations that take place in particular areas, I can do no better, so far as Essex is concerned, than to quote the Colchester divisional commander, Superintendent Julian Field. He says that police numbers

> fluctuate up and down all the time. Sometimes people are attached to us for a little while and sometimes people are seconded.

As for the loss of 12 officers—a policy that the previous Administration at one stage applauded—he said:

> That is because of a programme of civilianisation of officers who performed a range of jobs like crime prevention and licensing.

Before Opposition Members make too much of the reduction in police numbers, I remind them that it was a deliberate policy of the previous Administration, which was flagged up in their 1992 manifesto, that many jobs previously undertaken by police officers should in future be undertaken by civilians.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): The Home Secretary is often very straight with the House. Will he be straight with the House about police numbers? Is not the truth that although he has been consistent on the figure of 5,000 extra officers which he announced at the Labour party conference, that is extra to a number of recruits, which has now changed three times? The total figure for extra recruits over the next three years is now 17,500. The projections show that 16,800 officers are likely to leave, which means that the net figure of extra officers is 700, and we are already 1,600 down since the last election.

Would not the Home Secretary's promise be as hollow as the one that he has accused the Tories of making if he were now to say that, at the end of this Parliament, the Government will have delivered more police officers than there were at the beginning? Are we not likely to have at least 1,000 fewer officers and, if so, what will he do about that?

Mr. Straw: Precisely because the previous Administration passed into law the Police and Magistrates' Courts Act, which transferred the power over police numbers from the Home Secretary of the day to chief police officers, I made no promises about the total number of police officers before the election, at the election or since. I do not believe, as the Conservative party does, in pretending to the public that it is possible for the Home Secretary to deliver something that no Home Secretary can, within the current law, deliver.

I have, however, promised, and will deliver, the money to provide for 5,000 additional recruits over and above those that the police service was otherwise going to recruit. We have set out in full the projections on which those bids have been based.

I have said that I hope that police numbers will be above those at the previous election, but I cannot in any way guarantee that—not least because the level depends not only on the number of recruits but on the level of wastage. We—particularly the Minister of State, Home Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke)—are working to see whether there are ways

in which we may suggest that officers should not leave the police service prematurely, as well as ensuring money for the 5,000 additional officers.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, although total numbers are obviously important, their use in the police force and how forces use their resources is equally important? There is still wide variation between the best and worst force in the country, and it is a priority to ensure that resources and numbers available are better used.

Mr. Straw: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. The same message applies to the police service as applies to the health and education services: inputs are no guarantees of outputs. My hon. Friend and I know that Lancashire police service, with no better resources than any other, has been able to deliver significantly better results, with a record reduction in crime of 10 per cent. over last year, owing to more effective management and better strategies than some other services.

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): How much confidence can people who live in London have in the Home Secretary's stewardship when they have borne the hugest—[HON. MEMBERS: "Hugest?"]—rise in the decline of police numbers? Is he aware that the Metropolitan police alone accounts for 792 officers lost, and the City of London another 114 officers lost, since his term of office began? Before he resorts to the answer of "civilianisation", as he did in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady), is he aware that the number of civilian staff in the Met has fallen from 11,390 to 10,791 under his stewardship?

Mr. Straw: The latter arises as a result of an outsourcing contract, under which people who were previously in the public sector are now in the private sector. As for the number of officers in the Metropolitan police service, I can guarantee to the right hon. Lady and the Conservative party—I absolutely guarantee this—that our record from 1997 to 2002 will be infinitely better than hers over the previous five years. Has she forgotten the record cut in staffing at officer level in the Metropolitan police service of 1,773 in the six years from 1993–98? She should hang her head in shame at her record on the Metropolitan police service.

Miss Widdecombe: Will the right hon. Gentleman tell us, just for the record, how many police constables there were in the Met when he took over and how many there are now?

Mr. Straw: As police constables have to be supervised by sergeants, inspectors and other officers—[HON. MEMBERS: "No."] Oh yes, they do. Without that supervision, there is poor management, which in the past has been a major problem in the Met. I tell the right hon. Lady that, in 1993—[HON. MEMBERS: "Answer."] The excuses and explanations should be coming from the Conservative party, given its record on the Metropolitan police service. In 1993—*[Laughter.]* The right hon. Lady laughs at the decline in the Metropolitan police service that took place under her Administration. In 1993—

Mr. David Lidington (Aylesbury): Labour is in charge now.

Mr. Straw: The hon. Gentleman's party was in charge in 1993, when there were 27,867 police officers. By 1998, under the last Budget set by the Conservative Administration, there were only just over 26,000. That was the Conservative record.

Miss Widdecombe: I was laughing not at crime, but at the Home Secretary. He seems to imagine that the past two and a half years have not happened; that the decline of more than 792 in the number of Met officers has not happened; that the decline of more than 2,000 in the number of officers right across the country has not happened; that the fall in the number of police constables has not happened; that the first rise in crime for six years has not happened; and that the revolving doors prison policy has not happened. The right hon. Gentleman is in charge. Let him take responsibility.

Mr. Straw: I am happy to debate the issue of police numbers, but the last people in the world to protest their own record are members of the Administration who held office between 1992 and 1997, and the very last people in the world to call for more money to be spent on the police service are the Conservative Opposition.

I remind the right hon. Lady that the money that we are putting into the police service—the £1.24 billion over these three years, and the £400 million for crime reduction—has been condemned as reckless by her and her party. We had further evidence of what would happen if a Conservative Government were ever elected from the comments made on 1 March by the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin), shadow Treasury spokesman. Speaking with the authority of the shadow Chancellor, which the right hon. Lady certainly does not do, the hon. Member for West Dorset promised spending on critical public services. He said:

> By those, I mean health and education

but only

> possibly . . . the police and defence.—[*Official Report*, 1 March 2000; Vol. 345, c. 493.]

That is what we can expect from the Conservatives—just the possibility of a little additional spending on the police service, whereas the spending by us is regarded as reckless.

Paedophile Crime

6. **Mr. Bill O'Brien** (Normanton): What recent initiatives he has taken to reduce the incidence of paedophile crime; and if he will make a statement. [112577]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): The Government attach great importance to protecting children from sex offenders. We are introducing legislation this Session to create a comprehensive scheme to prevent unsuitable people, including sex offenders, from gaining access to children through working with them. We are establishing a criminal records bureau. We are also investing in the Prison Service sex offender treatment programmes. Sex offender orders and extended sentences for sexual and violent offenders are now available to the courts. In police

terms, we are focusing on the international paedophile networks through the National Criminal Intelligence Service, which will be helped by the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill that is now being considered by the House. The Association of Chief Police Officers has established a register of sex offenders, which contains more than 10,000 names.

Mr. O'Brien: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply and for the efforts being made by him and his colleagues to ensure that no danger is posed by sex offenders. I realise that the Sex Offenders Act 1997 is a valuable tool for the police in tracking sex offenders. In the Horbury community in my constituency recently, there was great concern about the fact that a registered paedophile had been seen around schools and with children due to assemble. It seems that further regulations are needed, or instructions to the police with regard to the tracking of sex offenders. Another problem involving young offenders—10, 11 and 12-year-olds who offend against small children—needs to be examined by the Department. Will my hon. Friend take note of the concerns that I express on behalf of my constituents, who are troubled by the presence of sex offenders in the community?

Mr. Clarke: I note the points that my hon. Friend makes. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to the police, who, under the Sex Offenders Act 1997, have achieved through the police national computer almost 97 per cent. compliance by those required to register. That is a tribute to police work on this type of crime. My hon. Friend suggests an initiative to track sex offenders; that technique is used and can be further developed.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): Did the Minister see the exhibition of literature sponsored by my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) that was on display in Committee Room 18 on Thursday last week? If he has not seen that exhibition, may I commend it to him? The production of such literature for influencing children at school—presumably after the abolition of section 28—constitutes in itself a sexual offence against children.

Mr. Clarke: I did not see the exhibition in Committee Room 18 to which the hon. Gentleman referred. Much work is being done through the education service and schools throughout the country to make children aware of the dangers that they may experience. In the context of the section 28 debate, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment has issued substantial and strong guidelines to help schools to guide their children effectively.

Mr. John Heppell (Nottingham, East): Will the Minister join me in congratulating the police, the probation service and the Prison Service in Nottingham on the undoubted success of the special unit at Nottingham prison, where two of the most notorious paedophiles have been housed for six months without incident or any risk to children in the area?

Mr. Clarke: I am happy to congratulate the police, especially the Nottinghamshire police. The Prison Service has made a major effort to improve our ability to rehabilitate and deal with some of the most persistent offenders. I am sure that the House would want to congratulate Nottingham prison on its work.

Intelligence Services

7. **Sir Teddy Taylor** (Rochford and Southend, East): If he will make a statement on the procedure for supervising the activities of the intelligence services. [112578]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): The Security Service Act 1989 and the Intelligence Services Act 1994 provide that the security and intelligence agencies are under the Secretary of State's authority. The head of each agency controls its operations. The Acts also establish tribunals.

The 1994 Act established the Intelligence and Security Committee, which comprises hon. Members and Members of the other place. It examines the expenditure, administration and policy of the agencies. It reports annually to the Prime Minister, who lays a copy of the report, excluding matters that may prejudice the discharge of the agencies' functions, before Parliament.

Sir Teddy Taylor: Will the Home Secretary re-examine the case of Mr. Peter Bleach, who is currently in prison in India? He has argued in detail that he is in prison because of unfair treatment, and inaccurate information that the intelligence service provided to the court. If it is not possible for the Home Secretary to re-examine the case, will he at least make representations to the Government of India to ask them to review their legislation to enable Mr. Bleach to serve his penalty in the United Kingdom? That facility is available in many other countries.

Mr. Straw: On the hon. Gentleman's first point, I am happy to meet him to discuss the case, but any question of an appeal, and the admissibility of evidence in the case, has to be a matter for the appeal courts in India. Neither I nor any other Minister have any locus in the case.

On the hon. Gentleman's second point, there is an agreement between the United Kingdom and India to secure the mutual repatriation of prisoners who are sentenced in those countries. However, its implementation is being held up by the absence of legislation to effect it in India. I am happy to make representations to the Indian Government to secure its early implementation.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): Will the Home Secretary reflect on the fact that, uniquely among western democratic countries, we have the least parliamentary oversight of our security services? Not only is that an embarrassment to us as a democratic country: it flies in the face of our human rights obligations. Former presidents of the National Union of Students might be content with current arrangements, but some of us are not. Our security services have no accountability in this place. They are out

of control and it is time that the Government—a Labour Government—applied themselves to remedying that wrong.

Mr. Straw: I do not accept the assumption behind my hon. Friend's question that our agencies are subject to less parliamentary oversight than those of any other European country.

Mr. Mackinlay: There is none.

Mr. Straw: There is considerable oversight by parliamentarians. If my hon. Friend is making the nice point that the Intelligence and Security Committee is not appointed by the House, I accept that. However, any hon. Member who has appeared before the Committee knows that it is composed entirely of parliamentarians and that it does its job thoroughly and effectively. It is one of many ways in which the agencies are under control and accountable to the House.

Dr. Julian Lewis: Does the Home Secretary agree that no intelligence service can operate effectively if its former employees break their lifelong obligation of confidentiality? Given that the Government are pursuing relentlessly the egomaniac ex-officer of MI5, David Shayler, will the right hon. Gentleman at least acknowledge that some of the criticisms that the Labour party made of the previous Conservative Government when they pursued the egomaniac ex-officer Peter Wright were less than justified?

Mr. Straw: The House will excuse me if I do not quite follow the hon. Gentleman down the path that he invites me to take, except to say that I confirm that there is a lifelong obligation expected of staff, and I am glad to have the support of both sides of the House for the fact that that obligation should properly be enforced.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): As a member of the Intelligence and Security Committee, may I say to my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, and to my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay), that there is accountability to Parliament through the Committee, and that its members are diligent in the way in which we carry out our duties? However, my hon. Friend has a case. I agree with him that the Committee should be a Committee of Parliament.

Mr. Straw: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for confirming the reality of the accountability from, as it were, the other side of the table. I am sure that he will confirm also that Secretaries of State, heads of the agencies and many others who are examined by the Committee on which he sits are subject, as they should be, to extremely thorough scrutiny, and that in due course a report is made to the House.

It is in the nature of the business of the agencies that whether the Committee is or is not a Select Committee, its reports would have to be extremely carefully edited and that operational details could not be made public. I understand the case that is made for the Committee to be a Select Committee, but I do not think that it would or could operate in a significantly or substantively different way in that form. As my hon. Friend will know from the report which was published recently, we keep this matter under review.

Jury Trial

8. **Mr. David Heath** (Somerton and Frome): If he will postpone his plans to change the right to jury trial until after the publication of the review of criminal justice under the chairmanship of Sir Robin Auld. [112579]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): No. This measure is part of the Government's programme to modernise the criminal justice system to make it more responsive to the needs of the victims of crime, of the public, and of defendants alike. This issue has been considered extensively over the past seven years, not least by the royal commission on criminal justice in 1993. On each occasion the conclusion has been the same—that reform is required. Lord Justice Auld is aware of our intention to legislate and will, no doubt, take this into account in conducting his review. However, the Lord Chief Justice has already made it clear that our measure has his support and that of an overwhelming number of the senior judiciary.

Mr. Heath: At the risk of being accused of being a Hampstead liberal, and a bearded one at that, may I suggest to the Home Secretary that those who oppose the measure do so not because they are weak on crime or because they wish to preserve the salaries of lawyers but because they have a real interest in British justice?

Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that he has failed to persuade many Labour Members who have not yet subsided into acquiescence? Will he consider again whether there is a case for an independent and considered view to be taken before he proceeds with legislation, which in any event will fail in another place?

Mr. Straw: On independent and thorough review, this issue has been considered time without number by senior and independent people, including the members of the royal commission on criminal justice, who came to a unanimous view that the proposed change was needed in the interests of justice. On that basis, it is needed both in respect of victims and defendants. I am aware that there was some anxiety and concern among Members on both sides of the House, but I am delighted to say that there was a majority of 126 on Second Reading, and that only one Labour Member voted against the Bill at that stage.

Helen Jones (Warrington, North): I am sure that my right hon. Friend is well aware of the research that shows that the majority of defendants who opt for Crown court trial in an either-way case plead guilty once they reach the Crown court. Those of us who have worked in magistrates courts are aware that putting off the evil day is a powerful motive for defendants. Does he agree that this approach imposes an intolerable stress on the victims of crime and prevents other defendants who are awaiting trial in the Crown court from having their cases dealt with

expeditiously? Will he take that into account in proceeding with his proposals, so as to ensure that other defendants are given an equal hearing in any discussions?

Mr. Straw: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend, who brings considerable experience to the issue. The truth is that these are cases in which, typically, the defendant will plead guilty anyway, and knows that he or she will do so, and the amounts involved—a can of Tennents lager may have been stolen—are relatively small. They string the system out in the vain hope that they will get a shorter sentence when, in practice, they get a longer one. The Conservative party, having originally supported the proposal, has to explain why it is contributing to substantial extra delays in serious cases coming before the Crown court that could and should be tried only by the Crown court.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): The Home Secretary must recognise that he has considerable lack of conviction on this matter, having attacked the proposals—which were not supported by Conservative Members as he suggests, but put forward for consultation—when they were made by the royal commission. In view of that attack, it is a bit rich to tell the House and the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) of the royal commission's support. When, as the hon. Gentleman suggested, the Home Secretary's Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No. 2) Bill is thrown out by the other place, like the (No. 1) Bill, and as he failed to convince some 29 of his own Back Benchers in last week's debate, will he recognise that, as the proposal was no part of the Labour manifesto at the last general election, he would be entirely wrong to try to force it through the other place after a defeat? Will he then lick his wounds and crawl away?

Mr. Straw: The hon. Gentleman is being a touch economical with his recollection of the position of the previous Administration. We had it confirmed by the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) only last week that, had the Conservatives won the last general election and had he been in office, he would have introduced the measure. It was not put out for consultation, but for deliberation and for decision. As for the position of the other place, I hope that it will recognise that this is the elected House and that the will of the elected House must take precedence. If the hon. Gentleman is offering the alternative suggestion, I have to tell him that having any truck with it is dangerous for the future of the Conservative party.

Reparation Orders

9. **Mr. Paul Goggins** (Wythenshawe and Sale, East): How many reparation orders have been made since September 1998. [112581]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): A total of 1,110 reparation orders were made across the five pilot areas from 30 September 1998 to 31 January 2000. The reparation order requires young offenders to face up to the consequences of their offence for their victims and the wider community. The order will be implemented nationally on 1 June.

Mr. Goggins: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer and assure him that there is widespread support for reparation orders, not least as a measure of restoration to the victims of crime. What assessment has he made of the effectiveness of the orders that have been made so far and what steps is he taking to ensure that the courts make maximum use of the orders when they become available nationally later this year?

Mr. Clarke: We are analysing carefully the effects of the various schemes in the five pilot areas: the London boroughs of Hammersmith and Fulham, Kensington and Chelsea and the City of Westminster; Hampshire, Southampton, Portsmouth and the Isle of Wight; Wolverhampton; Sheffield; and Blackburn. The general impression—I have seen a number of the schemes myself—is extremely optimistic and we are encouraged by the extent to which people are taking part. Our assessment of the courts' willingness to use the orders is that they are positive and enthusiastic because they recognise the major advantages of reparation as a means of dealing with young offenders.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): How many of those who have received reparation orders have committed further crimes?

Mr. Clarke: I cannot answer that question, but I can say that 5.1 per cent. of all reparation orders made in the period have been breached compared with 13 per cent. of probation orders. Generally, there has been less breaching and we believe that there has been less return to crime.

DNA Tests (Norfolk)

11. **Dr. Ian Gibson** (Norwich, North): How many DNA tests his Department has carried out in Norfolk in the last two years; and with what results. [112583]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): Between April 1998 and December 1999, the Forensic Science Service received from Norfolk 8,425 criminal justice samples taken from suspects charged, reported, cautioned or convicted of a recordable offence, and 719 samples from stains left at scenes of crime. From those samples, the FSS reported 871 matches on the national DNA database between criminal justice samples and samples from crime scene stains, and 61 matches on the database between stains from different crime scenes.

Dr. Gibson: Clearly, the Norfolk service is using the new DNA technology to great effect. Is my hon. Friend aware that the technology is in some disrepute in some quarters in the United States, because some commercialised labs have misinterpreted and miscalculated the data? Will he ensure that, as we build up the national DNA database, we use the best and most up-to-date DNA technology, and that the information that is fed into it is accurate and independent?

Mr. Clarke: I can give the House those assurances. During the process, we shall introduce more up-to-date methods of sampling DNA. As my hon. Friend is aware, I know the force in Norfolk very well. It is one of the forces that has been leading in the use of DNA technology. What is most impressive is that a crime stain loaded on the database has a 40 per cent. chance—a four in 10 chance—of being matched against a potential

suspect. Approximately 500 matches are reported to the police for investigation each week. It is a substantial means of attacking crime.

Prison Service

13. **Mr. David Chaytor** (Bury, North): What steps he is taking to reduce absence through sickness in the Prison Service. [112585]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Paul Boateng): We have targeted staff days lost and introduced an annual key performance indicator to measure success in reducing staff absence through sickness. We have taken steps to improve data collection so as to provide managers with better quality information, and have introduced new guidance for managing and reducing days lost through sickness.

Mr. Chaytor: I thank my right hon. Friend for his reply, and congratulate him on his firm, thorough and systematic approach to this difficult problem. Does he share the views expressed in last year's report of the Public Accounts Committee that certain prisons are vulnerable to unrest as a result of the high level of sickness absence?

Mr. Boateng: I am grateful to the Prison Officers Association and the National Audit Office for their work in this area. There is no doubt that excessive staff absences due to sickness have an adverse impact not only on good order and discipline, but on our capacity to deliver programmes to reduce reoffending. We are determined to bear down on those absences to stamp out bad practice. We also want to celebrate good practice, because prison managers, in conjunction with staff and their unions, are doing excellent work to get a grip of this problem.

Asylum Statistics

14. **Mr. James Gray** (North Wiltshire): If he will make a statement about the asylum statistics for 1999. [112586]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): There were 71,000 applications made and 32 decisions taken during 1999. As a result of the Government's investment in the asylum process, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of decisions taken so far this year. The total number of decisions taken during January 2000 was 4,000, and the early indications are that the figure for the past four weeks is likely to be more than 8,000. In the first week of this month alone, more than 2,200 initial decisions were made. I am pleased to tell the hon. Gentleman that the numbers of decisions taken are now at record levels. The average time taken for an initial decision in December 1999 was 13 months compared with 20 months in April 1997.

Mr. Gray: Although I am grateful to the Home Secretary for that reply, it sounded a little glib and complacent. In an earlier response, the Minister of State, the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Mrs. Roche), suggested that the number of applications pending was due to the backlog left over from the previous Government. Will the right hon. Gentleman admit that about 104,000 applications are outstanding? His complacent reply that the number of decisions has gone up to 4,000 from 32 last year shows that he misunderstands the problem. More importantly, will he also admit that the number of applications has doubled since the Government came to power, that it is rising and that they are doing nothing about it?

Mr. Straw: I am not in the least complacent about the situation: indeed, I am very concerned about it. Had I been complacent, I would not have put any provisions in place to deal with the problems caused by the Siemens contract, which was signed indelibly in 1996 by the previous Administration and has caused such severe problems ever since. It is a mark of our concern about the system that we have significantly invested in the asylum and immigration process. The investment is now showing signs of paying off: as I have said, 8,000 asylum applications were decided in the past four weeks.

Ms Rosie Winterton (Doncaster, Central): My right hon. Friend has taken welcome action to relieve pressure on communities in Kent and London from those seeking asylum, but will he ensure that local authorities outside London receive information and advice as quickly as possible about the extra assistance that may be available to them, so that they can plan ahead carefully to receive asylum seekers?

Mr. Straw: We are doing everything that we can to ensure that local authorities are fully informed in respect of asylum seekers who are being dispersed to their areas. I have asked that arrangements be made to inform hon. Members so far as is possible when there are significant developments with regard to asylum seekers in their constituencies.

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): What response is the Home Secretary giving to local authorities such as mine in London, where the cost in the next financial year of accommodating asylum-seeker families will be about £25 on the average council tax? When precisely do the Government intend to assume financial responsibility for a national problem, as they have undertaken to do in principle?

Mr. Straw: On the funding that is directly the responsibility of my Department, I have arranged that we meet additionally an £8 million shortfall for 1999–2000, so that local authorities are compensated in full for their costs, as I believe they should be. There has been a particular problem in respect of unaccompanied minors who claim asylum, which is, at the moment, the responsibility of the Department of Health. I am in discussions with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and hope for a satisfactory outcome for local authorities. All of us recognise that the arrangements have placed a considerable burden on local authorities. We recognise the strength of their case to be compensated properly for that.

Mr. David Lidington (Aylesbury): What target did the Home Secretary set the national asylum support service on the units of accommodation to be secured by 1 April this year and on the introduction of the new support system? How many units of accommodation has it been

able to secure for that date? What is the shortfall in the Government's figures? Will he finally admit to the House that the new asylum seeker support system, about which he has been boasting for so long, is turning out in practice to be a complete and utter shambles?

Mr. Straw: I would be happy to provide the details that the hon. Gentleman sought by letter. We determined that there was adequate accommodation to start phasing in the national asylum support scheme, so that we could end the entitlement to cash social security benefits for all new applicants from 3 April 2000. The availability of cash social security benefits, which was instituted and confirmed by the previous Administration, has been one of the major pull factors in this country being seen as more attractive than others. It is we who are bringing that to an end for new applicants from 3 April. Far from supporting that, the Conservative party—following a pledge by the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe)—would have maintained the availability of cash benefits not only for existing applicants, but for all new applicants, at a cost of £500 million per annum.

Clandestine Immigrants

15. **Mr. Robin Corbett** (Birmingham, Erdington): What recent estimate he has made of the number of clandestine immigrants brought into the United Kingdom in heavy goods vehicles. [112587]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mrs. Barbara Roche): Immigration and nationality directorate records show that 11,500 clandestine entrants to the United Kingdom were identified between July and December 1999.

Mr. Corbett: I thank the Minister for the proper, responsible manner in which she is tackling the issue. Does she find it extraordinary that Conservative Members should line up with those who make vast sums from smuggling people illegally into the United Kingdom, rather than backing the measures that the Government have proposed to extend carrier liability to the owners of lorries, buses and coaches? Will she say what progress is being made with the industry in working out a code of practice to assist in better deterring and detecting clandestine entrants arriving in the backs of lorries?

Mrs. Roche: We have consulted widely with the industry, and we have tabled the draft code of practice. I have also announced that, on 3 April, we shall introduce the civil penalty provisions. We have repeatedly given the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) and other Conservative Members opportunities to join and back the Government on the issue, but they have completely refused to do so. Criminal acts are clearly being committed, and it would be nice to have the support of the right hon. Lady and other Conservative Members in trying to do something about them.

ECHR Judgment (Thompson and Venables)

3.31 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw):

With permission, Madam Speaker, I should like to make a statement on the decision of the European Court of Human Rights in the case of Thompson and Venables, who were convicted of the murder of James Bulger. This statement follows my oral statement to the House, on 16 December 1999, which was the day on which the judgment was given. I said then that the Government accepted our obligations under the European convention on human rights to abide by the Court's findings, but that I would need to study the detail and would report back to Parliament as soon as possible.

My statement today relates to England and Wales. Scottish and Northern Ireland Ministers have been considering what action will be necessary there, and announcements will be made in due course.

First, I offer my profound sympathy to the family of James Bulger, whose grief at that terrible murder is compounded by what must appear to them to be a never-ending cycle of court judgments on their son's murderers. Although I know that it will be of no comfort to them, the European convention on human rights has been an international obligation of the United Kingdom for 50 years, and successive Governments have been bound to give effect to the judgments of its Court. That Court, as the House will recall, is an institution of the Council of Europe and not of the European Union. From 2 October 2000, the convention itself will be incorporated into our domestic law, under the Human Rights Act 1998, which was welcomed and supported by all parties in the House.

The Court's judgment in the case of Thompson and Venables concerned both the law on sentencing and court practice and procedures. It therefore has to be dealt with through a mixture of legal and administrative changes. I have consulted the Lord Chief Justice about the conduct of Crown court trials. On 16 February, he issued a practice direction to judges on the trial of children and young persons in the Crown court. A copy of the direction has been placed in the Library. The direction is a key part of the response to the judgment.

The first issue on which the Court found against the United Kingdom was in respect of article 6(1), on the right to a fair trial. The Court said that, although special arrangements had been made in the Crown court, the two youths—then aged 11—were highly unlikely to have felt able to follow the proceedings properly or to pass information to their lawyers.

The European Court did not conclude that young people should not be tried in the Crown court. For our part, the Government believe that serious crimes with serious penalties continue to need a high-level judicial process, before a judge and jury. Rather, it is necessary to ensure that those trials take account of the particular circumstances of young people, although that must never undermine the seriousness of the proceedings or make it more difficult to convict the guilty.

If justice is not open, it cannot be seen to be fair. Therefore, juvenile trials for serious crimes must be held in open court. However, to avoid an unnecessarily overbearing atmosphere in the courtroom, the Lord Chief Justice's practice direction makes it clear that, although the proceedings must be in open court, judges should be prepared to restrict attendance of the public at the trial to a relatively small number.

On facilities for the press, courts already have discretion to limit the number of press representatives in court, taking account of the public's right to be informed about trials. The Lord Chief Justice has advised that limits on press numbers should, as necessary, be coupled with arrangements for audio and, if possible, closed-circuit television feed to another room in the courthouse.

As to reporting cases in the media, the practice direction also makes it clear that the courts already have powers to order that nothing should be reported that would lead to the identification of juvenile defendants, but, as now, the detail of the case and the arguments made in court should still be fully reported.

Given the Court's judgment, I have considered whether any legislative changes are needed on media attendance and reporting. I have concluded that they are not, although I know that the House will expect me to keep the implementation of the practice direction under review, in consultation with the Lord Chief Justice.

The practice direction requires courts to take positive steps to ensure that a juvenile defendant understands court procedure and that, where practicable, all the participants in the courtroom should be on the same level. The Government will be inviting Lord Justice Auld, in his review of the working of the criminal courts, to look in more detail at working of juvenile trials in the Crown court.

On the sentencing of juveniles convicted of murder, following a separate European Court of Human Rights decision in February 1996, which was accepted by the previous Administration, a provision in the Crime (Sentences) Act 1997 ended the Home Secretary's role in determining the final release date of those detained at Her Majesty's pleasure and passed that function to the parole board.

This latest European Court of Human Rights decision covers the other end of the sentencing process—the initial procedure for setting the tariff, which is the minimum period that a juvenile convicted of murder should serve in custody. Until now, that has been set by the Home Secretary of the day. However, in this case, the Court found against the United Kingdom under article 6(1), concluding that Ministers, as members of the Executive, should not set tariffs for juveniles sentenced to detention at Her Majesty's pleasure.

Given that clear Court decision, I am bound to bring forward legislation, which will be in the Criminal Justice and Court Services Bill this Session, to provide for tariffs to be set by the trial judge in open court, in the same way as they are currently set for adults subject to discretionary life sentences, which apply to any offenders apart from those sentenced for murder. The tariff will be appealable either by the offender or by the Attorney-General if he believes it to be unduly lenient. I also plan to ensure that the views of the victims and their relatives are better taken into account. I shall announce our proposals in due course.

About 250 people, sentenced as juveniles, are currently detained at Her Majesty's pleasure, and fresh cases continue to go through the courts. For new cases, pending the necessary change in the law which I have announced,

[Mr. Jack Straw]

I shall set any tariffs in line with the recommendation that the Lord Chief Justice makes to me in each case. For existing cases, I propose a fresh review of tariffs in line with the principles in the judgment. I shall be inviting representations from those whose tariffs have not yet expired.

Where no representations are received, the tariff will be set in accordance with the original recommendation made by the Lord Chief Justice in that case. Where acceptance of the Lord Chief Justice's original recommendation would mean that the tariff had now expired, I shall refer those cases to the parole board immediately. Where the original recommendation made by the Lord Chief Justice was higher than the tariff set by Ministers, the tariff would not be increased.

Where existing detainees wish to make representations, they can be made to the present Lord Chief Justice, who will then make a recommendation to me. I will then adopt his recommendation on what the tariff should be.

I now come to the question of the tariffs of Thompson and Venables. Part of the history of this is well known, but some of it is not. The trial judge recommended a minimum of eight years—the tariff. The then Lord Chief Justice recommended 10 years. My predecessor, the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard), decided in 1994 to set the tariff at 15 years. However, that tariff was quashed as unlawful by a decision of the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council on 12 June 1997. There is, therefore, no tariff for either offender in this case at present.

The decision of the European Court and the requirements of the general law mean that I have to treat the process in this case, as in any other case, in line with the procedures that I have just outlined. Representations have already been received from Thompson and Venables: they will be referred to the Lord Chief Justice for his recommendations to be made—which, as I have explained, I am bound to accept.

I appreciate that this continuing uncertainty will be distressing to James Bulger's parents and relations in particular. I hope that the process can be concluded as quickly as possible but they, and the wider public, may take some reassurance from the fact that the tariff set is a minimum for the requirements of retribution and deterrence. An offender, once his tariff has expired, is released only if the parole board, after a very thorough consideration, is satisfied that there is no unacceptable risk to the public.

The processes that I have outlined in this statement replace the tariff-setting and review arrangements for cases involving detention at Her Majesty's pleasure. Those were set out in the written answer of 10 November 1997, in response to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton, South-West (Ms Jones) about the implementation of the House of Lords judgment in the Thompson and Venables case.

The murder of young James Bulger was horrific. It is seared into the memory not just of his family but of the public as a whole. What I have sought to do is ensure that the binding decisions of the European Court of Human Rights are implemented in a way that secures that young people who commit dreadful crimes are properly brought to justice in an environment that is as open as possible, and that the interests of victims and their families are properly taken into account.

3.42 pm

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): I thank the Home Secretary for that statement and for his usual courtesy in letting me have an early sight of it. I am less pleased that much of it—although not all—appeared to be widely trailed in the press and media yesterday. In a case of such seriousness, it would have been more appropriate if the statement had come first.

I join the Home Secretary in extending to the relatives of Jamie Bulger the sympathy that all hon. Members feel for them. I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that the continual reopening of the case must have made their suffering worse. I understand that Jamie Bulger would have celebrated his 10th birthday this week. This further reopening of the case must be causing his relatives considerable distress yet again.

I also welcome the Home Secretary's statement that, in future, more account will be taken of the views of victims and their relatives.

As regards the detail of some of the right hon. Gentleman's other announcements, we will reserve our position pending further examination, but we accept that he could not have defied the ruling that he received. I accept that the right hon. Gentleman had no alternative but to comply with it.

However, that said, I am sure that the ruling will cause great disappointment and offence to many people in this country. I personally believe that 15 years was an appropriate tariff, given the severity of the crime, and that this ruling is a most unwarranted interference in a system that was working well.

The Home Secretary said that he would review tariffs, and that he would set them at the level recommended by the Lord Chief Justice. Has the right hon. Gentleman made an estimate—if not, perhaps he will write to me—of the number of cases in which that could involve a lower tariff? What would be the greatest reduction involved?

The Home Secretary said that, when the recommendation of the Lord Chief Justice would mean that the tariff had expired, he would refer the cases to the parole board immediately. Will there be any consequences for people being detained who, under the new system, should not be detained, in terms of any legal action that might be taken, or any suits that might be made for compensation? Again, if the Home Secretary cannot give me the details now I shall be happy for him to write to me.

Will the Home Secretary now answer the questions that I asked him following his statement on 16 December, which—quite properly, given that he had reached no conclusions about his response to the judgment—he was reluctant to answer then?

Should not a tariff reflect simply the circumstances of the crime, and the penalty that is appropriate for retribution and deterrence? Does the Home Secretary agree that, in the setting of a tariff, account should not be taken of whether individuals will transfer to other parts of the prison system during their sentences? There has been considerable speculation that it was because Thompson and Venables would have to transfer into the adult system that a lower tariff was recommended to avoid their having

to do so. Does the Home Secretary agree that that should not be a relevant consideration? Does he agree that, in the setting of a tariff, the only considerations should be reflecting the circumstances of the crime, and setting a suitable time to be served to satisfy the requirements for retribution and deterrence?

Will the Home Secretary confirm that, in 1996, the Court of Appeal upheld the Home Secretary's right to adopt the same policy for young offenders as for adults, and that the power to increase tariffs has been used hundreds of times without challenge? Will he also confirm that, notwithstanding the verdict of the Court that a fair trial was not received, it is still the case that the original verdict of guilt is unassailable, and that, even if the trial had been conducted under the new arrangements that he seeks to introduce, the result would have been the same?

Finally, may I ask the Home Secretary this? Does he not consider it an essential part of rehabilitation to accept the consequences of what one has done? Does he not agree that it is not in the interests of the perpetrators for them to regard themselves as victims of the system, and that, instead, they should regard themselves as perpetrators of an unthinkable crime? Is it not that with which they should come to terms, rather than their being encouraged to think that they have received unfair treatment?

Mr. Straw: I share the right hon. Lady's regret about the fact that the matter was widely trailed in the media. I do not suggest in any way that this was the source, but we felt it necessary to warn the representatives of the families a week ago—the family of the victim, and, of course, the legal representatives of Thompson and Venables—that a statement was likely to be made some time this week. We also warned them on Friday that the statement would probably be made today. I think it will be well understood that it would have been unconscionable to make a statement without warning the Bulger parents. I hope the House will also acknowledge that I try very hard to ensure that the House learns first of any decisions that are made.

I am glad the right hon. Lady accepts that, given the European Court's ruling, we cannot defy that ruling. She said, however, that the European Court's decision represented an unwarranted interference. What she described as an unwarranted interference arises from an entirely voluntary decision—made successively over the past 50 years, by her party as much as by mine—to accept the decisions of the European Court of Human Rights, and also from her party's endorsement of the Human Rights Act 1998, which incorporated the European convention on human rights in British domestic law. That being so, there will be occasions when the European Court makes decisions which, individually, we do not like. I have made no secret of the fact that I did not wish the Court to make the decision in this case. It was precisely because I believed that the previous system was correct that I ensured that the United Kingdom Government vigorously defended the action that had begun under the previous Administration. However, the decision of the Court was made, and certain consequences have followed from it.

The right hon. Lady asked me about the number of people who are detained who could expect a lower tariff. I am told that there are 12 detainees with unexpired tariffs whose recommendation from the Lord Chief Justice was higher than the tariff set by Ministers. She asked whether a court action could follow for some of those who are tariff-expired at a tariff set by the Lord Chief Justice. I do not believe that there are any grounds for claims for compensation, which I think is what the right hon. Lady had in mind. It is perfectly possible, given the ingenuity of English lawyers, that one or two may try that, and it is a matter for the courts whether they are accepted.

The right hon. Lady asked me about the way in which the tariff should be set. We shall be able to discuss that in greater detail during the passage of the Criminal Justice and Court Services Bill. I understand her point, but in setting a tariff for juveniles, account has been taken not only of the crime and its circumstances but of the relative age of the offenders.

The right hon. Lady's last point concerned the victims of the system. Of course I accept that we should take full account, always, of the interests of the victims of crime. That is what we have been seeking to do, and I intend to bring forward proposals on that in due course.

Mr. Robin Corbett (Birmingham, Erdington): Does my right hon. Friend share my view that it will reflect no credit on anyone, either in this House or among the red-top tabloids, if they seek to turn the case of Thompson and Venables into the same kind of vendetta that is being pursued against Myra Hindley? Will he none the less make it clear, and repeat, that when the time comes for Venables and Thompson to be considered for parole, that is all that that means, and there is no automatic entitlement to release? Will he also make it clear that if and when they are released, they can be called back to prison if they reoffend or show any signs of doing so?

Mr. Straw: I am glad to have the opportunity to put that point on record. It may provide some reassurance for members of the public as well as Members of the House to know that in respect of adult lifers, whose release dates I have to determine, the majority of the cases that I consider are those of people whose tariff has expired at least a year before, and in some cases many years before. The criteria for determining release for juvenile offenders, as for adults, has to be whether it is safe to release such individuals once they have served their minimum term. Once they are released, they remain on life licence should they attempt to reoffend.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): May I first associate Liberal Democrat Members with the sentiments of the Home Secretary that no right-minded person could think other than that this was the most shocking crime? We continue to want to show the family of James Bulger sympathy and solidarity. One way in which we can respect their wishes is to join with the Home Secretary, across parties, to ensure that in future the law takes more account, as the right hon. Gentleman intends that it should, of victims before and after trial. We are happy to assist him in seeking to formulate a way that meets to the maximum the demand for that to happen.

The right hon. Gentleman was quite right to accept the judgment. The judgment was quite right that there should be a system for trying young people that is seen to do justice to everybody, and that the setting of minimum sentence—the tariff—should be separated from political decisions and handed over to judges. That must be right, and we are happy to support that proposition.

[Mr. Simon Hughes]

To reinforce the point made by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Mr. Corbett), may I ask that the minimum sentence should remain a minimum? Can the Home Secretary confirm whether defendants who have been convicted as juveniles but who are now adults will, in addition to the assessment of risk when the tariff period runs out and as part of the process, have to accept and understand the reality of what they have done, and, as it were, apologise for it? That would be right for all juveniles who are convicted, however serious their crime, because it is proper to give them the chance of a new start.

Mr. Straw: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's support for my approach. However, there is plainly a difference between his approach and the Government's on one important point. On the merits of which system should operate, I should make it clear—as I think my statement did—that but for the ECHR's decision, which is binding on the Government, we should not have been minded to change the existing system. Given the extensive judicial supervision that already takes place of decisions made by the Secretary of State, I feel that the system was working satisfactorily and with a high level of public confidence.

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): I thank the Home Secretary for his courtesy in giving me advance sight of his statement. I remain of the view that 15 years is the minimum period for which Thompson and Venables should be detained, but I, too, accept that the Court has tied the Home Secretary's hands.

Can the Home Secretary make any sense of the decision of the European Court of Human Rights in the case of Wynne that it is not a breach of human rights for the Home Secretary to set a tariff in the cases of adult murderers and the decision that it is a breach of human rights for the Home Secretary to set a tariff in the case of juvenile murderers? Will he renew the efforts made by the previous Government to increase the respect shown by the ECHR for national courts, so as to ensure that it intervenes much less often in their decisions?

Mr. Straw: I find it difficult to follow a clear line of logic in the two cases to which the right hon. and learned Gentleman refers. Buried in the dense text of the judgment, there is some elucidation of the point—although perhaps not much illumination. On the right hon. and learned Gentleman's second point, I think, and the view is widely shared, that the United Kingdom has suffered from the fact that the European convention had not been incorporated into our law—paradoxically, given that the convention was drafted by English jurists—so that we have not had the margin of appreciation, as it is called, that many other countries have enjoyed.

I accept what the right hon. and learned Gentleman said about our need better to educate jurists in Strasbourg about the nature of our common law system. A fundamental problem is that most of those jurists were brought up in the Roman tradition, which differs in many respects, and which I would suggest is not a better tradition. As our courts begin to implement the jurisprudence of Strasbourg, we shall benefit more in the future from that margin of appreciation than we could have in the past.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): I deny that I am making a cheap, yah-boo point at the expense of the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard), but should politicians, even if they are Queen's counsel, alter tariffs at all? Some of us were extremely uncomfortable about the former Home Secretary's decision, feeling that he should not have done such things. What is the view of the current Home Secretary?

Mr. Straw: My view is that the system that existed before the Court judgment was working satisfactorily. I make final decisions about the release of those sentenced to life for murder. In practice, the Minister of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Brent, South (Mr. Boateng) makes the decisions about the setting of tariffs, except in respect of those for whom a whole life tariff may be appropriate, or in terrorist cases. The system commands public confidence; it is operated fairly. Furthermore, because the decisions are made in a quasi-judicial way, the process that is followed is—rightly—the subject of intense judicial scrutiny.

I have already referred to the Court of Appeal judgment in the summer of 1997. The decision of the previous Secretary of State in respect of the 15-year tariff was quashed as unlawful. The tariff of 15 years was not quashed as unlawful; it was the process by which the right hon. and learned Gentleman achieved the decision that was quashed. However, as I recall, no judgment was made by the Court as to the merits of that tariff. That is water under the bridge as far as juveniles are concerned; the Court has made its decision—it is our job to implement it.

Sir Brian Mawhinney (North-West Cambridgeshire): In future such cases, from whom will the Home Secretary seek advice on whether the state should offer new identities to prisoners when they are at the point of release? Has the right hon. Gentleman decided to offer new identities in this case?

Mr. Straw: There are standard arrangements for the offer of new identities in exceptional cases. I can recall seeing no papers on the question of identities for the prisoners in this case.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): The right hon. Gentleman may know that, subject to the authority of the then Home Secretary, I was responsible for setting tariffs for two years or so. The impending legislation is an opportunity to consider the tariff-setting for adult offenders on whom a mandatory life sentence has been imposed. Does the right hon. Gentleman share my anxiety about any involvement of Ministers at all? Does he agree that there is a strong argument for leaving the question of tariffs exclusively to the courts—not to the Lord Chief Justice—subject only to the right of the Home Secretary to apply to the court for an extended order subsequently, if it appears that the offender is likely to pose a danger to the public?

May I also ask the right hon. Gentleman to consider abolishing the mandatory life sentence entirely and enabling a trial judge to impose a determinate sentence?

Mr. Straw: I am completely opposed to the right hon. and learned Gentleman's second proposal. The regime

that has operated in this country in respect of murderers has worked satisfactorily, and has ensured public confidence. Murder is the worst possible crime in the criminal calendar. There is some connection between the exceptional care we take over the sentencing of murderers and the fact that our murder rate is one of the lowest in the western world, despite the fact that other crime rates—for acquisitive crime—are relatively high. I do not want to disturb that regime.

The fact that someone who has committed a murder is on a life licence—however long he or she may be out of custody—is extremely important in ensuring the safety of the public, and in ensuring that the person goes on to lead a law-abiding life. Happily, most such people do so. That cannot be said of the majority of those released from prison after determinate sentences.

As for the right hon. and learned Gentleman's first point, I am not persuaded of the case that he makes—to say the least. However, I dare say that he will make that case during the Committee or Report stage of the Criminal Justice and Court Services Bill.

Sir Peter Lloyd (Fareham): Will the Home Secretary explain why the public reaction to the horrific child murder committed by the child Mary Bell a generation ago was apparently so much more mature and less crudely vengeful than much of the reaction has appeared to be in the case of Thompson and Venables?

Mr. Straw: I am not sure that I share the right hon. Gentleman's recollection of what happened in the Mary Bell case. The only two observations that I would make are, first, that it took place many years before the terrible murder of James Bulger, and secondly, that the parents of the victims of Mary Bell were not put through the judicial mill as the parents of James Bulger have been. Of course everyone, including prisoners, has their rights and I understand why continual court appeals have been made, but, as I said at the outset, we must all have the profoundest sympathy with the parents of James Bulger and their relatives and friends, given the constant resurfacing of the case.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): In his first two and a half years as Home Secretary—until the Court's ruling in December—on how many occasions did the Home Secretary find it necessary to change the tariff set by his predecessors?

Mr. Straw: I do not think that I ever changed a tariff, but I will write to the hon. Gentleman if that is the case.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Does the Home Secretary agree that it was hardly fair of the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Mr. Corbett)—who, unfortunately, is no longer in his place—to refer to "a vendetta" by the press and the public against Myra Hindley? Surely what happens in these terrible cases is that even the popular press gets it right by reflecting the horror that the public feel when terrible murders are carried out, whether by adults or by children.

Does the Home Secretary also accept that there have been a number of cases of murders involving young people as perpetrators where the influence of violent films and videos has been directly traced, although not necessarily in this case? Given those data, will he consider reviewing the admissibility of violent content in films and videos, which takes a great part of the responsibility for depraving the moral standards of young people where crime is concerned?

Mr. Straw: In response to the hon. Gentleman's first point, each of us is responsible for the language that we use in the House or outside. All these terrible cases must be approached in a judicious, as well as a judicial, manner, but when approaching them in that manner we must take full account of the appalling trauma suffered by the parents and others close to victims of such crimes—distress to a degree that few of us could possibly even imagine, still less undergo—and the much wider public revulsion at the nature of such crimes.

In response to the hon. Gentleman's second point, I believe that the whole House accepts the need for proper controls of such violent and depraved videos. It will be a matter of note that the Court of Appeal is shortly to hear an appeal in which the parties will be the British Board of Film Classification and the Video Appeals Committee, concerning the powers of the BBFC in relation to that matter.

Points of Order

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I believe that there is growing concern in the country about the marginalisation of Parliament and the inability of the House to hold the Executive to account. Could you ensure that the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry comes to the House to explain the fact that £530 million-worth of public money is to be lent under the launch aid provision to BAe Systems for the development of the Airbus 3XX? Many of us may be in support of the project—I am—but it is a huge amount of public money. I believe that it is the biggest industrial investment of loan capital of its kind in years, and we really should be able to question the rationale that gave rise to that decision.

Madam Speaker: I am sure that an opportunity will arise for the Secretary of State to be questioned, even if it is only at Trade and Industry questions. If I remember rightly, there is a written question on the Order Paper today. That, quite understandably, does not satisfy the hon. Gentleman, but I hope that there will be opportunities to question the Secretary of State on that issue.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): On a point of order of which I tried to give you advance notice, Madam Speaker. Have you received a request from the Prime Minister to make a statement about the role of Lord Levy, an unpaid diplomat and the Prime Minister's personal envoy, who is acting on the right hon. Gentleman's behalf in the negotiations to further the peace process in the middle east? I gather that there is concern in the House and among the diplomatic corps that an undrawn line may have been breached: a diplomat is performing a role on behalf of the Prime Minister, but he is not accountable to Parliament because he is not paid. In addition, he is conducting business deals while he works on behalf of the Prime Minister.

Madam Speaker: The hon. Lady has not given me any notice of her point of order, but I am not aware that a statement is to be made on that issue today—or at any other time for that matter.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. In view of that fact that communications are even more difficult than in neighbouring Mozambique, has the Department for International Development made a request to make a statement on the work that it is doing in the horrendous situation that has developed in Madagascar as a result of the cyclone?

Madam Speaker: I have not been informed that a Minister from any Department seeks to make a statement on that issue.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I seek your guidance. Given the disgraceful description of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on Friday of the Army's Household Division as containing lots of "chinless wonders", have you received any sign from the right hon. Gentleman that he intends to come to the House to issue a full apology for the widespread offence that his vicious and boneheaded remarks have caused?

Madam Speaker: I am not responsible for the comments of any Secretary of State. I have not been informed that the right hon. Gentleman seeks to come before the House on such a matter.

Mr. Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Have you received any indication that the Secretary of State for Education and Employment is to come to the House to make a statement clarifying uncertainty over the Government's grammar schools policy? If a Secretary of State describes a previous policy statement as a joke, does he not at least owe it to the House and to the parents of Kent to come here to explain whether he will proceed with his unnecessary and divisive ballots?

Madam Speaker: All Members seeking statements need to do is to look at the annunciator screens at about midday. They announce what statements are to be made. However, I suggest to the hon. Gentleman and to others who are interested in these matters that they may table questions for the Secretary of State for Education and Employment to answer.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Is there any mechanism whereby we can further the purpose of the point of order raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) about the outrageous remarks of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and summon the right hon. Gentleman to the Chamber? If he refuses to come we could at least then express our view: so far from the targets of his wrath being "chinless wonders", he will have exposed himself to the charge of being a gutless windbag.

Madam Speaker: I fear that they are becoming bogus points of order. We have more important business with which to deal.

Orders of the Day

Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill

As amended in the Committee and the Standing Committee, considered.

Ordered,

That the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill, as amended, be considered in the following order, namely: New Clauses, amendments relating to Clause 1, Schedule 1, Clause 2, Schedule 2, Clauses 3 to 28, Schedule 3, Clauses 29 to 44, Schedule 4, Clauses 45 to 56, Schedule 5, Clauses 57 to 64, Schedule 6, Clause 65, Schedule 7, Clauses 66 to 72, Schedule 8, Clauses 73 to 87, Schedule 9, Clause 88, Schedule 10, Clauses 89 to 103, Schedule 11, Clause 104, Schedule 12, Clauses 105 to 111, Schedule 13, Clause 112, Schedule 14, Clause 113 to 123, Schedule 15, Clauses 124 to 128, Schedule 16, Clause 129, Schedule 17, Clause 130, Schedule 18, Clauses 131 to 138, Schedule 19, Clauses 139 to 149, Schedules 20 and 21, New Schedules.—*[Mr. Mike O'Brien.]*

New Clause 1

INVOLVEMENT OF COMMISSION IN CHANGES IN ELECTORAL PROCEDURES

'.—(1) The Commission—

(a) may participate with any relevant local authority in the joint submission of proposals falling within section 10(1) of the Representation of the People Act 2000 (pilot schemes); and

(b) shall have such other functions in relation to—

(i) orders and schemes under section 10 of that Act, and

(ii) orders under section 11 of that Act (revision of procedures in the light of pilot schemes),

as are conferred on the Commission by those sections.

(2) Where any scheme under section 10 of that Act falls to be implemented following the approval by the Secretary of State of proposals jointly submitted by the Commission and a relevant local authority as mentioned in subsection (1)(a) above, the Commission may, in connection with the implementation of the scheme, provide that authority with such assistance (except financial assistance) as the Commission think fit.

(3) In this section "relevant local authority" has the same meaning as in section 10 of that Act.'.—*[Mr. Mike O'Brien.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

4.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Mike O'Brien): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Madam Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to discuss Government amendments Nos. 6, 7 and 131.

Mr. O'Brien: New clause 1 and amendment No. 131 will extend the functions of the Electoral Commission so as to include a role in relation to pilot schemes. Section 10 of the Representation of the People Act 2000 makes provision for local authorities to bring forward proposals for pilot schemes for the purpose of testing electoral innovations such as early voting and electronic voting at local government elections. Section 11 of that Act also provides for the Secretary of State, in the light of the success of such pilots, to apply such electoral innovations to local government elections generally.

It is clearly right that the Electoral Commission should have a role here. The Bill already provides the commission with a broad remit in relation to electoral law and with a role in providing advice and assistance to other authorities in relation to electoral matters. It will also have an important role in promoting public participation in the democratic process.

Those functions clearly dovetail with the rationale behind the arrangements for the conduct of pilot schemes, and it would be a serious omission not to provide the commission with a clear role. Amendment No. 131 will amend sections 10 and 11 of the Representation of the People Act so as to spell out the commission's role. New clause 1 will add to the commission's functions under part I a power to participate with a local authority in the joint submission of proposals for a pilot scheme and to provide assistance to that authority in conducting the pilot.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): Is there any way in which an individual or organisation can appeal if a local authority is refusing to undertake a pilot scheme in particular areas? I have it in mind that certain areas may have a heavy Labour or heavy Conservative vote. What is to stop the party that does not control the council making representations that the pilot area should be extended to other areas of the council?

Mr. O'Brien: We have not yet been able to approve pilot schemes, but we shall consult local authorities this week. The orders are being drafted, and I hope to be able to lay them before Parliament on Thursday, when we will be able to announce which pilots we are approving. We have, however, considered the provisional pilots and, where we have been informed of a substantive disagreement within various councils, such as Conservatives disagreeing with a Labour-controlled council, we have in most cases decided not to proceed with the application. I have had a few discussions through the usual channels to find out whether there are any particular problems.

At present, there are no means by which someone can introduce a proposal to extend the remit of a pilot scheme but, if the new clause is accepted, an obvious way to do so would be to ask the Electoral Commission to make the proposal and discuss it with the local authority so that, hopefully, the authority would then agree with the commission that it was worth approving the pilot.

Any scheme would then have to be fully evaluated to see whether it prevented personation and ensured that more people participated. If the Electoral Commission felt that it could endorse the scheme, it might then be rolled out nationally in local government elections only. As will become clear, our view is that any roll-out for parliamentary elections would have to be done by legislation.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): The Minister referred to UK general elections. Although we are dealing primarily here with local government, how will the legislation interface with the National Assembly for Wales, with regard to the Assembly's involvement with local government, which is obviously directly relevant, or with any wish by the Assembly to develop pilot schemes that are particularly relevant in Wales?

Mr. O'Brien: We would want to proceed with changes in the operation of electoral procedures in local government, or indeed in national Government, only after

[Mr. O'Brien]

full discussion and consultation with the Welsh Assembly and Executive. Throughout consideration of the Representation of the People Act and this Bill, which deals with the organisation of political parties, we have sought to ensure that the views of parties in the Welsh Assembly are considered. We have also had several discussions with the Executive at different stages to ensure that, although our proposals might not have universal approval, they are at least broadly supported by parties in Wales.

I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will allow me to write to him about exactly how the procedures for local government elections will operate in Wales and to set out clearly how the measures will apply.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that, if a local authority proceeds with a pilot scheme and decides that it is beneficial but subsequently changes its mind, its initial decision would be revocable?

Mr. O'Brien: A local authority could decide to undertake a pilot scheme and undertake it, but it would then have to submit a report on the scheme and, before it was able to repeat the exercise, receive the consent of the Electoral Commission—indeed, the Home Office would have to approve the scheme. Therefore, in the sense that the local authority could not undertake another pilot scheme if we were dissatisfied with the way in which the first one was conducted, its initial decision is revocable. The fact that an authority has decided to undertake a pilot scheme once does not mean that it would be able to do so in subsequent years.

Mr. Bercow: Or would have to?

Mr. O'Brien: The hon. Gentleman is correct.

Where the commission does not co-sponsor a pilot scheme, the Secretary of State will be required to consult the commission before making an order providing for the implementation of a pilot scheme proposed only by a local authority.

During the passage of the Representation of the People Act, several hon. Members, both here and in another place, stressed the need to provide for the independent and objective evaluation of the pilot schemes. For the first wave of pilot schemes in May, the task of evaluating such schemes will fall to the relevant local authority.

However, during debate of the Representation of the People Bill on Report in another place on 29 February, my noble Friend the Under-Secretary said that the Electoral Commission would have an important role in evaluating the operation of pilot schemes. Indeed, we envisage that, in future, such evaluation would fall to the commission. Amendment No. 131 would amend section 10 of the Representation of the People Act 2000 to that end.

The commission would be expected to work closely with the relevant local authority, which would also be required to provide the commission with appropriate assistance in preparing the report. That assistance might, for example, take the form of seeking the views of voters, parties and electoral staff on the success of the scheme, and of providing information on the cost of the pilot scheme. The local authority would also be required to publish the commission's report in its area.

Evaluation of the outcomes of pilot schemes leads naturally to the question of the roll-out of successful innovations to local government elections generally. Section 11(1) of the Representation of the People Act provides for successful pilots to be rolled out by order of the Secretary of State. As recommended by the Select Committee on Delegated Powers and Deregulation in another place, amendment No. 135 would amend section 11(l) so that the order-making power may be exercised only on the recommendation of the Electoral Commission. Our intention is that that new requirement will apply to innovations piloted this May, as well as to those successfully piloted in subsequent elections. It will therefore provide safeguards which I hope will satisfy all in the House. The new clause and amendment No. 135 will provide the independent Electoral Commission with a decisive role in the conduct, evaluation and wider application of pilot schemes.

Amendment No. 6 responds to the point raised in Committee by the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean), who made the case for the Electoral Commission's reports under clause 5 to be published at the same time as they were submitted to the Home Secretary. In Committee, we said that we had no difficulty with the broad thrust of his argument, but that the question of publication should be left in the hands of the Electoral Commission.

Any reports produced by the commission under the provisions of clause 5 would, in effect, constitute expert advice to the Government of the day from an independent statutory authority. The commission will have ownership of that advice, and it should rightly be for the commission to publish it in the manner that it sees fit. The amendment makes the position clear. I should add that I would fully expect the commission to publish its reports in parallel to submitting them to the Home Secretary for consideration.

Amendment No. 7 adds to the list of delegated powers in relation to elections that may be exercised only by the relevant Secretary of State after consultation with the Electoral Commission. The Representation of the People Act inserted a new section 17A into the Greater London Authority Act 1999. Subsection (3) of it contains a power to prescribe, by order, the arrangements for a free mailshot during future GLA elections. There is already a requirement, under new section 17A(6), on the Secretary of State to consult with such bodies as he considers appropriate before making an order, but it is as well to recognise the particular role that the Electoral Commission will have as the principal source of advice on electoral matters.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): I am grateful for the opportunity to take part in the debate. The Government amendments show the efficacy of proper scrutiny of legislation, whether in Committee or on the Floor of the House. Last week, by contrast, a guillotine was imposed on discussion of the Representation of the People Bill. The quality of legislation may suffer as a consequence of the quantity, but I hope that we shall make progress on the present Bill in the next two days.

We welcome the fact that the Government recognise the importance of the electoral process remaining untarnished by perceived or actual rigging of elections by party politicians. Amendments to the Representation of

the People Act 2000 relate to the rolling out of the Secretary of State's powers in regard to future parliamentary elections.

I am delighted that the Government have taken the initial steps on a journey that we have been enticing them to make, both in this place and in another place, but there is still some way to go. It is a journey well worth making, as I hope the Minister will agree.

On 9 February, the Select Committee on Deregulation issued a report that proposed that changes to electoral law be made in consultation with the new Electoral Commission. The Government also accepted the recommendation that other sweeping powers relating to electoral changes to parliamentary elections require primary legislation. That was enshrined in the Representation of the People Act 2000, and we thank the Government for those changes.

The Neill report in October 1998 called for the establishment of the Electoral Commission and for the commission to be given a wide remit, including the review within six months of major elections and referendums. Recommendation 72 proposes that

the Government should consult the Commission before making or proposing any changes relating to electoral law and administration.

With regard to the commission and to electoral law and administration, I have some questions about the Government's new clauses and amendments.

We have enormous reservations about the make-up of the Electoral Commission, in view of the powers that it is to be given. We know that it will comprise between five and nine members, as recommended by the Neill committee. The Neill report further recommended that the commission should include no party politicians. That is a sound recommendation. The Speaker's Committee is to be established, on which politicians will serve. However, there is nothing in the Bill to prevent past or present party politicians being members of the Electoral Commission, and we hope that the Government will reconsider its composition.

My right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) will comment on the timetable for the establishment of the commission and the pilots due to take place in May. Problems may arise because of the time lapse between the pilots and the setting up of the Electoral Commission and the appointment of the chief executive.

It is important that the changes are made and seen to be made by an independent body. A number of pilots have already been approved by the Secretary of State, and the new body must be given sight of the local authority reports when the pilots take place. Can the Minister say what will happen to those reports, given the time lag? I believe that the Home Secretary told our shadow Home Secretary in a letter that the commission will be up and running in November. I should be grateful if the Minister could confirm that. If that is the case, we hope that the reports will be made available in November.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We will use our best endeavours, but I cannot provide a complete reassurance that everything will be in place by that date. However, we are doing our best to get things moving.

4.30 pm

Mr. Evans: I am grateful for that response. The Minister knows why we are worried about the matter.

My right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire will also refer to the powers of the new chief executive, who will be appointed before the chairman of the Electoral Commission.

We have other anxieties. Several pilots will be up and running throughout the country and, when the new commission is established, it will not only have the power—indeed, the obligation—to consider their efficacy, but it will have to deal with representations from several other local authorities, which want to introduce pilots next year. The Electoral Commission will thus have a lot of work in its initial stages. We want to ensure that it will be an absolute success. Will the Minister therefore explain the way in which he envisages the Electoral Commission working, and comment on the fact that it will begin its work long after the first pilot schemes have been established?

Will the Minister also confirm that the Electoral Commission may also want to investigate the London mayoral elections, or will it have no power to examine them? After the rigged referendum in Wales, the Neill committee presented important recommendations on the publication of literature by the Government. The Electoral Commission may want to consider what happened in that referendum to ensure that future referendums are not rigged. It may also want to present proposals on the London mayoral elections.

As the Minister knows, the list of pilots was made available to bodies outside the House before the House knew about them. We have received written answers about that from him, and he has given explanations at the Dispatch Box. However, in the next roll-out in 2001, the Electoral Commission and local authorities will work together, and we are keen to ensure that the House will be informed of the pilots before the Press Association or any other bodies. We should be told at least at the same time as local authorities.

Let us consider Government amendment No. 7. There has been much controversy about the literature for the Greater London Authority elections. First, we were told that it would be impossible for any free literature to be made available to the electorate. We were then told that the costs of doing that would be prohibitive. However, we are now told that it is not only possible to produce such literature, but that the costs have shrunk dramatically. A hard-fought victory for democracy was won by the unelected House of Lords.

We know why the Government were not keen initially on free mailshots for the London mayoral elections. However, they will now be provided. Even Dafydd Elis-Thomas was heard to remark in the House of Lords that politics was a funny business, and that he never thought that he would vote in the same Lobby as Margaret Thatcher in defence of Ken Livingstone.

Why do the Government wish to retain power over future mailshots? A mailshot is assured only for the first Londonwide elections. Why cannot the commission have the same powers for mailshots as it has for rolling out further reforms for pilot elections? The Secretary of State no longer has the power unilaterally to introduce changes to elections; he has to do that on the commission's recommendation.

There is a suspicion that the Government want to retain at least a reserve power to stop mailshots, and act in cahoots with a more compliant second Chamber in future.

[Mr. Evans]

The Minister may call me cynical, but my cynicism is bred from the stench of rigging and control freakery of which the former Soviet Union would be proud.

Will the Minister allay the House's suspicions and agree to reconsider whether the commission should introduce recommendations for future mailshots in London mayoral elections? If so, we will be reassured that the Government are not continuing to try to rig elections.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) asked me about the composition of the Electoral Commission. We believe that, essentially, members of the commission should be above party politics. Generally, that would mean those who were not recently actively engaged in the party political process. We would want to be sure that those who were appointed to the commission had the broad support of all the political parties in the House. We would not wish it to be thought that an attempt was being made to put in place a group of party political hacks, who might try to manipulate the situation to their own advantage. That is not the way in which the Neill report envisaged the commission operating, and it is not the way in which the Government want it to operate. I trust that we shall have the Opposition's support in ensuring that the process takes place in a way that is seen as above the fray.

Mr. Evans: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. O'Brien: I will clarify the matter and then give way.

We have already discussed whether someone who had been involved in politics by standing as a candidate some time ago would be excluded from the commission. I would not necessarily exclude such a person, but it is not our intention to include him or her in the process. We do not have a particular view on who will be on the commission but, in due course, we shall be starting the examination of possible candidates. We hope that they will be of the great and good, but not too political.

Mr. Evans: I am grateful for that reassurance. Will the Minister therefore confirm that no current Member of the House of Lords will be eligible for membership of the commission? Given the number of hereditary peers who have left the House of Lords, does he envisage some of them being used for the commission? I hear what he says about consultation with leaders of political parties that are represented in this place by two or more Members. Will each political leader have a black ball to put against any names that come forward if he is unhappy about those people?

Mr. O'Brien: I hope that these things can be done by consensus rather than black balls. We do not want to get into black balls—that approach leads to the situation where one side blackballs, followed by the other. We want there to be a number of individuals who are seen to be above the party political fray, whom broadly everyone can accept.

The hon. Gentleman asked me whether any Member of the House of Lords might be included in the process. Law Lords are able to sit in another place, and I would not wish to exclude individuals of that calibre from the commission. We need to ensure that we have a commission with which all parties with two or more Members sitting in the House are broadly satisfied. I hope that other political parties will be able to go along with that, to ensure that the members of the commission are of a high calibre and the sort of people who can be relied upon to reach independent and fair judgments.

Mr. Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. O'Brien: I am not getting very far in responding to the debate, but I shall give way.

Mr. Stunell: Perhaps I might tempt the Minister to go a little further. The debate in Committee on this matter focused not only on where potential members of the commission might come from but on where they might go. The hon. Gentleman will remember that I moved some amendments to prevent members continuing in office if they were going to take up political activity. We should have some poachers becoming gamekeepers, but not gamekeepers becoming poachers.

Mr. O'Brien: I do not envisage these people subsequently deciding to become involved in politics. I suspect that those who are likely to sit on that body would not be likely to get involved in partisan politics or to put themselves into the fray but, if they did so, questions would have to be asked about whether they would continue in that role. We would want to be very careful about the types of individual who were members of the Electoral Commission and avoid that problem arising in the first place.

Let me answer some of the other points raised by the hon. Member for Ribble Valley. In terms of the pilots, there will be a time lapse before the Electoral Commission is in place. Subject to the Bill receiving Royal Assent by summer, we aim to establish the commission in November 2000, and its priority will be to put in place the arrangements for the reporting of donations and the controls on electoral campaign spending. We will therefore need to discuss with the commission the extent to which it can be involved in pilot schemes at the May 2001 elections. Any roll-out of such schemes to local government elections generally will be on the commission's recommendation.

A number of pilot schemes will be tested this year and we shall evaluate those tests, but I should be surprised if we were able to roll them out before the next election—although that would not be impossible, were there no controversy—and the time scale will probably be slightly longer. We would hope to have the Electoral Commission in place by then. We would also hope that it would be in a position at least to examine some of the possible pilots for next year. If we were to set up the commission in November, evaluation would probably have to take place in December and the time scales for the pilots for May 2001 would become very tight. We could leave the decision late, as we have done for parliamentary reasons this year, but that would not be desirable. We would like to tell the local authorities the pilots to which we had agreed before that.

The Electoral Commission's role would, to some extent, depend on its ability to deliver an evaluation. We would want it to be involved, but in the interim we would

deal with these matters by ensuring that there was proper consultation between the political parties and a way of evaluating each scheme. We would not proceed where there were serious political objections, particularly during the next year. There is lots of speculation about various things that might happen next year and we would be particularly cautious about the way in which we proceeded with pilots then.

We would be able to evaluate those schemes. If we were disposed, without any great controversy, to agree to some extension of the electoral arrangements, that would be done by affirmative order. It would be fully debated in the House. Again, it would be in no one's interests—certainly not the Government's—to put electoral arrangements that are a matter of party political dispute before the people of this country. We are trying to move forward by consensus.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether the Electoral Commission would consider the mayoral elections, but they might have taken place a year previously by the time it got round to holding an inquiry, and it would have to consider party donations and perhaps evaluate some of the pilots before doing so. I cannot preclude that, and there may be good reasons for making such a decision—I do not know—but that would be essentially a matter for the commission. It seems to me that the time scale does not easily lend itself to such an inquiry.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the announcement of provisional pilots. I hope that there would be more publicity about which pilots were being considered. I have been concerned that there has not been the lead-in time to enable some Members of Parliament to be fully consulted by their local authorities because of the way in which things have been done over the year, because of delays with the Bill and because of a number of issues in respect of which authorities would introduce pilots. Indeed, I pulled at least one pilot because Members of Parliament said not only that they had not been consulted, but that they would have disagreed if they had been. We did not want to get into a controversy even if it were internal and involved one political party, as in this case, rather than inter-party.

4.45 pm

The best way to carry out these pilots is for them to be as uncontroversial as possible, so that there is broad support. We should evaluate them properly, and the House should decide in due course whether to go further. Before we proceed on a broader basis, we should consider the recommendation of the Electoral Commission.

The hon. Member for Ribble Valley asked about postage and payment for the distribution of electoral addresses for the Greater London Assembly elections. That brings us back to the debate that we had last week. The Conservatives want the distribution of their election addresses to be subsidised by the taxpayer. The Conservative party has financial problems owing to its lack of support in the country. The hon. Gentleman tries our patience by arguing that decisions on whether taxpayers' money should be spent on subsidising political parties in elections should be taken out of the hands of the House of Commons and given to the Electoral Commission. I am not easily convinced by that argument.

I suspect that, when the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues have considered the proposal, they will not be able to endorse it. The House has always jealously guarded decisions on the expenditure of taxpayers' money. I suspect that most Tories would not endorse handing them over to an entirely independent and unelected body.

The Electoral Commission may, in certain circumstances, be prepared to express a view on that issue, which the House could consider seriously, but the decision on expenditure should always rest with the House.

Mr. Evans: Our view has nothing to do with the Conservative party wanting money to distribute our publications, but everything to do with the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone)—and everyone knows that, so the Minister's point is a smokescreen. It was a hard-won victory in the other place. We are keen to ensure that the Government take the Electoral Commission's views seriously if it says that it is vital to have free postage to ensure that the electorate are fully informed of the various merits and policies of the candidates.

I understand what the Minister says about giving another body responsibility for the expenditure of taxpayers' money, but he must accept that, for the full workings of democracy, it is important that all candidates can avail themselves of the opportunity to have their publications delivered to every house in London.

Mr. O'Brien: I am not sure whether this new clause is the appropriate place to debate that issue. I was a little surprised by the hon. Gentleman's suggestion that this was nothing to do with the Conservative party, and everything to do with the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone). The Conservative party's advocacy of this proposal now seems to have everything to do with its support for the hon. Member for Brent, East. I suspect that Steven Norris would be a little chagrined by the hon. Gentleman's view. The Conservatives moved from supporting Lord Archer to Steven Norris, and now they are supporting the hon. Member for Brent, East. That is a surprise.

The hon. Gentleman may recall that the Conservative party advocated this measure before the hon. Member for Brent, East indicated his intention to stand as an independent candidate in the London mayoral elections. I find his suggestion that this has nothing to do with the finances of the Tory party difficult to believe. In any event, I am grateful to him for his broad support for the Government's new clauses and amendments.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause read a Second time, and added to the Bill.

New Clause 2

PAYMENTS ETC. WHICH ARE (OR ARE NOT) TO BE TREATED AS DONATIONS BY PERMISSIBLE DONORS

'.—(1) The following provisions have effect for the purposes of this Part.

(2) Any payment out of public funds received by a registered party shall (subject to section 46(1)(a) and (b)) be regarded as a donation received by the party from a permissible donor.

(3) Any donation received by a registered party shall (if it would not otherwise fall to be so regarded) be regarded as a donation received by the party from a permissible donor if and to the extent that—

(a) the purpose of the donation is to meet qualifying costs incurred or to be incurred in connection with a visit by any member or officer of the party to a country or territory outside the United Kingdom, and

(b) the amount of the donation does not exceed a reasonable amount in respect of such costs.

(4) In subsection (3) "qualifying costs", in relation to any member or officer of the party, means costs relating to that person in respect of—

(a) travelling between the United Kingdom and the country or territory in question, or

(b) travelling, accommodation or subsistence while within that country or territory.

(5) Any donation received by a registered party from a trustee of any property (in his capacity as such) which does not constitute a donation transmitted by the trustee to the party—

(a) on behalf of a person who, at the time of its receipt by the party, is a permissible donor, or

(b) in pursuance of a bequest made by such a person as is mentioned in section 48(3),

shall be regarded as a donation received by the party from a person who is not a permissible donor.'.—*[Mr. Mike O'Brien.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the clause be read a Second time.—*[Mr. Mike O'Brien.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): With this, it will be convenient to discuss the following Government amendments: Nos. 15, 90 to 93, 96, 23, 97 to 100, 103 to 106, 111 and 114.

Mr. Robert Walter (North Dorset): I am intrigued that the Minister is not speaking to what is a large group of amendments. When we discussed the Bill in the Standing Committee, I was delighted that the Government promised to revisit on Report the two important aspects that are covered in the amendments. One concerns the international links that our various political parties have. Under the Bill as drafted, there is a danger that we may cut ourselves off from the outside world to prevent any money flowing through the international links that our parties have. It is clear that a modern political party should be able to deal with its sister parties overseas.

The second important strand deals with the power of trustees and bequests. Government amendments Nos. 15, 111 and 114 essentially seek to delete the paragraph which states that

any donation received by a registered party by way of a donation by a trustee, in his capacity as such, shall be regarded as a donation received by the party from a person who is not a permissible donor.

That was at variance with Neill. Although Neill was fairly specific about blind trusts, that paragraph would have covered open trusts. Neill's recommendation 22 was that open trusts should be permitted, and it was my understanding that the Government had accepted that. Paragraph 3.37 of their White Paper states:

In recommendations 22 and 23 of their report, the Neill committee addressed the wider issue of donations to individual members of political parties or to unofficial groups within a party, as distinct from donations to political parties as such. The Government sympathises with the view that the principles of openness and accountability should apply equally to such donations.

Consider the case of a trust that was set up as a result of a bequest, the purpose of which was to donate funds for political purposes. To suggest, as the clause does, that that would not be a permissible source flies in the face of Neill and in the face of what I regard as natural justice.

I hope not to die too soon, but, if I were to leave a bequest that was managed by trustees on my part and my will said that I would like the trustees at their discretion to make occasional donations to the Conservative party, I would expect my wishes to be carried out. Subsection (4) would mean that trustees would not be able to carry out my wishes; it would not be permissible to make such a donation.

In Committee, the Opposition made it clear that we saw little purpose in banning such donations. I welcome the Government's acceptance of that, as I welcome their acceptance that international links should be preserved and that the money necessary to preserve those links should be allowed to flow.

Mr. Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove): For my part, I welcome the direction in which the new clause is going. The discussion in Committee covered many of the points, and I echo what the hon. Member for North Dorset (Mr. Walter) has said.

One or two loose ends remain. May I ask the Minister to say something on the role of trustees of property? I have done my best to comprehend precisely what the Minister believes he has achieved in that area. I am still not sure that the Government have achieved what hon. Members want them to achieve.

I ask the Minister to say a little more about subsection (5) and how it will be applied, especially as the words used in the subsection are used in many other parts of the Bill. Broadly, however, I welcome new clause 2, and Liberal Democrat Members will support it.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I am grateful to the Liberal Democrat and Conservative Members who have supported this group of amendments, which give effect to the prohibition on foreign and anonymous donations.

The Bill currently prevents political parties and other regulated bodies and persons from accepting donations from sources other than permissible donors. One effect of that provision is to prevent not only hon. Members, but party members and party officers from undertaking overseas visits at the expense of an overseas Government or body. That was not our direct intention. As the hon. Member for North Dorset (Mr. Walter) has rightly said, it is important that we maintain our international links with parties of a similar philosophical view. Such links both add to knowledge abroad of this country, and enable us to maintain very important relationships with other countries that benefit the United Kingdom not only politically, but in many other spheres.

Hon. Members undertake many and varied overseas visits in pursuance of their proper parliamentary duties. Such visits are invaluable in promoting hon. Members' understanding of a wide variety of issues, and thereby better equip them to discharge their duties as parliamentarians. A quick glance through the Register of Members' Interests reveals visits paid for by overseas Governments, overseas territories, overseas Parliaments and a variety of political foundations, such as the Konrad Adenauer Foundation. The main point is that, in the Bill as it stands, not all those sponsors would constitute a permissible donor.

The issue is not confined to Members of Parliament. We have had representations from the Green party and other groups about their arrangements, and they have sought the type of changes proposed in this group of

amendments. New clause 2 and the raft of amendments grouped with it are directed primarily at addressing that issue. The key provisions are in subsections (3) and (4) of the new clause, which applies to donations to political parties.

Government amendment No. 100 makes identical provisions for party members, members of associations and holders of elected office.

I very much hope that the House will accept this group of amendments. From the broad support that hon. Members have demonstrated for the provisions, it seems that they will be accepted.

A subsidiary purpose of this group of amendments is, in certain very limited cases, to allow donations from trustees. Clause 48(4)(b) currently provides that a donation received by a registered party from a trustee acting in his capacity as such is to be treated as a donation

from a person who is not a permissible donor.

That provision sits uncomfortably with clause 48(3), on donations made in the form of a bequest.

Clearly, when a person's will includes a bequest of money or property to a political party, the trustees of the will should be able to give effect to that bequest. Reckless as the hon. Member for North Dorset (Mr. Walter) may be to want to give money to the party that he mentioned, I think that he should have every right to do so. Provided that the deceased was on the electoral register at the time of his or her death, the registered party named in the will should be able to accept the bequest.

There may be other cases in which a trustee is simply acting as an agent in passing money or property. Again, it would be legitimate for a party to accept a donation of property provided that the person on whose behalf the trustee is acting is a permissible—that is, registered—donor. In such circumstances, clause 48(7) would apply, and the trustee would be acting as an agent for another person. That other person would be recorded as the donor.

I hope that, now that those points have been dealt with, the House will be able to give strong support to the new clause and amendments in this group.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause read a Second time, and added to the Bill.

New Clause 3

TRANSFER TO COMMISSION OF FUNCTIONS OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT BOUNDARY COMMISSION FOR SCOTLAND

'.—(1) The Scottish Parliament may by order make provision for the transfer to the Commission of any one or more functions of the Local Government Boundary Commission for Scotland (in this section referred to as "the Scottish Commission").

(2) The Commission shall make arrangements for functions transferred to them by an order under subsection (1) to be exercised by the Boundary Commission for Scotland.

(3) Where each of the functions of the Scottish Commission is transferred by an order under subsection (1), the Scottish Parliament may by order make provision for the abolition of the Scottish Commission.

(4) An order under subsection (1) or (3) may include provision for the transfer to the Commission.

(a) of the staff of the Scottish Commission, and

(b) of any property, rights and liabilities to which the Scottish Commission are entitled or subject;

and an order which contains provision such as is mentioned in paragraph (b) may in particular provide for the order to have effect despite any provision (of whatever nature) which would prevent or restrict the transfer of the property, rights or liabilities otherwise than by the order.

(5) An order under subsection (3) may include provision for the abolition of any duty in compliance with which the Scottish Commission was established or constituted.

(6) An order under this section may contain any appropriate consequential, incidental, supplementary or transitional provisions or savings (including provisions amending, repealing or revoking enactments).

(7) Any power of the Scottish Parliament to make an order under this section shall be exercisable by statutory instrument.

(8) The expenditure of the Commission, so far as attributable to the exercise of any functions transferred by an order under subsection (1), shall be met by the Scottish Parliament.'.—*[Mr. Grieve.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

5 pm

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 140, in schedule 1, page 99, line 21, at end insert—

'or by the Scottish Parliament in pursuance of section [*Transfer to Commission of functions of Local Government Boundary Commission for Scotland*] (8)'.

No. 141, in clause 5, page 4, line 7, after "however", insert—

'save with the consent of the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales or the Northern Ireland Assembly (as the case may be)'.

No. 142, in page 4, line 26, at end insert—

'(iv) local government elections in Scotland (with the consent of the Scottish Parliament); and'.

No. 143, in clause 8, page 6, line 31, at end insert—

'unless the Scottish Parliament requests otherwise'.

No. 144, in clause 11, page 8, line 16, after "Scotland", insert—

'except with the consent of the Scottish Parliament'.

Mr. Grieve: We are revisiting an issue that was touched on in Committee. There appeared to be a possible problem that the House could help to solve.

As a result of the Scotland Act 1998, all responsibility over local government in Scotland is given to the Scottish Parliament. It is for the Scottish Parliament to determine how local government is to be run, what alterations might be made to its structure and to boundaries and, in particular, how elections might be conducted. I emphasise that we have no problem with that.

However, as we looked through the Bill, it became apparent that there are many areas in which the Electoral Commission might—I emphasise that word—be of benefit to the Scottish Parliament and Executive. We are setting up a structure with responsibilities for England and for certain devolved matters in Wales. Our concern was that if the Scottish Parliament and Executive wished to avail themselves of the services of the Electoral Commission,

[Mr. Grieve]

they should be in a position to do so. I emphasise that we are not seeking to tell the Scottish Parliament how they should go about their own business. That applies to the ability of the Electoral Commission to provide input and advice to the boundary commission. Scotland has a distinctive, small commission that deals only with local government boundaries. The services of the Electoral Commission may be wanted for that purpose.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: It may assist the hon. Gentleman to know that he does not have to convince me in principle. We are having discussions with the Scottish Executive on how to move forward. We may well be able to table amendments in another place in due course.

Mr. Grieve: I am grateful to the Minister. I knew that the matter appeared to be of some interest to the Government when we raised it previously and I am grateful for a progress report. We were waiting for the Report stage to see how matters were progressing. In those circumstances, I do not intend to take up more of the time of the House.

Having re-read the new clause, I should emphasise that, if the boundary commission for local government matters in Scotland were subsumed into the Electoral Commission, that commission should then report to the Scottish Parliament and Executive and not here. Otherwise, there would be a suggestion that we were trying to ratchet those powers back. I flag that up because I am the first to accept that the phrasing of the new clause might be capable of improvement. Subject to those comments and to the Minister's helpful remarks, I shall ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman should give the Minister an opportunity to reply before he does so.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) asked me for an update. I thought that I might not have a chance to give one.

We are considering similar proposals and we are sympathetic to the broad principles that the hon. Gentleman has outlined. As my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office said on 14 February, we are discussing with the Scottish Executive whether they wish to include provisions along the lines of the new clause and associated amendments. The Scottish Parliament and Executive have said that they would welcome an order-making power exercisable by Scottish Ministers to enable the functions of the local government boundary commission for Scotland to be transferred to the Electoral Commission. They have also agreed that there should be a similar enabling power to extend, to local government elections in Scotland, with the agreement of the Scottish Executive and Parliament, the Electoral Commission's remit under clause 8(3)(a) and clause 11. The hon. Member for Beaconsfield is right that the commission would then have to report to the Scottish Parliament.

In the light of this agreement, I am ready to accept in principle the new clause and amendments Nos. 140, 143 and 144. The Government will table amendments along similar lines when the Bill reaches another place. We propose that those amendments will provide that the various functions in relation to local government boundaries and elections may be transferred to the Electoral Commission by an order made by a member of the Scottish Executive. Any such order would be subject to the equivalent of the affirmative resolution procedure in the Scottish Parliament.

I should add that we see no need for provisions along the lines of amendments Nos. 141 or 142. Under clause 8(1) the commission may, at the request of any relevant body, provide that body with advice and assistance in respect of any matter in which the commission has skill and experience. The definition of a "relevant body" in clause 8(6) includes the Scottish Parliament and Executive, and the National Assembly for Wales. It would therefore be open to the Scottish Parliament to request, for example, that the commission undertake a review of electoral law in relation to local government elections, or for the National Assembly to ask the commission to review the conduct of a poll held under section 36 of the Government of Wales Act 1998.

Given that clause 8(1) essentially has the same effect as amendments Nos. 141 and 142, I am pleased that the hon. Member for Beaconsfield is disposed to withdraw them.

Mr. Wigley: I am sorry to have had to rush in for this debate, which I had not expected to start so early. I am aware that the debate applies to Scotland, but the Minister has referred to Wales. Some parts of the electoral law in Wales come under the Home Office, and others come under what used to be the Welsh Office and the National Assembly. To what extent are the Minister's comments about Scotland applicable to Wales?

Mr. O'Brien: The right hon. Gentleman will know that he has to be quick in this House, and I am pleased that he managed to get here for the debate. However, I am not sure of the focus of his question. The Government would always seek to consult the Welsh Executive and the Welsh Assembly if there were to be any change to the way that things were done in Wales. We would also hope that the Welsh Assembly would let us know how it wanted to proceed in relation to any matters with which it deals.

So far, dealing with devolved matters has proved remarkably easy. Good relationships are being developed, and plenty of discussions are being held between the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and the Executive here in London. I hope that we will be able to ensure that the procedures that we use will be acceptable to all parties.

Mr. Wigley: I agree that, where good will exists, the system can be made to work. However, I seek some clarification from the Minister. Orders may occasionally need to be made, and I was asking about the facility that exists to enable the National Assembly for Wales to make them. Given that the local government legislation has transferred powers to the Assembly, will provisions equivalent to those that apply to Scotland be made?

Mr. O'Brien: The Government do not at present propose to transfer to the Welsh Assembly matters relating to council elections. They are not devolved matters, but there is no reason why the Welsh Assembly should not refer a matter to the Electoral Commission for

advice. I am not sure that I have got the drift of the right hon. Gentleman's point—or perhaps I have and have answered it.

Mr. Wigley: I shall try and clarify my question. On several occasions, order-making facilities have been added to Bills going through Westminster, with the result that the National Assembly is able to undertake extra functions. Will the Minister bear in mind the possibility of making such provision for Wales in future, where it seems appropriate that orders should come from the Assembly?

Mr. O'Brien: I certainly agree to bear that in mind. If matters are best dealt with in Wales, it is appropriate that they are dealt with there, just as it is right that matters best dealt with here are dealt with here. There may well be occasions in the future when we will be able to act as the right hon. Gentleman suggests.

Mr. Grieve: I am sorry if I gave the impression that I was seeking to curtail the debate. Opposition Members are usually accused of trying to spin out debate on their amendments for longer than is justified.

I thank the Minister for his comments. I note that the Scottish National party is not represented here today, and assume from that that its members felt reassured by comments that they had heard previously that the new clause would not fetter the powers devolved to the Scottish Parliament. I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley) for giving us the Welsh dimension.

I look forward to seeing what progress has been made when the Bill eventually returns here from the other place. On that basis, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Motion and clause, by leave, withdrawn.

New Clause 4

Tax relief for donations to political parties

'.—The following shall be inserted after section 379 of the Income and Corporation Taxes Act 1988 (interpretation of sections 369 to 378)—

"Relief for donations to political parties

379AA.—(1) Tax relief shall be available to an individual (the donor) in accordance with this section on qualifying political donations made by him of up to £500 in any year of assessment.

(2) A donation is a qualifying political donation for the purposes of this section if it is made to an eligible political party and—

(a) it takes the form of the payment of a sum of money,

(b) it is not subject to a condition as to repayment,

(c) it is not conditional on or associated with, or part of an arrangement involving, the acquisition of property by the political party, otherwise than by way of gift, from the donor or a person connected with him, and

(d) the donor is resident in the United Kingdom at the time the donation is made.

(3) For the purposes of this section a political party is an eligible political party if, at the last general election preceding the donation in question—

(a) two members of that party were elected to the House of Commons, or

(b) one member of that party was elected to the House of Commons and not less than 150,000 votes were given to candidates who were members of that party.

(4) If an individual makes a qualifying donation he shall be entitled, on making the payment, to deduct and retain out of it a sum equal to basic rate tax thereon.

(5) Where a sum is deducted under subsection (4) above the sum deducted shall be treated as income tax paid by the person to whom the payment is made.

(6) Any person by whom a qualifying donation is received shall be entitled to recover from the Board, in accordance with regulations, an amount which by virtue of subsection (5) above is treated as income tax paid by him; and any amount so recovered shall be treated for the purposes of the Tax Acts in like manner as the qualifying political donation to which it relates.

(7) The following provisions of the Management Act, namely—

(a) section 29(1)(c) (excessive relief) as it has effect apart from section 29(2) to (10) of that Act,

(b) section 30 (tax repaid in error, etc) apart from subsection (1B),

(c) section 86 (interest), and

(d) section 95 (incorrect return or accounts),

shall apply in relation to an amount which is paid to any person by the Board as an amount recoverable in accordance with regulations made by virtue of subsection (6) above but to which that person is not entitled as if it were income tax which ought not to have been repaid and, where that amount was claimed by that person, as if it had been repaid as respects a chargeable period as a relief which was not due.

(8) In the application of section 86 of the Management Act by virtue of section (7) above in relation to sums due and payable by virtue of an assessment made for the whole or part of a year of assessment ('the relevant year of assessment') under section 29(1)(c) or 30 of that Act, as applied by that subsection, the relevant date—

(a) is 1 January in the relevant year of assessment in a case where the person falling within subsection (5) above has made a relevant interim claim; and

(b) in any other case is the later of the following dates, that is to say—

(i) 1 January in the relevant year of assessment; or

(ii) the date of the making of the payment by the Board which gives rise to the assessment.

(9) The Board may by regulations make provision—

(a) for the purposes of any provision of this section which relates to any matter or thing to be specified by or done in accordance with regulations;

(b) with respect to the furnishing of information by donors or recipients, including, in the case of recipients, the inspection of books, documents and other records on behalf of the Board; and

(c) generally for giving effect to this section.

(10) In this section—

'financial year' in relation to any person means a financial year of that person for the purposes of the relevant regulations;

'interim claim' means an interim claim within the meaning of the relevant regulations;

'relevant interim claim' means, in relation to an assessment made for a period coterminous with, or falling wholly within, a person's financial year, an interim claim made for a period falling wholly or partly within that financial year; and

'the relevant regulations' means regulations made under subsection (9) above.

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(11) Section 839 of this Act shall apply for the purposes of this section to determine whether one person is connected with another".'.—*[Mr. Walter.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

Mr. Walter: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

We consider this proposal important, because it goes to the heart of our democratic process and the party system. It would introduce a tax relief at the basic rate of tax on political donations up to £500 a year. The wording is based on the mortgage interest relief at source—MIRAS—scheme and the charities gift aid schemes, so it has some tax precedents.

Opposition Members have never believed that we should cherry-pick the Neill recommendations. We think that, as far as possible, they should be implemented in full, and that is what the new clause would bring about. We must make what is, perhaps, a philosophical choice about whether we want our political parties to be directly funded by taxpayers—I know some hon. Members would sympathise with that view—or whether we want to implement a procedure to encourage more voluntary donations to political parties. The new clause would encourage voluntary donations.

In evidence to the Neill committee, the Conservative party said:

Rather than call for state funding we would welcome the Committee's views about how more individuals could be encouraged to donate. We note that in some countries individuals are offered tax relief for political donations, elsewhere tax credits or matching grants are provided. We believe that the Committee should give serious consideration to the practicalities of these approaches in the context of the United Kingdom's voluntary system.

The Neill committee's recommendations are set out in our new clause. It is important, in the interests of democracy, for the funding of political parties to be as broadly based as possible. The Neill report cites evidence from Germany about a system of tax relief introduced in 1974, under which the pattern of donations to political parties has changed from significantly large donations to many small ones. That is in keeping with the spirit of the new clause and, we believe, with the Bill.

The new clause is identical to a proposal tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) on 22 June last year in the Standing Committee considering the Finance Bill. It would amend section 379 of the Income and Corporation Taxes Act 1988 by inserting a new section 379AA.

Lord Neill's recommendation 38 states:

Tax relief by deduction at source should be introduced, limited to the basic rate, on donations of up to £500 a year to eligible registered political parties.

Recommendation 39 states:

Political parties should be eligible to claim under the tax relief scheme if at the last general election two members of the party were elected to the House of Commons or one member was elected and the party won at least 150,000 votes.

5.15 pm

Why do we feel that it would be appropriate to include what seems to be a taxation measure in the Bill? The then Economic Secretary to the Treasury, the hon. Member for Leicester, West (Ms Hewitt) said in response to my hon. Friend's amendment to the Finance Bill being considered in Committee in June 1999:

The Government do not believe that that is the appropriate way to respond to the Neill committee, which proposed a package of recommendations that should be considered together. That is why I shall ask the Committee to reject the new clause.

The question of whether there should be tax relief for donations to political parties—and, if so, how it should operate—must be considered alongside all the proposed measures that we intend to publish in the draft Bill before the summer.

That draft Bill has now become the Bill before us. The hon. Lady went on:

We should not try to deal with this one aspect in isolation.

She continued:

It is also necessary to consider the issue of tax relief for donations to political parties alongside the review of tax relief for charitable donations—something that we are already working on with the charitable sector. It would be most unfortunate if the system appeared to be more generous in relation to smaller donations to political parties than in relation to smaller donations to charities.

The new clause takes note of that. The then Economic Secetary concluded:

I urge hon. Members to await publication of our draft Bill on donations to political parties and campaign expenditure. I hope that, in the spirit of fraternity . . . the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton will agree to withdraw the new clause.—*[Official Report, Standing Committee B*, 22 June 1999; c.778.]

It is therefore the Treasury's view that the new clause should be considered as part of this Bill, not in isolation and not as part of a Finance Bill. That is why, although the new clause was tabled in the Standing Committee considering the Finance Bill last year, it was felt that it should be considered alongside this Bill.

As the Minister will be aware, given arguments for and against tax relief, Lord Neill concludes in favour of a system of tax relief. In his evidence to the Neill committee, Lord Razzall, the treasurer of the Liberal Democrats, saw benefit in the tax relief system. He said:

I think that as a weapon for the political parties to build up their membership base in particular . . . as part of that armoury as long as it was structured in a way that was designed to benefit the small donations, I wouldn't be against it.

Lord Parkinson, giving evidence on behalf of the Conservative party, said:

I think that this is a very attractive idea. I think anything that encourages people to participate in a political process, to get involved in political parties, to broaden the base of their membership is to be welcomed because I think politics is a very honourable profession and supporting a political party is a very worthwhile way of spending one's time and money.

It would be wrong to say that there were no arguments against the measure. In his evidence, the finance director of the Labour party, Mr. David Pitt-Watson, said:

Tax relief is of value only to people who pay tax—

That is true—

and where the donations given are of significant size. It would be of little value to the Labour Party, which has 400,000 members who are paying an average of £20 each to the Labour Party's coffers. It would be of enormous value to our opponents.

As well as those who give the Labour party an average of £20, many donors give much more. I say with some sadness that I know for a fact that the Labour party has more donors giving more than £5,000 than the Conservative party. I imagine that some of those donors might value a small tax concession. We are aiming not at those who give £20, nor at those who donate £5,000, but at those who want to make a contribution that is significant in their terms. I refer to those on middle

incomes who consider that making a substantial donation to a political party is a worthwhile way of spending their money.

I offer the example of my Conservative association in North Dorset, which has a successful patrons' club. Members donate £200 and are content to do so without the benefit of tax relief. We should be in a much healthier state, however, if tax relief applied, because more people might be inclined to make such a donation to the party. The Liberal Democrats would benefit, as would the Labour party.

The new clause would bring many small to medium-sized donors into the political process. It is not concerned with those who pay basic subscriptions, or with those who can write cheques for £5,000 or even £1 million. Those people will make their contributions anyway, and the tax relief on, say, £500 would be of minimal benefit to them. We want to aim for people who already make charitable donations of up to £500 using the gift aid scheme and who are encouraged to do so by the tax relief granted on their donations.

We could enable political parties to broaden the base of their finances so that they are less reliant on large donors of more than £5,000, not to mention those who can donate £1 million or more. We want the financing of political parties to become more broadly based, which was one of the major themes of the Neill report. Such a scheme would constitute a great fillip for democracy and would be of minimal cost to the Treasury. I say that advisedly, having examined the costs of other political parties and compared the figure with the cost of special advisers alone, which is a burden on the taxpayer.

This modest money measure would add an entirely appropriate new clause in the Bill, and I commend it.

Mr. John MacGregor (South Norfolk): As I was a member of the Neill committee, which drew up the original recommendations, hon. Members will be unsurprised to know that I warmly support the new clause. We should understand from the outset the important difference between tax relief and public funding. Neill did not recommend public funding for general party political purposes, nor is there any stomach in the country for such a proposal. Tax relief, however, depends on individual donors deciding where they want their money to go and making a direct contribution accordingly.

The Neill committee took the unanimous view that tax relief should be included as part of the package. "Package" is the relevant word—the committee saw all its recommendations hanging together, and I regret that this is the major element of those recommendations so far left out of the Government's proposals.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Mr. Walter) correctly explained the principle behind the Neill committee's proposal. We envisaged that donations from traditional sources to political parties would drop off as a result of our recommendations. We saw tax relief as a means of ensuring that sufficient funds to serve our democratic purposes were attracted to political parties. In particular, if corporate and trade union donations to political parties drop off, making the parties more reliant on donations from wealthy individuals, it would be important to move towards small donations from many people rather than large donations from a few. In an era in which we wish to encourage many more people to participate in our democratic political process—by and large, they must do so through political parties—we can do so by encouraging them to make financial contributions.

We have heard that the proposed tax reliefs are similar to those for charities. The House will recall that not long ago there was a leak—this time directly from the Chancellor—to the effect that the Budget would include a new charitable aid package. He gave as one of the reasons the need to encourage people to make that voluntary contribution to important parts of our national life. I believe that nothing in our national life is more important than the democratic process and the work done by political parties in that regard. If there is to be another major package of charitable aid in the Budget, this provision would be only a small addition to it.

My final point in favour of the new clause will be brief, because the matter has been debated on other occasions: the principle has already been accepted in the tax system. The Inheritance Tax Act 1984 accepted the principle of tax relief for political donations through inheritance taxes and it is now part of our fiscal law.

Several objections have been made to the new clause. The first is that it would help parties that were more likely to receive donations from richer individuals. There are three answers to that point. First, a cap of £500 is proposed. Secondly, the tax relief proposed would be at the basic rate, not at the higher rate or at the marginal rate of the individual; it would thus be the same for every donation.

The third answer relates to the argument that the new clause would favour parties that did not rely on large numbers of small donations from people on low incomes—the treasurer of the Labour party may have had that point in mind when he gave evidence to the Neill committee. However, if we consider the current donations to the Labour party, it seems unlikely that many donors are not paying tax. With personal allowances relief at a little more than £4,000, it is unlikely that many people could make a decent contribution to a political party on that amount of income. We all know—because of the frequent new Labour boast—that the Labour party now has a broad spread of membership and donors. There would be no difference between the parties as to the extent to which they benefited.

Mr. Martin Linton (Battersea): I note the right hon. Gentleman's comments about the marginal rate and the limitation on the amount of tax relief. Does he agree that he and his colleagues on the Neill committee would have been better advised to recommend a tax credit, such as the system they observed in Canada? That would ensure not only that the marginal rate was the same, but that the amount of subsidy would be the same for everyone, regardless of their rate of tax or how much they paid.

Mr. MacGregor: That is similar to our proposal. There would be a difference for those who pay no tax at all. However, as I have pointed out, few people who pay no tax would be likely to make a contribution to a political party.

We did indeed examine tax credits and we carefully considered the Canadian system. We concluded that the British tax system is not appropriate for that system. The proposal that we recommended, and which is in the

[Mr. MacGregor]

new clause, is much more relevant to the British system and has a precedent in charitable tax relief—that is why we came down on that side. We asked the Inland Revenue to consider the implications of a tax relief system and what would be most appropriate for the UK. We received a memorandum from the Revenue that made it clear that the proposed system was right for the UK. Furthermore, it would be easy to administer in the UK system. That is why we came down in favour of it.

A second objection to the new clause is that it would create a precedent for other forms of tax relief—for example, for certain lobby organisations that were allied to a political view. The answer to that objection is that the inheritance tax reliefs introduced in the 1984 Act have not been extended beyond political parties, so there is no reason why that should be regarded as a precedent for such an extension under the definition in the new clause. The definition in the new clause is the same as the one in inheritance tax legislation.

The third objection was the administrative cost of the proposal. In previous debates, the Government have tended to rely on that objection.

I believe that the administrative cost would be very light. If the scheme were operated in the way that the scheme for charitable contributions operates, it would be for the political parties to make the claim for tax relief. Therefore, from the Inland Revenue's viewpoint, very few organisations would submit applications for tax relief—far fewer than the number of charities that do so. There would be an administrative burden on political parties, and it would be for them to judge whether they wished to make applications and whether the benefits outweighed the costs, but the cost to the Inland Revenue would be much less than the cost of existing forms of charitable tax relief. Therefore, I do not believe that that objection is a strong argument against the proposal.

5.30 pm

Finally, there is the objection that there would be a small cost to pay in terms of the tax forgone—the tax relief allowed. By any calculation, that amount would be small. My hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset suggested that it would be less than the cost to taxpayers of special advisers. Certainly, it would not be very different from that cost. It would be entirely up to political parties to try to take the maximum advantage of the tax relief by encouraging an increasing number of people who do not currently subscribe to political parties to do so. As I have said, it is one of the main purposes of the proposal to encourage that wider participation in the political process.

I believe that the objections, which we did consider very carefully in the Neill committee, do not have sufficient force. That is why we came unanimously to the view that this proposal was a very important part of the overall package. I therefore hope that the Government, now that they have had time to consider all the arguments, will accept, either through this Bill or the Finance Bill, that this proposal is to the benefit of all political parties and does not unfairly benefit one as against another.

Mr. Stunell: I, too, support the new clause, although perhaps not with as much warmth and enthusiasm as others have expressed. I feel that it is an important step forward. I hope that the Government will feel able to accept the principle, which has been well outlined and has a pedigree that makes it worthy of support and careful consideration.

I do not want to focus my remarks on the direct advantages to political parties of this proposal. Instead, I want to discuss the overall effect that the legislation will have on the funding of political activity in this country. I shall ask the simple question, where will the money to fund political parties come from if the Bill becomes law in its present form?

Obviously, in future, overseas donations will not be made to political parties—and a good thing too, many of us believe. I and many observers believe that there will be a strong tendency for the level of commercial support for political parties to reduce. The requirements for transparency and disclosure and the need to get decisions past shareholders will tend to inhibit the inflow of money from that source. There will be a similar effect on private large donors, who may not want to be exposed to the full glare of publicity. All those changes may be beneficial—I believe that they will be—and it is quite proper for us to bring such matters out into the open and for them to be matters of public debate and public knowledge. Sponsors of party political conferences and so on will face similar inhibitions.

The Bill has one or two unintended side effects, which have been discussed in Committee elsewhere. In certain circumstances, bequests will not now be able to be fulfilled in the way that the testator wanted. There has been a limited relaxation today, which I welcome. However, in Committee I moved an amendment drawing attention to the fact that, especially in the last year or two of a person's life, it is commonplace for them to move—perhaps into residential care or to live with carers elsewhere—and no longer to appear on the register. Those people will be cut out of the situation.

Another unintended consequence of the Bill as it stands relates to the complexity of accounting for even quite small donations. It is quite proper and appropriate that the Bill should require such accounting, but I point out to the Minister that every one of the things that I have mentioned will result in less money coming into the province of voluntary support for political parties in this country.

Neill certainly believed that it was appropriate to give incentives to broaden the financial base on which political parties operate. I can probably speak from a fairly neutral viewpoint because, at the moment, the Liberal Democrats are supported almost exclusively by small donations. I regret that—I wish that we received large donations, but we do not seem able to attract them. I do not know whether my party would benefit from the proposal.

The proposal's value is not that it would necessarily create a broader base for a political party. I doubt that whole categories of people want to donate to a political party, but are just waiting for tax relief to become available so that they can do so. Providing tax relief is a means of enhancing income from what is probably a static base of donors. Nevertheless, tax relief would be welcome.

The proposal is not about encouraging participation, but about encouraging activity. What do the Government think would happen if, as a result of the Bill becoming law, political parties had less to spend on campaigning

and on getting people elected? Would that be likely to increase the turnout and the level of political competition? Would that be likely to develop and extend democracy, or would it, on the whole, lead to more apathy and less interest, with politicians and political parties having less impact on the communities that they try to serve?

Although my support for the new clause is not as warm and enthusiastic as that of other hon. Members, I want to draw attention to the fact that the Bill—deliberately in some cases and accidentally in others—will result in less money being available to political parties. That means less political activity, which is not good for the body politic in this country. If that happens, surely the Government must consider a countervailing mechanism that would allow political parties, in a legitimate, fair and transparent way, to conduct the activity that we are all quite good at, which is campaigning and motivating electors to support us.

Mr. Martin Bell (Tatton): I shall speak briefly on behalf of the Independents in the House. As we have just doubled our number, I think that we have a contribution to make.

I have a slightly questionable declaration of interest to make. My cousin is a prominent member of the constituency association of the right hon. Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor). I do not want her to bankrupt herself raising money for that association.

Small contributions, with tax relief, would be entirely appropriate. If there is a flaw in the Bill—and there is a flaw—it is the high ceiling of £19.77 million that the main parties will be allowed to raise and spend at the next election. They will spend more money than they can safely raise and, in their different ways, the Ecclestone and the Ashcroft cases have reminded us of that. It would be infinitely preferable if contributions were made to parties and, in exceptional cases, to non-parties, such as my own, with tax relief. That would encourage the little people to get involved in politics, which would help our democracy and make it much healthier.

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole): I am pleased to support new clause 4, which was ably moved by my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Mr. Walter).

The Neill committee report was a job well done. I was very surprised that the Government did not take up the proposals for tax relief. Everyone in the House realises that the days of large donors and, perhaps, of trade unions donating as much as they did in the past are over. If political parties want to thrive, they must get many more people donating reasonable sums of money. I am thinking in terms of hundreds of pounds rather than the £15 or £20 that they receive from ordinary party members. We all realise that that is the future.

The new clause would set a cultural environment in which people would think that it was a good thing to donate to political parties. Tax relief would provide a seal of public acceptance. In our current culture, it is fine to give £20, but if one gives a large donation, people think that there is something wrong or that one is in it for something. New clause 4 would change the culture of our political process.

The hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell) made a good point: most of us regard £20 million as a lot of money. All political parties face a hard task in raising that amount. We all know of the pressure to spend in the run-up to elections and the campaign itself and to worry about raising the money another day, and all of us in politics will try to take a shortcut if we can, provided that it is legal. Tax relief would make a great difference.

My right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor) eloquently made the case for tax relief. A greater number of donors to all political parties would greatly improve our political process. The new clause is well drafted and contains safeguards, such as a political party having to have two Members and 150,000 votes. That would accommodate Independent Members if they formed, in effect, a political party.

Even if the Government reject the new clause today, I urge them to return to the issue in future legislation. We have heard the case for special advisers, and we could consider other services on which a lot of money is spent. As my right hon. Friend said, this is not public funding, although there would be some cost to the Exchequer. A man or woman will make a personal decision to give money to a political party, and the state will give that decision its seal of approval. That is a good, healthy and honourable action, and it would lead to a much better political process.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The hon. Member for North Dorset (Mr. Walter), who opened the debate, said that the new clause is important to him, but is it a priority for the people of this country for us to give tax relief on support for political parties? I suspect that they would rather we spent the money that is available directly on health or education or on tax relief such as allowances for children or lone parents, individual allowances or business allowances.

We have calculated that the proposal would effectively cost the Exchequer about £5 billion. [HON. MEMBERS: "Billion?"] I apologise—I mean £5 million. That is £5 million of taxpayers' money that would go to political parties, but which could be spent in more desirable ways. The people of this country would not support that approach.

Mr. MacGregor: If that is the hon. Gentleman's argument, and he wants to rest it on the basis of putting the question to the people of this country, does he not think that they would feel exactly the same about the big increases in funding for special advisers?

Mr. O'Brien: Special advisers are a different issue. That is a question of whether Ministers should have advice from someone who is able to support them through contact with their local party and the people who elected them. A Minister making a decision therefore has not only the civil service view but an independent view from someone who has a different political perspective. That ensures good decision making and is effective expenditure of public money. It enables Ministers to hear more than one point of view and therefore to reach better judgments.

We are talking about entirely different matters. I would certainly have no qualms about supporting the need for at least some expenditure on political advisers to Secretaries of State. That is well worth while and pays dividends to the public in efficiency and good-quality decisions. It is entirely different to subsidise—as we are being asked to do—unelected officers and full-time officials of political parties. I do not accept that that is a good way in which to spend taxpayers' money.

5.45 pm

The Government have sought to implement the Neill committee's recommendations as a package, as the committee intended, but we are not persuaded of the case for tax relief on political donations, as the new clause proposes. Last week, the Conservatives sought aid for their candidates' leaflets; earlier, they were seeking further aid for that. This week, they want subsidies for the salaries of Conservative party officials. Public declarations by the Conservative party of opposition to state subsidies are being replaced by constant moves to secure more and more of them.

The Liberal Democrats have always been entirely consistent in favouring state funding of political parties. The Conservative party has always said that it is opposed to such funding, but time and again in recent weeks Conservative Members have demanded in the House that the taxpayer should subsidise their politics. We are not convinced that that would be good expenditure of public money, and there are several reasons why.

The Government acknowledge the desirability of broadening the base of contributors to political parties. In placing a ceiling on political parties' expenditure, the Bill will do much to reduce their need to seek large donations from wealthy individual donors. The Government have also increased the amount of public money made available to opposition parties in order to fulfil their role in Parliament. The Bill will also provide for the disbursement of up to £2 million in policy development grants to political parties. Now, the Conservative party says, "Give us another large amount"—whether it be £5 million or not.

Against that background, we remain unpersuaded of the case for tax relief on donations. As the Government stated in their White Paper, we believe that such a scheme would amount to state aid by another route. Indeed, loss of revenue has been estimated to be between £4 million and £5 million. That must be considered in the light of our other expenditure priorities. I am not convinced that political parties are, in the broader scheme of things, a spending priority. Nor would it be desirable for them to become increasingly dependent on, in effect, public funding of their activities outside Parliament.

I recognise that the new clause would give effect to one of the Neill committee's recommendations—the Government have sought wherever possible to adhere to its recommendations—but this is one issue on which the Government have concluded that we must depart from such recommendations. That is because we do not agree with it; we are unpersuaded of the need for it.

The hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) said that the Bill might result in fewer foreign donations, with which he would be pleased, and in fewer company donations, which to some extent he accepts. That might result in less of an arms race on funding. The new clause would fuel that arms race.

The views on these matters of the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell) carry a great deal of weight because they particularly concern him and were some of the reasons why he stood for Parliament. He wanted to ensure improvement in the funding of political parties and the integrity of the political process. However, such tax relief would simply fuel the funding race that he fears the Bill will not control sufficiently.

The hon. Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) said that he thought that the future lay in getting hundreds of political party members to make contributions of hundreds of pounds. There may be members of his political association who are able to contribute hundreds of pounds a year, but I can think of very few members of my political party who could contribute £100, never mind several hundred pounds, to the Labour party. The way in which—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for West Derbyshire (Mr. McLoughlin), from a sedentary position, is starting to bandy about the names of certain individuals. We could both do that. He should be a little careful about mixing it. We could both mix it, more toughly than he intends.

I shall deal with a more sensible comment from the hon. Member for Poole. There is a difference in wealth between individuals who might comprise particular political associations or parties. There would therefore be a disproportionate advantage to one political party compared with another or, I suspect, most of the others.

I understand why the Conservatives have proposed the measure—they would benefit from it. They would get more public subsidy and probably more donations. However, I fail to see the public interest; indeed, I am not satisfied that there is a public interest. I am not satisfied that this is a purpose for which taxpayers in my constituency would want reliefs to be granted. Neither I nor the Government are prepared to recommend the new clause.

Mr. Walter: Until we heard the Minister's contribution, I thought that a considerable consensus on our new clause was building up in the House.

I am grateful for the valuable contribution of my right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor), who was a member of the Neill committee, as he pointed out. Like hon. Members in all parts of the House, I regret that my right hon. Friend is not standing at the next election, and that we will not benefit from his contribution after that.

My right hon. Friend summed up exceedingly well the basis of the Neill recommendations. As he said, the new clause is not a charter for those who write out large cheques. It states clearly that donations would be capped at £500 and relief would be granted at the basic rate of income tax. It would answer what my right hon. Friend considered spurious objections from the Labour party. Few donors to any political party are below the tax threshold, so donors to all parties are taxpayers. My right hon. Friend stated that Labour would benefit from the measure.

As my right hon. Friend pointed out, because of the way in which our new clause is phrased, the administrative burden would fall on the political parties. It would not be a requirement on each taxpayer to reclaim the tax. Claims for tax relief would be made by the small number of political parties when they made their returns to the Inland Revenue. The administrative burden would fall not on the various inspectors of taxes, but on the party treasurers. In any case, the amount of tax forgone by the Treasury would be quite small.

I was grateful for the support from the Liberal Democrat Benches. The hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) posed the question of where the money would come from to fund the political process in the

future, as several categories of donors to our political parties are excluded by the Bill. He asked who would replace the overseas donors who could no longer contribute, the corporate donors who might in future have difficulty getting shareholder approval for their donations, and the large donors who valued their present state of anonymity but whose names would have to be published if they wrote cheques for more than £5,000. The hon. Gentleman's view was that the parties would have less money at their disposal, so an incentive scheme such as the one proposed would be of value to all political parties.

I am grateful for the support of the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell). We all applaud his championing of the cause of the little people in politics. The measure is designed to govern the financing of political parties, so as an Independent, the hon. Gentleman unfortunately would not benefit from the provisions of the new clause. The Bill is quite specific in its definition of an "Independent".

My hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) spoke of the change in the cultural environment that would be brought about by the Bill. He argued that through legislation, we should make people aware that it was socially acceptable to give slightly larger sums to political parties—sums up to £500—in the same way as it is socially acceptable to give larger donations to charities, up to the same level. He thought that that should be encouraged by our political process.

Finally, we heard the contribution from the Minister, who at the beginning had difficulty distinguishing his billions from his millions. I can reassure him that the figure that he was looking for was £5 million, not £5 billion. He later qualified that as £4 million to £5 million. In the context of Government expenditure, £5 million is quite small beer, considering the incentive effect of the new clause. We are discussing the incentive effect for parliamentary democracy, not state subsidies for political parties.

The Minister accepts that we need to broaden the base of support for our political parties, but he believes that capping at just under £20 million the sum that a large political party can spend in a general election would broaden the base of our democracy.

The Minister was entirely wrong about one thing: the new clause may have been tabled in the names of my right hon. and hon. Friends, who are all members of the Conservative party, but it is not a recommendation of the Conservative party alone; it is a recommendation of the Neill committee.

Neill's recommendation 38 states:

> Tax relief by deduction at source should be introduced, limited to the basic rate, on donations of up to £500 a year to eligible registered political parties.

Neill's recommendation 39 goes on:

> Political parties should be eligible to claim under the tax relief scheme if at the last general election two members of the party were elected to the House of Commons or one member was elected and the party won at least 150,000 votes.

The Government must not cherry-pick the Neill report, which arose from an independent inquiry and is broadly supported in the House and very much supported in the country. The report is designed to bring a new level of financial propriety into our political process, and transparency into our political operations. Underlying the report is the view that we should broaden the base of political support and encourage more people to participate in the political process, not just by voting at elections but by contributing to our political parties. If the Government do not accept the new clause, we will press the motion to a Division.

6 pm

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time:—

The House divided: Ayes 150, Noes 272.

Division No. 102] **[6 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brazier, Julian
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Collins, Tim
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Flight, Howard
Forsythe, Clifford
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Ross, William *(E Lond'y)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard

Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Peter Luff and
Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Cann, Jamie
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Gunnell, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
Olner, Bill
Organ, Mrs Diana
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire

Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Winnick, David
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Clive Betts and
Mr. Greg Pope.

Question accordingly negatived.

New Clause 5

ANNUAL REGISTRATION OF OVERSEAS VOTERS

'.—(1) The Representation of the People Act 1985 (as amended by the Representation of the People Act 2000) is amended in accordance with this section.

(2) In subsection (3) of section 1 (Extension of parliamentary franchise) leave out paragraph (c) and after paragraph (d) insert the words "and

(dd) he makes a declaration under and in accordance with section 2 of this Act within five years ceasing to be resident in the United Kingdom and he continues to register in each succeeding year.".

(3) For subsection (4)(a) of section 1 (Extension of parliamentary franchise) substitute—

"(a) he makes a declaration under and in accordance with section 2 of this Act within five years of ceasing to be resident in the United Kingdom and he continues to register in each succeeding year,".'.—*[Mr. Linton.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

Mr. Linton: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to discuss the following: new clause 6—*Annual registration for overseas voters: peers*—

'.—(1) The Representation of the People Act 1985 (as amended by the Representation of the People Act 2000) is amended in accordance with this section.

(2) In subsection (3) of section 3 (Extension of franchise for European Parliamentary elections) for paragraph (c) substitute—

"(c) either that entry in the register was in force at any time falling within the period of 20 years ending immediately before the relevant date, or he makes a declaration under and in accordance with section 2 of this Act within five years of ceasing to be resident in the United Kingdom and he continues to register in each succeeding year,"

(3) In subsection (4) of section 3 (Extension of franchise for European Parliamentary elections) for paragraph (a) substitute—

"(a) either he was last resident in the United Kingdom within the period of 20 years ending immediately before the relevant date, or he makes a declaration under and in accordance with section 2 of this Act within five years of ceasing to be resident in the United Kingdom and he continues to register in each succeeding year".'.

New clause 7—*Extension of franchise for employees of international organisations*—

'.—(1) Subsection (1) of section 14 (Service qualification) of the Representation of the People Act 1983 is amended in accordance with this section.

(2) In paragraph (c) the words "or an international organisation of which the United Kingdom is a member" are inserted after the words "British Council".

(3) After paragraph (e) the words "(f) is a person under the age of 25 who is resident with a parent qualifying under any paragraph (a) to (e) above," are inserted.'.

New clause 8—*Representation of the People Act 1985*—

'(1) The Representation of the People Act 1985 (as amended by the Representation of the People Act 2000) is amended as follows.

(2) after subsection (5) of section 1 add:

"(6)(a) Any person who was registered as an elector under this section at the end of the period of five years beginning with the date that he ceased to be resident in the United Kingdom and who registers in each succeeding year, shall be entitled to vote for the purposes of this section notwithstanding the fact that the period of time referred to in subsection 3(c) or subsection 4(a), as the case may be, has expired, provided that he satisfies the other relevant requirements of this section.

(b) In respect of any person who by reason only of his age was incapable of being included in any register of parliamentary electors in force on the last day on which he was resident in the United Kingdom, the period of five years referred to in subsection (a) shall be taken as commencing on the day he ceased to be incapable of being so included by reason of his age.".

(3) After subsection (9) of section 3 add:

"(10)(a) Any person who was registered as an elector under this section at the end of the period of five years beginning with the date that he ceased to be resident in the United Kingdom and who registers in each succeeding year, shall be entitled to vote for the purposes of this section notwithstanding the fact that the period of time referred to in subsection 3(c) or subsection 4(a), as the case may be, has expired, provided that he satisfies the other relevant requirements of this section.

(b) In respect of any person who by reason only of his age was incapable of being included in any register of local government electors in force on the last day on which he was resident in the United Kingdom, the period of five years referred to in subsection (a) shall be taken as commencing on the day he ceased to be incapable of being so included by reason of his age.".'.

Amendment No. 139, in clause 132, page 84, line 32, leave out "10" and insert "5".

Amendment No. 180, in page 84, line 32, at end add

', except for employees of approved international institutions, where for "20 years" there shall be substituted "the whole of their period of employment with an approved international institution".

(2) For the purpose of subsection (1) an approved international institution shall be any organisation set up pursuant to any treaty or convention of which the United Kingdom is for the time being a signatory.'.

Amendment No. 176, in page 84, line 32, at end add—

'(2) The substitution of "10 years" for "20 years" in subsection (1) shall not apply in respect of any person who, on the coming into force of this section, was registered as an overseas elector and who continues to register in each succeeding year.'.

6.15 pm

Mr. Linton: I have moved the new clause, with which we shall consider other new clauses and amendments, because I believe that we still do not have a fully satisfactory compromise on overseas voting. The Government have effectively split the difference between 20 years, which is the current law, and nil, which was suggested by my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) and others in our original debate on the matter, and argued for cogently.

New clauses 5 and 6 follow a different approach. They would reduce the qualifying period to five years and allow people who have claimed registration to continue claiming it every year. Different people approach the issue from different standpoints. Some take a liberal attitude and argue that anyone with a United Kingdom passport should be able to vote in a UK election regardless of where they

[Mr. Linton]

live, of whether they pay tax, of how long they have lived where they live or of whether they have any other passport.

Others look for a more disciplined approach, including a commitment to the country in which someone wishes to vote. Other considerations are where people live and where they pay tax. Those who take that approach are opposed to giving votes to people who are effectively tax exiles, who have moved abroad to avoid paying tax in the UK. I have much sympathy with that second point of view, but I think that new clauses 5 and 6 represent a happy compromise.

I pay tribute to the constructive way in which international organisations of all the parties have approached the issue. I find their arguments persuasive, and I think that those who live abroad deserve some certainty in their lives. There was no overseas vote until 1985. There was a five-year requirement until 1989, when it became 20 years. The Select Committee on Home Affairs has called for the requirement to be reduced to five years, and my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary suggests 10 years. Those living abroad would be within their rights if they complained that the situation was confused.

Anyone who has lived in a foreign capital, as I have, knows that there are many British expatriates who do not work for the British embassy, for the British Council or for an international body, and who are not married to foreigners. Those people happen to live abroad but they remain completely British in their outlook and sense of identity. If such people live in the European Union, the Maastricht treaty guarantees them the right to vote in local and European elections and to stand as candidates, just as European citizens in this country can vote in local and European elections here.

The Maastricht treaty applies only to local and European elections. As for national elections, it is assumed that people vote in the country of which they are a citizen. On that basis, it is fair to say that if a British national is living in a European Union capital, it is only right that they should have the chance to keep their vote. It is true that German, French, Spanish, Italian and Swedish citizens can keep their vote in national elections in their home country.

The "use it or lose it" nature of the concession ensures that it will not be used by the half-hearted, by tax exiles, by dual nationals or by the rootless: it will be used and appreciated by those for whom it is intended—those who wish to maintain a strong commitment to the UK while they live abroad.

New clause 7 would give automatic voting rights to those who work abroad for international organisations. It has nothing to do with whether they have lived in a certain place for five, 10 or 20 years. It will only affect people who work for organisations of which the UK is a member state. There have always been provisions for diplomats to vote abroad. There has long been a service vote, and more recently the staff of the British Council have been given the vote abroad. The foreign service vote has been extended to the civil service. I do not think that anyone would dispute that there is a strong case for extending the concession to those who work for the European Union.

Many people will have received a letter from four British officials of the EU, who I think have made the case very well. They give three reasons why they think that they should have an automatic right to a vote in UK elections. First, they say that they are public servants, working to serve the public in Britain as well as in other member states. Secondly, they say that they work for a transnational organisation of which Britain is a member and which represents Britain's interests. Thirdly, they argue that it is Government policy to try to increase the representation of British nationals in Brussels, on the basis that it is in the national interest to have as many British nationals as possible working in the EU so that its institutions can better reflect our culture and attitudes. They conclude by saying that they believe that their aim is reinforced by the need to ensure that those working inside EU institutions retain their connection with Britain, and that disfranchisement severs the link with British political life and risks weakening their ties.

The demands of justice and of national interest do not always coincide so completely, but here we have justice represented by the call for equal treatment with domestic civil servants and the argument that it is in our national interest that those officials should retain a strong sense of British identity once they work in the EU. Not to make a concession to their case would not only be unjust but counter-productive, leaving them not only disfranchised but disenchanted. Many have accepted jobs since 1989 expecting their voting rights to be safeguarded for 20 years and, indeed, many may have been recruited on that understanding.

The only hesitation that I can imagine holding the Minister back from agreement is whether there is any confusion surrounding the definition of an international organisation, but new clause 7 states that such an organisation is one

of which the United Kingdom is a member . . .

That clearly includes not only the EU institutions, but the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, the United Nations and all its daughter organisations, the Council of Europe, the Western European Union and so on.

We have come a long way from the days when Britain's only representatives abroad were diplomats and soldiers: in these days of globalisation, it is time we recognised that far more people fly the flag in other countries. They are not asking much when they say that, if they are to represent the interests of this country abroad, they would like to be guaranteed a say in how it is run. Increasingly, the political discourse in this country is about globalisation, and more and more people, as part of their careers in this country, work in other countries for extended periods. That is most obvious in Paris, Geneva, Rome and New York, but it takes place across the EU and farther afield.

There are two sound reasons for accepting the new clause and extending the rights of overseas voters. The first is a simple recognition of the way the world is moving, and the second is political—a right, once granted, is difficult to remove. By depriving a small number of people of the automatic right to vote, we shall make completely unnecessary enemies. Annual registration serves, in practice, as a tough test of people's commitment to this country, by testing their determination to vote.

I am appealing to hon. Members on both sides of the House. International organisations representing our three parties have already reached a high degree of consensus.

They have agreed the form of the "use it or lose it" new clause and the international organisation new clause, and it would be a good thing if their representatives in the Chamber also reached agreement. If we can show the Government that there is broad consensus not only among our parties' international organisations but among Members of the House, we may hear the Minister say that he is prepared to reconsider.

Mr. Evans: I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this important debate. I hear what the hon. Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) says about seeking a consensual approach and about the possibility of deals being done. We look to the Minister. I complimented the Labour party on taking some steps on the journey that we wish it to make, and feel that it could go a little further in this regard: the Government have to take a few more steps.

Our amendment and new clause would correct the ignorance, prejudice and lack of consultation that have shrouded the whole overseas voter issue, and I hope that overseas voters will achieve some justice in an otherwise squalid measure. It would be far better if the Government dropped all this nonsense now, undertook a comprehensive consultation on their proposals and introduced sensible and fully thought through measures. That would be the best option on overseas voters. *[Interruption.]* Is the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) trying to intervene? There has been no consultation. I am bemused as to why speed is a necessity and why the consultation could not have taken place before measures were introduced. Why it all has to be so hurried, I simply do not know.

As the Minister knows, my right hon. Friend the shadow Home Secretary wrote to the Home Secretary on 25 November 1999 to say that she opposed these measures because there had been no full consultation. Let us bring some sense to what the Government are attempting to do. We have tabled new clause 8 and amendment No. 176. The Government have in mind the picture of a number of people who fled Britain and have little interest in this country—except that they have the ability to vote in our general elections every five years or so. That is an old-fashioned idea, and certainly one that cannot sit easily with new Labour. I do not want glibly to pass over the fact that the Bill takes the right to vote in British elections away from a number of people. We are trying to temper that, as the vote will otherwise be removed without consultation.

We have heard all the arguments about whether there should be a cut-off of five, 10 or 20 years, or no limit at all. Some were rehearsed in Committee. If the Government are intent on introducing a Bill that would deny the vote to people who are currently able to vote, that is completely wrong. I hope that they will listen to what we have to say. I listened to the hon. Member for Battersea, and believe that his new clauses go some way in the right direction. People may have to go abroad for all sorts of reasons—I shall come to that later—and I see merit in dropping the figure to perhaps five years and allowing them to keep their vote provided that they show sufficient and continuous interest in what is going on in this country to go out of their way to register every year. However, I do not believe that the hon. Gentleman's new clauses are sufficient to meet the demands that we make in new clause 8—nor is the job description wide enough. We could go a little further.

The 10-year argument baffles me. We hear that 10 years is the compromise figure, but it is not a compromise between what we want, what the right hon. Member for Gorton wants and what the people who will lose the vote want. I hope that the Government can cut through the political agenda on this issue and introduce a more sensible measure. The new clauses tabled by the hon. Member for Battersea are insufficient because this country operates globally. The hon. Gentleman listed a number of organisations with which we are involved. We have also signed up to a number of international obligations and, moreover, British people work throughout the world. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the European Union and European institutions. Like other Members of the House, we received a letter from an individual, who also sent a copy to *The Guardian*. It would be completely wrong if people working on behalf of this country fell foul of the Bill. We must consider the fact that people who work in a global economy and who may be sent abroad suddenly, for whatever reason, to work in the commercial sector on behalf of their companies will run the risk of losing their vote after 10 years.

6.30 pm

The way things are going, people may go abroad and work for a company for five years and then be moved to another part of the world without coming back to the United Kingdom. They may have every intention of returning to the UK at some point, and may do so at a later stage when their company decides that it is right for them to come back. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller) has Vauxhall in his constituency, which is a global company and has plants throughout the world. Some of his constituents may be sent abroad.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): No.

Mr. Evans: Employees of companies like Vauxhall may be sent abroad for some years. I believe that the five-year limit for public institutions or organisations with which we have signed treaty obligations is not sufficient. We must extend the provision to the commercial sector. It would be a big advance if the Minister considered that proposal.

New clause 8 deals with youngsters who go abroad with their parents and then fall foul of this legislation. This matter was dealt with in Committee.

Mr. Miller: We wrote it.

Mr. Evans: Indeed, so Labour Members should support it. Many of our suggestions are common-sense measures which Back Benchers have proposed, so I hope that the Government will consider them. We want people aged 16 or 17 who are taken abroad and turn 18 while they are there to be able to register, and to vote in elections. We are trying to encourage as many young people as possible to vote. The thrust of the Representation of the People Act 2000, which was passed last week, was to encourage people to vote. It would help if the Government considered that anomaly more closely.

Amendment No. 176 deals with the retrospective element.

Mr. Bercow: Has it occurred to my hon. Friend that there is a curious tension in the thinking of a number of

[Mr. Bercow]

right hon. and hon. Members on the Labour Benches? They seem anxious to do absolutely everything they can to assist certain persons, some of whom are too lazy to make any significant effort to vote and should apparently be assisted by the facility of pressing a button. However, they regard with hostility the people who have the sheer audacity, in pursuit of their commercial obligations, to go abroad to work when requested to do so. Is that not a curious—one might even say, troglodyte—view of the world?

Mr. Evans: My hon. Friend speaks far better than I. He is better educated and able to come up with words like troglodyte, which I shall ensure is included in many of my speeches in future. He is absolutely right. It is ironical that the Representation of the People Act gives the vote to some people in mental institutions, which we agreed with and supported, and to remand prisoners, who may be on remand for various crimes. We thought that it was right to give them the vote as they have not gone before the courts, sentence has not been passed and they have not been convicted of any crime.

My hon. Friend has encouraged me to consider amendment No. 139 tabled by the right hon. Member for Gorton. We are considering the proposal to take away the vote after five years: that is when the cruel guillotine will fall on those people, irrespective of the fact that they are in parts of the world earning money, possibly earning profits for this country, and paying tax in this country. I look forward to hearing what the right hon. Member for Gorton has to say as he tries to twist the knife even further into that group of people, who are doing this country a great service. That is wholly wrong. My only hope is that the right hon. Gentleman's hon. Friends on the Government Front Bench treat his suggestions with as much disdain as I do, and as would the vast majority of people in this country.

I have studied the Liberal Democrat amendments and amendment No. 180. Although we have some sympathy with them, they do not go far enough on the job descriptions. The hon. Member for Battersea wants a consensual approach. I hope that the Minister can give us some hope and assurance that some ground can be made on the issue of overseas voters. I do not believe that we should proceed with a measure out of spite and vindictiveness. It will remove the vote from many people who would wish to contribute to democracy in this country. We shall listen carefully to the Minister's comments before we decide whether to press our amendments to a vote.

Mr. Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton): I intended to be rather gentle with the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) until he accused me of disdain and heightened the temperature of this gentle and good-natured debate. Like his party, the hon. Gentleman seems to have forgotten the historical perspective of the franchise. He talks about taking votes away from people as though that was utterly unprecedented. The Attlee Government of 1945 rightly abolished the business vote and the university vote. They were perfectly right to abolish fancy franchises. We got on quite well with the extension of the franchise—the Wilson Government extended it to 18-year-olds—until the Conservative Government introduced a new fancy franchise.

The hon. Gentleman talks about lack of consultation and squalor, but he should look back to what happened when this franchise was introduced. I have reminded the House on a number of occasions that I was there. The very idea that there was consultation is an extraordinary sick joke. There was no consultation whatever. We had a serious disagreement when Leon Brittan decided to invent this franchise to benefit his own party. There was no attempt at consensus. It was a unilateral act by the Conservative party.

The Conservatives wanted to increase the period to 25 years when my right honourable and noble Friend Lord Hattersley was in charge of these matters for the Labour party. They now say that there was consensus because the present Secretary of State for Social Security had been ready to settle for 20 years rather than 25. There was not: we were making the best of a bad job on a franchise that ought never to have been introduced. It was introduced against the wishes of the then principal Opposition party—which was a lot bigger than the present one—to suit the interests of the Conservative Government. We should be clear about the historical context in which this franchise was arranged.

The hon. Gentleman talks about a political agenda. Unfortunately, the Government have less of a political agenda than I would like them to have. The Conservative party has the agenda. Having read the report of the Committee stage, I understand that the proposals of my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) are supported by my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller). I would go along with them without any difficulty. To provide the right to a franchise for servants of this country overseas is an act of justice. It is a principle that servants of this country overseas are given a vote, whether they are diplomats or members of the armed forces. My hon. Friend's proposal fits in with that.

Mr. Grieve: Persons who go abroad to serve international organisations—I have previously given the example of a person known to me—do not necessarily come back to this country afterwards. How does the right hon. Gentleman square that with the principles that he is trying to enunciate?

Mr. Kaufman: If the hon. Gentleman believes that the proposals of my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea are too generous, I am ready to accept his strictures. When the Select Committee on National Heritage, as it then was, went to Barcelona, we found that our consul general intended to retire to that place. If the hon. Gentleman is saying that, if that were his choice, he should not have the vote any more, I agree. I thank him for being so acute in his political perception.

Mr. Grieve: It might be possible to argue that it should go the other way—that the distinctions that the right hon. Gentleman is trying to introduce between people working for international organisations and people who are abroad for business reasons are non-existent and that one should simply accept that those who wish to have the franchise when they are abroad should be allowed to have it.

Mr. Kaufman: I was not trying to introduce any distinctions whatever. I was commenting on what my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea had proposed.

My amendment is the purest, most straightforward and most logical amendment that anyone could possibly table. It changes one figure for another with no exemptions. I was saying that, because I am flexible, good-natured, helpful and basically wish good will to most of my fellow men, I am ready to entertain the principle on which my hon. Friend was operating, but my amendment is clear.

I come—I hope that my hon. Friend will forgive me—to an area where I disagree with him. Commendably, he has thought a great deal before introducing the "use it or lose it" concept, but that concept entrenches still further what I object to most about that franchise: it is a voluntary franchise, not a voluntary exercise of the franchise, which should be available to any citizen in a democracy. People choose whether to have it.

All the rest of us in this country are committing an offence if we do not register to vote. We do not have to vote once we have registered, but we are committing an offence if we do not register.

Mr. David Wilshire (Spelthorne): I am listening carefully to the right hon. Gentleman. Does his argument about the voluntary franchise and the distinction between that and a compulsory one mean that he is in favour of making it compulsory to vote?

Mr. Kaufman: Certainly not. I wish that it were compulsory to vote from one point of view: my puny majority of 17,000 would probably double. That is an attractive proposition, but I believe that democracy entitles people not to use the franchise, although I wish that they would, particularly if they are Labour voters. I am considering the fact that it is a voluntary franchise. People decide whether to take it up—they decide not whether to use it but whether to take up the right to have it.

6.45 pm

My hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane) has sensibly made himself scarce. When we debated the matter on the previous occasion, he added up the monumental millions whom we would punish by depriving them of the vote, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea pointed out in the Standing Committee—just as I did the last time we voted—the figure is 13,000. This huge subject revolves around 13,000 people: the number who have decided to take up that option.

We are talking not about democracy as a right but about democracy as an option. I do not believe that the vote is an option. Either people are entitled to it or they are not. Although I disagree strongly with Conservative Members about the matter, there might be an argument that it should be granted in perpetuity, rather than being time-limited. The hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) talked about a compromise between 20 years and nil. I am not a compromiser on the issue. I want nil.

My five is there to chop the period down still further. The reason why I propose five is that, except in unusual circumstances, it would mean that someone qualifying for the franchise would be able to exercise it once. I would be ready reluctantly to accept that, but the 10-year period, which the Government, with sentimental generosity, have decided to abide by, will allow someone to vote in three general elections. There were three general elections between 1979 to 1987. That is a great deal more than is acceptable.

I am not going to divide the House against the Government. They know that I will not do so because I am subservient to their wishes on most occasions, but I have to tell the Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office that I am looking forward to a response in which he says that, on the basis of the way in which the measure operates, he will consider in a future Bill whether he can reduce the period to five years.

I intend to stay in the House for a very long time. I assure my hon. Friend that, in Parliament after Parliament, I shall table amendments on the matter. I warned Ministers early in this Parliament that it was one of my obsessive interests. I do not let my obsessive interests rest, whether they be related to the film "Singin' in the Rain" or to the overseas franchise.

Mr. Wilshire: I warm to a man of courage, conviction and principles. Why on this occasion is the right hon. Gentleman not prepared to push his convictions, which he holds so strongly, to a vote, and to stand up for what he believes in?

Mr. Kaufman: Before I finish—I have spoken for too long—I shall tell the House of a conversation that I had with Denis Healey. His full name is Denis Winston Healey. I asked him how he came to be called Winston. He said, "I was born during the first world war and my father was a great admirer of Winston Churchill, who was First Lord of the Admiralty. He gave me the name Winston because of his huge admiration for Winston Churchill. He did it as a gesture." I said, "But Denis, if your father admired Winston Churchill so much, why did he not call you Winston Healey?" He said, "Hell. A gesture is a gesture." That is my answer to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Stunell: It is a privilege to follow the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman).

I shall speak primarily in support of amendment No. 180, which is in my name and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce), not Gorton, but I have added my name to two of the new clauses that have been proposed by the hon. Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton)—5 and 7—and I find myself in considerable sympathy with some of the others. That perhaps shows, as the hon. Gentleman said, that an all-party view that something needs to be done is at least beginning to emerge. The Government may take the view that some of the shells have landed somewhat randomly, but the fact that they have been bracketed by a variety of amendments shows perhaps that some progress could be made to the advantage of the Bill, as well as to the groups of British citizens about whom we are concerned.

Amendment No. 180 was, in essence, drafted at the Committee stage, before it broke into the parallel universe of the new clauses created by the hon. Member for Battersea. To a large extent, it overlaps his new clauses. Without repeating all the arguments that he deployed, let me say that the intention is to ensure that we provide not

[Mr. Stunell]

only a continuing benefit for those who work in international institutions, but a benefit to the UK. Amendment No. 180 defines such international institutions as

> any organisation set up pursuant to any treaty or convention of which the United Kingdom is for the time being a signatory.

It would therefore remove doubt and ambiguity in defining such organisations and make the relevant definition sufficiently wide.

The hon. Member for Battersea touched on the matter of the benefits that might accrue to the United Kingdom from extending the franchise to the employees of such organisations, but I should like to expand on those benefits. There are not only many such organisations but, in many cases, treaties require that United Kingdom citizens comprise part of those organisations' staff and provide support to those organisations.

More to the point, there is a very strong UK interest in our playing an active part in those organisations. That interest is not only wide ranging, but potentially long lasting. Through our participation in them, we may gain not only diplomatic advantage but perhaps economic and even linguistic and cultural advantage. Those benefits should not be thrown away.

As the hon. Member for Battersea said, we may lose those benefits in two ways. They might be lost, first, if we were to inhibit the participation of UK citizens in those bodies. People might be reluctant to play a part in those organisations if they were forced to forgo the wider benefits of United Kingdom citizenship.

Secondly, the issue of disengagement from the United Kingdom could affect people currently working in such organisations and those who will one day work in them. The popular description of people who have been affected by disengagement is that they have "gone native". In many organisations, people can go native pretty quickly, and the Government might think that, for the general benefit of the United Kingdom, it is worthwhile trying to slow down that process.

The case for amendment No. 180, therefore, is based not simply on the rights and obligations of citizens working for such organisations, but on the United Kingdom's pure self-interest as a player on the international stage. Such a realpolitik argument may appeal to the Government, even if other arguments fall on deaf ears.

Some of the other amendments in this group address broader issues which Ministers should consider. It is sensible to allow family members of people working overseas to vote at 18, allowing them essentially to get on the bottom step of the escalator of our democratic process. Those people are expected to move, if not involuntarily, certainly without resistance. I should think that such a proposal could not be criticised on the basis that those people will subsequently become perfidious donators to United Kingdom political parties and undermine democracy in the United Kingdom. The issue is one of ensuring that they are able to develop roots in and links with the United Kingdom and to exercise their United Kingdom citizenship.

Mr. Evans: Does the hon. Gentleman accept—in an attempt to further the consensual nature of our proceedings—that, if we were to allow people to join a rolling register, to begin the process, there would have to be a transitional period of perhaps 12 months in which those who are currently abroad were allowed to register on such a rolling register?

Mr. Stunell: It is always worth trying to push the limits in our debate. However, we really should consider whether the Bill's objective should be to include and continue on a register everyone overseas who is currently registered. That is one option in proceeding on the matter. Another option is to open registration to everyone who is currently overseas, even if they have not yet registered. That seemed to be what the hon. Gentleman was suggesting.

If there were an amendment proposing the first option, the hon. Gentleman might be able to tempt me to support it. People in that category not only have taken the trouble to register, but, as the right hon. Member for Gorton said, comprise a small group. There are only six such people in my constituency, and that number may be typical of the number in other hon. Members' constituencies.

I am less persuaded that we should throw open inclusion to everyone who is currently overseas. I do not think that hon. Members could be persuaded that those people have not registered because they have not been able to get round to it. I think that they have not registered because it is not an attractive proposition for them to do so.

The intervention by the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) has served one purpose—to divert me from my thread of argument—and I appreciate the spirit in which it was done.

New clause 5, which was tabled by the hon. Member for Battersea and to which I put my name, introduces the "use it or lose it" concept. It also contains an element of self-regulation, which I hope Ministers will take on board if they are at all tempted to adopt such a provision.

"Use it or lose it" is also the essence of amendment No. 176, which was tabled by Conservative Front Benchers. I think that, rather than providing a completely open-ended obligation or opportunity for those who live and work overseas, it would be appropriate to include a process of rolling re-registration.

I hope that Ministers will have listened to this debate and appreciated the concerns expressed by hon. Members holding various views on the issue. However, each of those views goes to the same point. Overseas, there is a group of United Kingdom citizens who have, and should continue to have, a role to play in the United Kingdom democratic process. In coming decades, the size of that group of people may well grow.

I do not overlook the fact that one of the reasons why the restrictions are being introduced is to stop the abuse of donations from overseas. I am well aware of that issue and of the fact that Ministers may feel that they should make only carefully judged and limited concessions on the issue. However, I ask Ministers not simply to shut the door on every overseas group and category, but to determine which amendments they are able to accept, or which specific provisions they might otherwise be able to import into the Bill. The amendments express feelings that are widespread in the House.

Mr. Miller: When the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) was appealing at the Dispatch Box for

consensus, he seemed to be defeating his own argument by adopting an aggressive style. I assure him that hon. Members who believe that the current principle is wrong—for the very reason outlined by my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman)—do not intend to extend it to include people from his ethnic grouping. Despite the fact that he comes from south Wales, the hon. Gentleman will keep the votes in Ribble Valley. *[Interruption.]* I thought that my right hon. Friend the Member for Gorton was going to intervene, to say that the hon. Gentleman will not keep those votes, but he is merely going to speak to the Minister.

I should like to deal with some of the points made by the hon. Member for Ribble Valley. He mentioned Vauxhall Motors UK, in my constituency, which is an important player in both the regional economy and the British economy. Some super people are leading that company, not only in Britain but in Europe. However, in the context of the franchise, their position—they are answerable to the parent company, which is registered in the United States—is different from that of people who work for institutions of which Britain is a member.

7 pm

We shall come to clause 48 later. In Committee, the Conservatives tabled an amendment that would not have allowed donations from companies incorporated in the European Union. They cannot have it both ways. They have recognised that we do not have the necessary transparency.

My hon. Friend the Minister has a difficult judgment to make, because the line has to be drawn somewhere. My right hon. Friend the Member for Gorton has a clear idea about where it should be drawn. Others have said, "Yes, but" in various ways. With the exception of the hon. Member for Ribble Valley, who, I think, would prefer the status quo to prevail, most of those involved in the debate want a consensus to be reached.

Mr. Evans: Does the hon. Gentleman think it ironic that those of Italian or French descent who work for Vauxhall in his constituency are encouraged to vote in elections in France and Italy—the hon. Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) mentioned other countries as well—while we are going in the other direction?

Mr. Miller: We are dealing with the franchise of those who work for Britain in institutions of which we are a member. There is some common ground. All of us, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Gorton, accept that diplomats, the armed forces and British Council staff are legitimately covered by the current legislation. However, other categories should fall within that broad definition. The facts that the mother of the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) is French, as we discovered in Committee, that my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) lived in Finland, or that I happened to brought up in Malta are red herrings, although they made for a good debate in Committee.

The essential principle relates to institutions of which Britain is a member. I appreciate that lines have to be drawn somewhere, but as we attempt to reach a consensus, it is not illogical to include those who work for institutions such as NATO within the ambit of existing legislation, which incorporates the armed forces, diplomats and the British Council. It is ludicrous and unfair that a general or someone of diplomatic status in NATO is covered, but a civilian member of personnel is excluded.

Mr. Grieve: I seek clarification of the hon. Gentleman's views. He is talking about new clause 7, but I think he will agree that it would be unnecessary if new clause 5 were agreed to, because all the categories would be covered by virtue of the ability of individuals to continue provided that they re-registered. Would not new clause 5 deal with his points?

Mr. Miller: I am not a million miles from the hon. Gentleman. I accept that a line needs to be drawn somewhere. The hon. Member for Ribble Valley seemed to want it drawn too far from where most people in the country would regard as acceptable. If the principles that I am espousing were incorporated in the 10-year rule proposed by my hon. Friend the Minister or the five-year rule espoused by my right hon. Friend the Member for Gorton, we could have a workable consensus.

I appreciate that some Conservative Members would say that that would not go far enough. I understand their point, but they have to understand that a line has to be drawn somewhere in an attempt to arrive at a consensus. I urge my hon. Friend the Minister to look for ways in which the line can be drawn slightly away from his current proposal. I would have no objection if the base line was that espoused by my right hon. Friend the Member for Gorton, so long as there was a mechanism by which those who work for legitimate organisations of which Britain is a member could continue to be enfranchised.

Mr. Wilshire: Unlike the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman), who I am sorry to see has left the Chamber, I am very happy to support those on my Front Bench. I trust that they are suitably grateful. I note that a word about my enthusiasm is already going into the little blue book. I look forward to the result of that enthusiasm.

New clause 8 and amendment No. 176 are necessary to meet my concerns and those of some of my hon. Friends—and, by the sound of it, of some Labour Members. The Government's plans to cut the time available worry me. As far as I can gather, no valid reasons for the change have been given. I hope that the Minister will give us some. There has been a spirit of compromise around and I am prepared to listen. I suspect that the hon. Gentleman will not give any reasons, but I shall give him the benefit of the doubt at least until he speaks.

Given that the proposal was not in the Neill recommendations, the Minister needs to explain why the Government now think it so important. I have heard no evidence of abuse of the current arrangements, and the Government have offered none. Abuse would be the most important reason for change. If there is any evidence of abuse, perhaps the Minister could give it to us.

As others have said, there are so few people registered abroad that I am at a loss to understand why the measure has become such a key part of a complicated Bill. This is a minor matter and there are many far better things to do,

[Mr. Wilshire]

such as finding the money to ensure that my hospital does not have its accident and emergency unit closed by the Government. There are so many other more important things than messing about with this change. It will clearly cost money and I would rather that that money was spent on preventing cuts to my hospital. Why are the Government worried about such a small group of people?

I have tried to find out what research has been done. How many people will be affected? How many of the very few who register stay abroad beyond the period that the Minister is proposing? My guess is that only a minute number of people will be caught by the change. Why is the Minister making it? It is also important to know whether the Government have done any research on the sort of people who would lose their vote. That would allow us to see whether the proposal was even-handed, or whether an ulterior motive existed.

Mr. Miller: Would that not be an abuse of the Government's power, as the outcome of such research might confer a party political advantage? Another Government—not this one—might be tempted to make decisions based on that outcome. Should we not be dealing with the principle?

Mr. Wilshire: I do not see that objection at all. There is no need to ask people how they are going to vote. The questions will concern their reasons for living abroad, why they chose to register, and how long they propose to be abroad. That is the sort of fundamental research that any Government should undertake before bringing such proposals before the House.

I would also be interested to know how many of the small number who register actually use their votes. That should not be too difficult to find out, as the marked register is available from every constituency. It would be relatively simple to go back as far as the previous two general elections, say, and find out how many overseas votes were exercised.

My third worry is that the Government appear not to have consulted the people affected. If they have, I hope that the Minister will describe how the people who currently have votes were approached.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): There have been many representations from, and discussions with, the people affected.

Mr. Wilshire: I am grateful to the Minister, but according to Home Office evidence to the Select Committee on Home Affairs in 1998, the overwhelming majority of the representations being received at the time were requests for an extension to the period.

Mr. Grieve: My hon. Friend may be interested to know that those who were consulted this time rather appreciated being able to keep the franchise.

Mr. Wilshire: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who reinforces my point by reporting that that view is still held. I hope that the Government will give details of any research that has been carried out. How many people have been contacted, how many have asked for a shorter period, and how many have asked for longer? That information would be useful.

The Government have not explained why they have changed their mind since 1989, when the then Labour Opposition backed the 20-year proposal. I have heard it said in the debate that that was some sort of compromise but, even if the Government were not wedded to the principle, something must have happened to bring about a change of heart. Governments dislike having their U-turns exposed and having to justify them. However, that is another example of a U-turn by this Government. They are always doing it, and it would be nice to know why they have torn up their previous beliefs in favour of a new set.

The hon. Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) offered a sensible and understandable way to adopt an approach based on the "use it or lose it" principle. I have no difficulty in accepting that people should have some link with the United Kingdom, but the hon. Gentleman's proposal is not the best way forward. However, it is not so dissimilar to new clause 8, for which I hope the hon. Gentleman's conviction about the importance of the "use it or lose it" principle will lead him to vote if the Government do not accept his new clause 5. He has argued strongly in favour of new clause 8, and I look forward to welcoming him into the Lobby in support of that new clause when the time comes.

7.15 pm

I commend new clause 8 to the hon. Member for Battersea on the basis that requiring people to register every year is quite a good way to ensure that links with the United Kingdom are kept up. Given the spirit of compromise and consensus in the debate, it is reasonable to accept the case for such links, but I am worried that the absence of a mechanism for continuing the present arrangements for as long as people had expected will be an impediment to those who feel strongly about their home country but who want to accept a posting overseas. It would not be in the interests of the United Kingdom if people were prevented from going abroad and doing a good job on our behalf because they would be disfranchised as a result.

When he spoke about new clause 7, the hon. Member for Battersea referred to international organisations. I was not clear whether he was talking about formal organisations only, or whether he also meant non-governmental bodies. He referred to the European Union and NATO, and I agree that the people involved with those organisations constitute an important group. Similarly, however, there are people who work for non-governmental organisations such as charities who do not come within the definitions proposed for those working for the official organisations. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will consider that.

A group of people not exempted by new clause 7 are those who work for British businesses. Big multinationals send some of their key employees abroad to run branches of the main business but, whereas diplomats come and go—and in any case return to London after a four-year posting—some business men and women are sent abroad for very long periods.

However, because they work for British firms, they come back to head office regularly. Their companies are seriously affected by British legislation and the nature of

the British Government. Their futures and prospects are tied up with the fate of their companies in this country. If anyone is to be exempted, it should be those people.

I hope that we do not go down the route of having two classes of people. The right hon. Member for Gorton argued that it was wrong to put voluntary franchises and compulsory franchises in opposition. In the same way, it would be wrong and an affront to democracy to divide British citizens abroad into two classes—those who are allowed to vote and those who are not. All British citizens abroad should have the right to vote.

Mr. Stunell: Is there not an incongruity in the hon. Gentleman's view, given the different qualifications that apply to people in the diplomatic and military services, and to people working for the British Council? Does not the situation that he describes exist already?

Mr. Wilshire: Yes, it does. However, the arrangements that I would prefer would render those distinctions unnecessary. The House must never try to create a democracy with two types of people in it. That would be very dangerous for the principle underlying how we run our country.

Finally, I turn to amendment No. 176. Even if my arguments are ignored and the Government do not accept the proposals from my hon. Friends on the Opposition Front Bench, the legislation should not be made retrospective. People who live and work abroad on the understanding that they will have a vote for a particular length of time should not be penalised. It could be that they would not have gone abroad if they had known that they could not vote. Moreover, such people might find that, even though they wanted to keep their votes, they could not return home to make sure that they did.

I really hate retrospective legislation, and I make a strong plea to the Minister to assure the House—even if he will accept no other argument—that, in the spirit of compromise, he will not go down the route of retrospective legislation.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): I am sorry that my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) has left the Chamber, because I wanted to tell him that, when I entered the House six years ago, I would have found two things inconceivable—first, that I could disagree with him on any subject under the sun; secondly, that I would be invited to reduce the franchise—to reduce the rights of British people to vote. There we are, however: alas, things move on.

I shall be brief, but I want to tell the House about all the e-mails, letters, faxes and telephone calls that I have received from profoundly patriotic British citizens, and all the meetings that I have had with them—*[Interruption.]* I shall come to the Conservatives later. Anyway, those who have been to see me, or have contacted me in other ways, have said that they want to keep their right to vote. We are not the French Parliament, in which Members can represent far-flung sunny climes of the former empire and colonies; but I feel that it would be wrong not to record those people's dismay about what is being proposed tonight.

I have three reasons for concern. First, it is a good principle of democracy for us to extend any franchise, rather than reduce it. Secondly, we should be proud of all our citizens living and working overseas. The hon. Member for Spelthorne (Mr. Wilshire) mentioned the business community, but British citizens make a huge contribution to many voluntary and non-profit-making organisations, such as the World Council of Churches, trade union international organisations, the International Committee of the Red Cross and various non-governmental organisations.

When I was travelling in on the tube today, I saw a moving advertisement for Voluntary Service Overseas, asking people to work for £400 a year and to risk malaria to fly the flag for Britain. Many VSO members subsequently remain in the international community because of a love of their country, and I do not think that their vote should be taken away.

Thirdly, I feel that, in a global economy in which democracy needs to be preserved and extended, we should fly our flag for the democratic process and practice, rather than saying that people can exercise their democratic rights only if they reside in the United Kingdom. Conservative Members have made interesting and enjoyable speeches: I am delighted to observe that they seem to be discovering many hidden virtues in Europe that I do not recall their praying in aid before.

Mr. Wilshire: Where? Where?

Mr. MacShane: I am glad to note that the xenophobic beast is rising up again after his generous internationalist speech, but the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) spoke glowingly of Italy and of France. I hope that we shall observe the same at Prime Minister's Question Time and other events. The hon. Gentleman shakes his head. It appears that, as we expected, the Tories' love of Europe was instrumental only in so far as it might embarrass the Government.

I have another reason for being unconvinced of the generosity of spirit involved in the Conservatives' arguments. Theirs is the party—a party for which hon. Members here may have voted—that introduced the poll tax, which removed between 1 million and 4 million British citizens from the electoral roll, deliberately, cynically and cold-bloodedly, to fix and rig elections.

Furthermore—this will for ever place a mark of shame on the Conservatives' period of office—the Conservatives changed the terms of the Immigration Act 1971 in the British Nationality Act 1981. They did so not in order to take away the right to vote—although that would have been a serious measure—but in order to take away the right to citizenship of the descendants of British citizens who lived overseas.

There are many British citizens, to whom the hon. Member for Spelthorne referred, whose children are born overseas. If they marry foreigners and have their children overseas, that generation—the grandchildren of the people whom we have been discussing, who are living and working overseas—will lose the right to be British, save on the fiat, or at the discretion, of the Home Secretary. That was a shaming alteration of our nationality laws, which took away citizenship and has caused great hurt and concern to many British people overseas.

However, I do not want to be polemical tonight. I think that the new clauses and amendments are sensible, and go in the right direction. The "use it or lose it" proposition that has emerged since the Bill was tabled reflects the

[Mr. MacShane]

wishes of British citizens who actively wish to maintain a participatory voting link. My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary, who is not here now, and other Ministers have spent a great deal of time—perhaps, given that this is only a small part of a complicated Bill, more than we might have expected—meeting and talking to concerned citizens. I have attended those meetings, and I salute them for their generosity in finding time to do that. I do not know how, given the number of Home Office Bills, a Home Office Minister finds time to do anything other than keep us here all night.

Mr. Grieve: It seems that we may be building on the chrysalis of consensus that emerged in Committee.

Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one of the merits of the "use it or lose it" approach is that it removes the frequent complaint from some of his hon. Friends that people suddenly intervene in domestic politics, having shown no interest for some time?

Mr. MacShane: I think that it offers a sense of continuity, rather than the ability to be "bought in"—not necessarily in a financial sense—to participate in an election.

My hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) has done remarkable and assiduous work, which has been warmly welcomed by many British citizens overseas—all of whom seem to vote Labour nowadays. I cannot bring myself massively to disagree with the Conservatives' new clause 8 either. In any event, I do not want to press this to a Division in order to record a vote. Perhaps when the Bill goes to another place, Ministers can examine the problems, because there is time for that to happen before it is enacted. Perhaps we can arrive at a conclusion that will deal with the many protests that I have received, and will honour the tradition that the House always seeks to extend rather than reduce the franchise.

Mr. Tipping: It seems that clause 132 has become one of the most contentious parts of the Bill. I congratulate hon. Members in all parts of the House who have tabled ingenious and well-thought-out amendments, which deserve serious consideration and which I will consider and, indeed, already have considered.

In the light of all those good ideas—shells, as they were called by the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell)—the Government are inclined to look for a consensus. Such a consensus appears to be growing, and I reassure my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman)—who is not present now, but who will be back—and the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Mr. Wilshire), who argued for consensus but whose language at times took us away from it, that we will consider what might be done.

Clause 132 takes forward the recommendations of the Home Affairs Committee, of which my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) is an influential member. He has changed his mind on the issue since the Select Committee report, but I do not criticise him for that. He has argued that we need to move away from the present 20-year period to the Home Affairs Committee's proposed five-year period—a view that my right hon. Friend the Member for Gorton retains.

The hon. Member for Spelthorne asked me a number of questions; let me deal with two. First, he asked about the principle behind the proposal. I think that the argument is fairly clear and straightforward. If a person chooses to live overseas for a long period, at some point—there is an argument about when that point is—they are distanced from the current political climate. They are, in a sense, fighting old battles with old ideas. We live in a period of modernisation in which we move forward and ideas develop.

7.30 pm

Mr. Wilshire: I am pleased that the Minister is viewing the new clauses in a consensual way. Could he give a little more thought to his use of the word "choose"? Some people, including voluntary workers and business people, could say that they will not be posted overseas. Their contract or their beliefs, however, lead them to live overseas, and I do not think that they should be caught.

Mr. Tipping: The hon. Gentleman makes a very fair point, and I will come to it in more detail in a few minutes. People in the voluntary sector and in the commercial sector, to which he referred in his speech, generally do not live abroad for 20 years, but come and go. However, we should acknowledge the importance of people in both the voluntary and commercial sectors, as well as public servants, who work overseas.

The hon. Gentleman asked about consultation. The Select Committee on Home Affairs did some work on it. My hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane), in his normal, generous way, pointed out that there had been a series of meetings on this issue. Perhaps there were more meetings about this than about any other part of the Bill. That is rather surprising, in the light of the fact that, at present, slightly more than 13,000 overseas voters are registered here. We do not have information about how many of those voted in the last election, or what kind of people they are.

The central issue is how long someone needs to be overseas to become detached from the political process. It may be 20 years or it may, as the Home Affairs Committee recommended, be five years. There may be a middle way. The Government's preferred option is for a 10-year period. It is a compromise that will work in many ways. It allows people to be overseas for quite a long time—perhaps enough for two postings—yet remain on the register.

A couple of other ways forward have been proposed. The one that seems to have captured the imagination of hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber during this debate has been the "use it or lose it" option. That is a subtle way of countering the argument that, if people have been away from home for some time, they are out of touch. Registering within five years and continuing to register on a yearly basis shows a commitment to remaining in touch with the real issues.

Mr. Evans: Will the Minister concede that, with new technology, the internet and satellite television, people who live abroad can keep up to date with current affairs in their countries of origin? Recurring registration seems to leave the way open for us all to agree.

Mr. Tipping: New technology, information technology and the use of digital television certainly enable people to

keep in touch better. The question before the House is how long it is necessary for someone to have been away to lose touch. The hon. Gentleman makes the fair point that it is increasingly easy to remain in touch. I remember reading that, in the old days, it took 174 days for a letter to come from India reporting whether a battle had been lost or won. Today, such an event would be reported almost simultaneously.

Mr. Evans: It is on CNN.

Mr. Tipping: Absolutely.

The question is whether we are right about how long people should live abroad—should it be for five, 10 or 20 years? Or is it better to support the "use it or lose it" option?

A third option which has been discussed tonight is to extend the service conditions to make allowance for people who work for British organisations abroad. The telling point was made by the hon. Members for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) and for Spelthorne. What is the difference between a civil servant working in Brussels or for NATO, and someone working for an aid agency in Mozambique? What about the employee of Vauxhall Motors UK who works abroad but is still interested in British issues?

The final issue concerns amendment No. 176 which, in a sense, maintains existing rights. There is a logic to that. The counter-argument is that, if the amendment were accepted, at the beginning of this year—before the legislation came into operation—people would be safeguarded for 20 years, but after these provisions were implemented, they would be safeguarded only for as long as we decided. Different classes of voters have been mentioned, and amendment No. 176 might not be the best way forward.

The Government's preferred option is to have a simple rule and explanation that everyone can understand, and for that to command consensus across the political parties. There seems to have been a growing consensus in Committee and in the Chamber tonight, apart from the occasional burst of shelling. I believe that the "use it or lose it" option meets everybody's needs. It deals with all the points that have been discussed.

Mr. Evans: I welcome the Minister's approach. Will he also take account of proposed new subsection (6)(b) of new clause 8, which deals with people who have not yet reached the age of majority, but will do so while they are abroad with their parents?

Mr. Tipping: That, again, is a fair point, but a careful application of the "use it or lose it" principle would meet their needs too.

I do not want to make false promises. As my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has said throughout the Bill's proceedings, it is important that we take the political parties with us, and that a consensus emerges. It seems from this evening's discussion that we have not simply a kernel of a consensus but a wave that is beginning to roll out over "use it or lose it".

I am well aware, having received representations and heard the views expressed in Committee and in the debate tonight that this argument will not go away. I simply say to those right hon. and hon. Members who tabled the new clauses and amendments in this group that I guarantee to listen to the argument and reflect on it. Let me be clear on this: I make no guarantee that I will bring forward an amendment. However, if the consensus continues to build and develop across all the political parties, the "use it or lose it" option may become a real possibility. In that spirit of consensus, I invite my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea to withdraw new clause 5.

Mr. Evans: Will the Minister clarify one point about the "use it or lose it" principle, no matter whether it is introduced under new clause 5 or new clause 8 or some amalgam of them? If someone registers within five years and continues to register every year, can they continue to do so for ever, or will there be some limit?

Mr. Miller: It will be done by consensus.

Mr. Tipping: I hear what my hon. Friend says: we would have to discuss that. There is a strong argument for a cut-off date, because a "use it or lose it" option would be more generous than the current provisions. However, I give no guarantee, except that, as the Home Secretary has said, if a consensus emerges and a model develops that has the consent of all the political parties, it will deserve serious consideration.

Mr. Linton: We have had a debate on the nature of compromise and the way towards consensus. The Government's original attempt at consensus was to offer a mid point—a geometrical bisection between 20 years and nought, which was, of course, 10 years. The alternative that has emerged might be described as a non-linear compromise—five years, not 10, but with continuous registration. That proves that the middle way does not always mean reaching a mid point. I claim no credit for thinking of that solution; it came from the international organisations of the parties.

I freely confess that I have, as the Minister said, changed my mind since the recommendation of the Home Affairs Committee. As that recommendation was for five years, however, I have changed my mind not on the length of time required, but on the way in which the law may apply to those who are prepared to re-register year after year. As the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) said, our approach contains an important self-regulating feature, ensuring that the amendment would apply only to the small number of people who show determination to register. There are perhaps 3 million or 4 million British passport holders overseas, but we are talking about only 13,000 of them—just one in 300 are determined to keep their vote.

New clause 7, on international organisations, was never meant as special pleading for those who work for public sector organisations. It was intended to be taken with new clause 5, on the "use it or lose it" principle, to create a double system by which people whose commitment to the UK is beyond doubt could be assured a continuing vote. Those who work in the public sector for organisations of which we are treaty members would receive an assurance. Those who do not would prove their good faith through registering year after year. In either case, the intention of the amendments is to set a test of people's continued commitment rather than opening up the vote to the millions who live abroad and who have British citizenship.

[Mr. Linton]

I am encouraged by what my hon. Friend the Minister has said. I understand that he offers no guarantee, but it is incumbent on all parties to seek the consensus that would persuade him to accept an amendment so that what the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) called the chrysalis of consensus may burst into the butterfly of agreement. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Motion and clause, by leave, withdrawn.

Schedule 1

THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION

Mr. Tipping: I beg to move amendment No. 84, in page 98, line 30, at end insert—

'(8) Until such time as the Commission may determine, the Commission's chief executive appointed under sub-paragraph (7) may incur expenditure and do other things in the name and on behalf of the Commission, whether or not the membership of the Commission has yet to be constituted in accordance with section 1.

(9) The power conferred by sub-paragraph (8) shall be exercisable by that person subject to and in accordance with any directions given to him by the Secretary of State.'.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): With this, it will be convenient to discuss Government amendment No. 85.

Mr. Tipping: As the Home Secretary stated on Second Reading, the Government intend to bring the Electoral Commission into being as a functioning body before the next general election. Whatever the timing of either Royal Assent or the election, we can be certain that the timetable for establishment of the commission will be tight. The Chamber has already discussed the demands and choices about priorities that the commission will face. It is essential that the groundwork for the rapid and smooth establishment of the commission as a going concern should be done as soon as possible. Once appointed, the commissioners should be able to devote their attention and energies to implementing the Bill's core provisions.

7.45 pm

Schedule 1(11)(7) provides for the Secretary of State to appoint a person to be interim chief executive of the commission pending the appointment of the electoral commissioners. The intention is to appoint an interim chief executive as soon as the Bill receives Royal Assent so that he or she can take forward work both on logistical issues relating to the establishment of the commission, such as accommodation and recruitment of staff, and give thought to practical arrangements for implementing the controls on income and expenditure set out in the Bill.

Our objective is to ensure that the commission will be in a position to discharge its functions as soon as possible following the appointment of the commissioners. In doing so, the interim chief executive will need to enter into contracts and incur expenditure and make other decisions relating to implementation of the commission's functions in the short term. Paragraph 11(8), introduced by amendment No. 85, would provide the interim chief executive with the authority necessary to incur expenditure and to do other things in the name of and on behalf of the commissioners pending their appointment. We have already discussed that process.

Paragraph 11(9) would require the interim chief executive to exercise that power only in conformity with directions given by the Secretary of State. Given the need to incur expenditure in advance of the appointment of the commissioners, it is also necessary to make provision for the appointment of an interim accounting officer until such time as the Speaker's Committee is able to do so under paragraph 19(1). Amendment No. 86 would therefore amend paragraph 19 to provide for the Secretary of State to appoint a member of the commission's staff, or some other person—for example, the interim chief executive—as the commission's accounting officer until an appointment is made.

Quick progress is essential on the establishment of the commission. The Government—and I believe hon. Members on both sides of the House—believe that the commission should be up and running in time for the general election—whenever it comes. I hope that the House will accept that the amendments will facilitate that.

Sir George Young: We should perhaps put a sleeping policeman in front of this juggernaut. Some important implications lie behind the amendment. The Minister explained that the commission wants to hit the ground running, adding that there was a tight timetable and a demanding schedule. To avoid delay, he wants to give powers to the chief executive to begin work before the commission is formally established.

That seems innocuous, and if the Bill had been passed during the previous Session, we should not have been too concerned about it. However, this is probably the last full Session of the current Parliament, and the Bill may not receive Royal Assent until November, the month in which many of the Government's Bills from the past Session received it. There may be an election in May 2001—or even earlier.

The amendment gives powers to an individual to act in the name of the Electoral Commission before the commissioners are appointed. If an election were called before the electoral commissioners had been appointed, or if key decisions have to be taken by the commission in order to meet the challenging timetable set for it, that chap would have to do the work. The amendment potentially undermines all the Bill's attempts to make the commission independent by allowing the Secretary of State to nominate a chief executive who then carries out the powers of the commission.

Under paragraph 11(7) of schedule 1, we note that the chief executive may be appointed by the Secretary of State. It would be helpful to know what time scale the Minister envisages for that. Will it be done ahead of Royal Assent? Does he have anyone in mind? In view of the powers that the chief executive may have in the interval between his appointment and the appointment of the commission, does the Minister propose to consult Opposition parties as to who that chap may be?

Amendment No. 84 gives the Secretary of State's appointee wide powers. He can act on behalf of the commission until

such time as the commission may determine.

The commission's powers are very wide indeed. Paragraph 2 of the schedule provides that the commission

> may do anything (except borrow money) which is calculated to facilitate, or is incidental or conducive to, the carrying out of any of their functions.

Everything covered by clauses 1 to 11 could be undertaken by that appointee of the Secretary of State. He could deal with policy development grants; with education about electoral systems; and with party broadcasts. Indeed, he could even undertake chunks of part II. The only constraint on his activities is that they should be

> subject to and in accordance with any directions given to him by the Secretary of State.

That does not give the Opposition enormous reassurance.

It may take some time to appoint the electoral commissioners. The process is set out in clause 3. As I understand the matter, the commissioners cannot be appointed until the Speaker's Committee has been established. Its agreement must be secured before an Address from the House of Commons can be issued; then the electoral commissioners can be appointed. I assume that the Nolan committee process for public appointments will be used. That may take time. The people approached may not want to take up the job—or if they want to do so, they may not be able to for some time.

In the meantime, the clock will be ticking. If we are to believe the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the hon. Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz), the date has already been fixed. Progress will have to be made in the absence of the commissioners. Those crucial, independent decisions will be taken by someone appointed by the Secretary of State and subject to his direction. The general election could be called before any commissioners have been appointed and that chap will be in charge.

Can that be right? Without the amendment, the chief executive cannot act on behalf of the commission—with it, he can. Without the amendment, there would at least be some incentive to appoint the commissioners promptly, so we would not need it. At a stroke, it could destroy the assembling of a visibly neutral body to oversee the next general election.

The powers vested in the chief executive are enormous. I am not sure that any civil servant would want to discharge them. We have spent much time discussing those powers. It would be helpful if the Minister could take us through the timetable. When does the Secretary of State envisage appointing a person as the commission's chief executive? What is the time scale after Royal Assent for the appointment of the commissioners? When does the Minister expect that the commission will be able to operate and to take over all those responsibilities from the acting chief executive?

If my understanding is correct, that acting chief executive may have to do some of the legwork that the Minister mentioned in his opening remarks. He referred to some logistical issues that would have to be addressed. We need to know a little more about which sensitive political decisions might have to be taken by that chief executive until such time as the commissioners can take over from him.

Mr. Tipping: The right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) made several important points. I recognise the sleeping policeman that he has placed in the path of the Bill. However, he also noted that the clock would be ticking; although he appreciates the need to make progress, he rightly asks for checks and safeguards.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about the timetable. The Government will use their best endeavours—I am sure that we shall have the support and help of this House and of the other place—to obtain Royal Assent before the summer recess. That may not be the case; as the right hon. Gentleman pointed out, Bills have slipped in the past. However, we aim to have Royal Assent by the summer. At that time, we shall appoint an interim chief executive. Under the current timetable, the commissioners would be in place in the autumn. November has been mentioned, but that date is not set in stone.

The right hon. Gentleman asked whether anyone was lined up for the post of interim chief executive. That is not the case. I envisage that the post will be filled by a civil servant, who will undertake purely logistical work—to set up the office and put systems in place. The right hon. Gentleman referred to the range of important functions—some political—that the commission will be asked to undertake, but, at that stage, the interim chief executive will work purely on logistical arrangements.

The right hon. Gentleman asked how commissioners would be appointed and gave the answer himself: the Nolan rules will apply. We have already discussed the type of people who might be commissioners and what their background might be. The Government are determined—as are the Opposition—to ensure that the body is free from any accusation of vested interest or political partiality. That should be a point of reassurance for the right hon. Gentleman. The Bill is driven by a new determination—not only from the Government, but from all parties—to ensure that the commission is open, transparent and honest; that it is a body that all can trust for independent advice.

There is no intention whatever that the interim chief executive will be involved in the more contentious parts of the work. I made it clear in my opening remarks and in my response; the interim chief executive will "hit the ground running", as the right hon. Gentleman said. He will ensure that the logistics of the operation are in place. The sooner we can move to the appointment—under Nolan rules—of a permanent chief executive, with commissioners also appointed under those rules, the better for all of us. With that reassurance, I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will be content for the amendments to be accepted.

Sir George Young: With the leave of the House, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The Minister has been as helpful as he can. However, will he confirm the following points? If the Bill received Royal Assent by the summer recess—the scenario that he outlined—and supposing that there was a dissolution of Parliament in October this year, would the election be fought under the rules envisaged in the Bill, which would then be an Act, or under the current rules, especially those that apply to expenditure limits?

Under an alternative scenario, the measure might not receive Royal Assent by the summer recess. We have already heard that further amendments will be tabled; they will have to be considered in another place and, inevitably, they will return to the House. If the Minister does not hit his targets, and the timetable for the whole

[Sir George Young]

system to be up and running is not achieved, will not the chief executive have to take decisions that are more than simply logistical?

8 pm

I do not propose to press the amendment to a Division, but I do want to express my belief that as the powers—which would not be constrained by amendment No. 84—given to the chief executive to

incur expenditure and do other things in the name and on behalf of the Commission

are not restricted to purely logistical matters, in some scenarios he may find himself taking some rather sensitive political decisions.

Mr. Tipping: With the leave of the House, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

The right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) invites me to answer hypothetical questions, and I may find myself in the difficulty that the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz), did in speculating on the date of the general election. If we do not achieve Royal Assent by the summer, the sooner the general election is after Royal Assent the more obvious it becomes that the general election will have to be fought under current rules. However, much depends on the progress that we make. *[Interruption.]* I am delighted to hear the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire say, sotto voce, "That answers that".

Sir George Young: I am afraid that the Minister's hearing is not as good as he thought it was. I said, "Even if the Bill becomes an Act, we shall fight the election under the old rules". I am not quite sure how one does that.

Mr. Tipping: We would have to fight the election under the old rules because the commission would not be in place. If there were a general election in October and Royal Assent had not been achieved by then, the election would obviously take place under the old rules. I believe that, if Royal Assent is received at the end of July and the general election is in October, the logistics and the argument would be that it would not be possible to fight under the new rules and we would have to fight under the current rules. However, much depends on the speed of the Bill's passage; if sleeping policemen are not erected, we can make quick progress.

If we are able to appoint an interim chief executive with logistical powers to set up the office and systems, the more progress we make, the more it becomes possible to put in place new arrangements for the general election. As I said earlier, that is what the Government desire and I believe that it is what all parties in the House now desire.

Amendment agreed to.

Amendment made: No. 85, in page 102, line 5, at end insert—

'(6) The Secretary of State may designate any member of the Commission's staff or other person to be the Commission's accounting officer until such time as the first designation made under sub-paragraph (1) takes effect.'.—*[Mr. Tipping.]*

Clause 2

SPEAKER'S COMMITTEE

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I beg to move amendment No. 3, in page 2, line 6, at end insert—

'the Speaker of the House of Commons, who shall be the chairman of the Committee, and the following other members, namely'.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): With this it will be convenient to discuss Government amendments Nos. 4, 86 to 89 and 5.

Mr. O'Brien: In Committee, the hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) moved an amendment on much the same lines as amendment No. 3, which provides for the Speaker to chair the Speaker's Committee. The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Mr. Tipping), said then that we would discuss with Madam Speaker her views on the matter, and I am pleased to advise the House that she has agreed that the Speaker of the day should indeed chair the Speaker's Committee and take an active part in its work.

With the Speaker in the Chair, amendment No. 4 reduces the number of ordinary members of the Committee that are appointed by the Speaker from six to five. The appointment of those five members will be entirely at the Speaker's discretion. In particular, there will be no requirement on the Speaker to ensure that the membership of the Committee as a whole reflects the balance of the parties in the House. Indeed, the Speaker has indicated that she intends to appoint one Government Back Bencher, three from the principal Opposition party and one from another opposition party. The result, taking into account the three ex officio members, will be a Speaker's Committee which is exactly balanced as between Government and Opposition Members.

With the Speaker at the helm and a balanced membership, I hope that the House will be assured that the Speaker's Committee will discharge its functions in a non-partisan manner and, in doing so, will act as the guarantor of the independence of the Electoral Commission.

Amendment No. 86 corrects a drafting error in paragraph 1(1) of schedule 2. The intended purpose of that provision is to require the Speaker's Committee to report periodically to the House of Commons on the exercise by the Committee of its own functions. As drafted, paragraph 1(1) erroneously required the Speaker's Committee to report on the exercise of the Electoral Commission's functions. I hope that the amendment will be endorsed by the House.

I hope that, on that basis, the House will be able to agree to the amendments.

Sir George Young: That was a very helpful speech. Amendment No. 3 incorporates part of amendment No. 17, which the Opposition moved in Committee, and it seems to me right that the Speaker's Committee should have the Speaker in it. We are delighted that our oratory was successful. I was pleased to hear of the consultations that have taken place with Madam Speaker, both on her views on appointment and on how the five members of

the House might be appointed. The original formula was somewhat vague about the overall composition of the Committee. It seemed to us that the fact that some members were specified created an inbuilt Government majority, and that the Speaker might then have used her discretion to put that right or she might have appointed the six from the House in proportion to the balance in the House. I was delighted to hear how the five appointments will be made. That information relieves our concern.

The Minister has explained that amendment No. 86 resulted from a typing error. We accept that.

Amendment No. 5 is reassuring. The Minister may recall amendment No. 20 tabled in Committee, because the Bill as drafted allowed the Chairman of the Speaker's Committee to agree to the appointment of the commissioners, even if everyone else on the Speaker's Committee disagreed. Putting the Speaker in as Chairman gets around that potential problem. Real progress has been made and we welcome the amendments.

Mr. Stunell: I add my words of support for the revisions, which very much reflect the character of the previous debate. It is good to see the Minister reflecting that debate and returning to the House with proposals that will go a long way towards ensuring not just that the Committee behaves fairly, but that it is absolutely above reproach in the public's eyes.

Amendment agreed to.

Amendment made: No. 4, in page 2, line 14, leave out "six" and insert "five".—*[Mr. Tipping.]*

Schedule 2

THE SPEAKER'S COMMITTEE

Amendments made: No. 86, in page 103, line 20, leave out "Commission" and insert "Committee".

No. 87, in page 103, line 25, at end insert—

'(aa) the Speaker of the House of Commons;'.

No. 88, in page 103, line 41, leave out paragraph 3.

No. 89, in page 104, line 9, at end insert—

'(3) The Committee may appoint a member of the Committee to act as chairman at any meeting of the Committee in the absence of the Speaker.'.—*[Mr. Tipping.]*

Clause 3

APPOINTMENT OF ELECTORAL COMMISSIONERS AND COMMISSION CHAIRMAN

Amendment made: No. 5, in page 2, line 36, leave out—

'chairman of the Speaker's Committee'

and insert—

'Speaker of the House of Commons'.—*[Mr. Tipping.]*

Clause 5

REVIEWS OF ELECTORAL AND POLITICAL MATTERS

Amendment made: No. 6, in page 4, line 21, at end insert—

'(4A) Each report made by the Commission under this section shall be published by them in such manner as they may determine.'.—*[Mr. Tipping.]*

Clause 6

COMMISSION TO BE CONSULTED ON CHANGES TO ELECTORAL LAW

Amendment made: No. 7, in page 5, line 7, at end insert—

'(i) an order under section 17A(3) of the Greater London Authority Act 1999 (free delivery of election addresses at elections to the Greater London Authority).'.—*[Mr. Tipping.]*

Clause 9

BROADCASTERS TO HAVE REGARD TO COMMISSION'S VIEWS ON PARTY POLITICAL BROADCASTS

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I beg to move amendment No. 8, in page 6, line 45, leave out from "broadcasts," to end of line 5 on page 7.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss Government amendment No. 109.

Mr. O'Brien: During consideration in Committee of part I, which was taken on the Floor of the House, we had a useful debate on two amendments to clause 9 tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton). My hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary said that we would reflect on the views that were being expressed from both sides of the House. Since then, we have had an opportunity to discuss the matter further with the BBC. Amendment No. 8, which has the support of both the BBC and S4C, is the result of those discussions.

The effect of amendment No. 8 is to remove subsection 3(b) from clause 9. In doing so, it brings the relationship between the Electoral Commission and the BBC more closely into line with the relationship between the Electoral Commission and both the Independent Television Commission and the Radio Authority. In all cases, the broadcasting authorities will have to have regard to the views of the Electoral Commission when determining their policy or rules, as the case may be, on party political broadcasts. Any such views will be non-binding, but the broadcasting authorities will be bound to give them proper consideration.

The Electoral Commission will no doubt have views on the criteria for determining which political parties qualify for party political broadcasts and on the length and the frequency of such broadcasts. The amendment will not in any way prevent the commission from commenting on those important aspects of the BBC's overall policy on party political broadcasts, but the Government agree that it is inappropriate to single out those aspects of the BBC's policies in subsection (3) when they are not singled out in subsections (1) and (2) as they relate to the Independent Television Commission and the Radio Authority.

Amendment No. 109 is a parallel amendment to the provisions on referendum broadcasts in schedule 11. I hope that the House will accept the amendments.

Mr. Grieve: I welcome the Minister's remarks and the amendments. There was never any criticism of the Government's intention to involve the Electoral Commission, but Opposition Members and some Labour Members were concerned that the detail was likely to expose the commission to a degree of involvement in the

[Mr. Grieve]

minutiae of editorial policy that was undesirable for both the BBC and the commission. The likely consequence would be that any aggrieved person would take the commission to judicial review proceedings in the same way as occasionally happens to the BBC when it starts to allocate party political broadcasts at election times and the courts are called on to resolve the matter.

Editorial policy should be left to the editors, and I am grateful that the Minister has taken that point on board while in no way detracting from the proper involvement of the Electoral Commission in stimulating debate and putting forward ideas and proposals to all broadcasters on the way in which broadcasts should properly be handled. On that basis, Conservative Members welcome the amendments and we are grateful to the Minister for responding to the representations that were made from both sides of the House.

Mr. Linton: I do not wish to detain the House except to thank my hon. Friend the Minister for being as good as the word of my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, who said in Committee that he would take a fresh look at the wording. They have done that and they have adopted the amendment that I moved in Committee. That is the best course of action because it will preserve the unwritten, voluntary and informal parts of the constitution.

Amendment agreed to.

Clause 11

EDUCATION ABOUT ELECTORAL AND DEMOCRATIC SYSTEMS

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I beg to move amendment No. 9, in page 8, leave out lines 12 and 13 and insert—

'(a) current electoral systems in the United Kingdom and any pending such systems, together with such matters connected with any such existing or pending systems as the Commission may determine;

(b) current systems of local government and national government in the United Kingdom and any pending such systems; and'.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following: Amendment No. 157, in page 8, leave out line 14.

Government amendment No. 10.

Amendment No. 159, in page 8, line 28, at end insert—

'(4A) Notwithstanding anything in subsection (4), any grant under subsection 3(b) may not be used to promote or otherwise publicise—

(a) any change in the system of national government in the United Kingdom (other than a change that is pending for the purposes of this section);

(b) any change in the electoral system in use at any particular election within the United Kingdom (other than a change that is pending for the purposes of this section); or

(c) any change in the system of local government in use in any particular part of the United Kingdom (other than a change that is pending for the purposes of this section).'.

Mr. O'Brien: A number of concerns were expressed in Committee about the extent of the remit given to the Electoral Commission under clause 11. The clause sets out the commission's voter education function. It will have an important role to play in promoting a greater sense of citizenship and encouraging participation in the democratic process. However, it is not for the commission to promote alternative electoral systems or alternative systems of local, regional or national government.

The commission will be the custodian of fair play in any referendum on proportional representation for elections to the House or on the introduction of elected regional assemblies. In such circumstances, the commission's impartiality would be called into question if it had previously campaigned for electoral reform or for the introduction of elected regional government.

8.15 pm

Government amendments Nos. 9 and 10 will confine the commission's voter education function to promoting current or pending electoral or governmental systems. The reference to "pending" systems denotes new systems that have already been enacted, but are not yet in force. It is not a question of trying to promote something that is not yet in place.

For example, were the commission already in being, it would fall to it to explain the arrangements for the election of the London mayor, and we would wish it much luck in performing that task. It would also have to explain the arrangements for elections to the Assembly, albeit that the Greater London Authority is not yet in place.

The effect of the Government amendments is that the Electoral Commission will not be able to make grants to a body, under the provisions of clause 11(3), to promote the cause of proportional representation for elections to the House, or to campaign for regional elected government. With that assurance, I hope that the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young), who is concerned about these issues, will decide not to press amendment No. 159.

Amendment No. 157 covers slightly different, but none the less familiar, territory. It would omit the reference in subsection (1) to the institutions of the European Union. Opposition Members appear readily to accept that if we are to boost turnout at local government elections, it will be necessary for the Electoral Commission to explain how local government works and impacts on our daily lives. People will be more inclined to vote if they believe that the body that they are being asked to elect is relevant to them and will make a difference to the community in which they live. If that is true of local government, it is surely also true of the European Parliament.

At the previous European elections, voter turnout was very low. If there are ways in which we can improve turnout, we should seriously consider them. The commission must have the scope to explain the role of the European Parliament and its relationship with the European Commission and the other institutions of the European Union. If amendment No. 157 were passed, the Electoral Commission would not be able to discharge its voter education function in respect of European parliamentary elections.

No political party can take comfort from the low turnout at last June's elections. The Electoral Commission cannot reverse the downward trend on its own, but, if it is to have any impact, it must at least be given the scope to run a meaningful campaign.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. O'Brien: I will give way shortly.

The amendment deals with Europe. We know from past experience what happens when one mentions the word "Europe" to Conservative Members. Unlike Pavlov's dog, they tend to break out in indignation, splits and general hypertension. I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman will do precisely that, but I shall give way to him to find out.

Mr. Robathan: I am so grateful to the Minister, because I can see that he is looking forward to my intervention. The task that he is setting the Electoral Commission of promoting public awareness of the institutions of the European Union is fairly large. Will he therefore illuminate the House as to his awareness of its institutions? Could he tell us what DG VII and DG VIII do?

Mr. O'Brien: I cannot do so off the top of my head, because I have not been involved in these matters recently. However, I can tell the hon. Gentleman what DG V does—but can he tell me?

Mr. Robathan: No.

Mr. O'Brien: It might serve us both to be properly educated about the role of the European Commission, the European Parliament and the institutions of Europe. We could both do with a little more education on these matters. If we accepted amendment No. 157, which was tabled by Conservative Members, we might not receive the education that we need.

Sir George Young: I welcome Government amendments No. 9 and 10. They reflect amendment No. 42, which we moved in Committee. However, I think that amendment No. 159 is also necessary for reasons that I shall explain shortly.

As the Minister said, Government amendments Nos. 9 and 10 will keep the neutral and impartial Electoral Commission out of contentious issues by allowing it to promote only those electoral systems made by enactment. It will keep it out of promoting AV-plus and other forms of proportional representation before the House of Commons approves them—if, indeed, it ever does. I am grateful that the Minister confirmed that the commission could not promote public awareness of elected regional assemblies when they are not pending. It is worth reminding the House that the Neill committee did not envisage the commission embarking on the functions set out in clause 11.

I shall speak to amendments Nos. 157 and 159. Amendment No. 157 is similar to an amendment that we moved in Committee, so the Opposition's beach towel has already been laid on this deckchair. The amendment would preclude the commission from promoting public awareness of the institutions of the European Union. The Minister may recall the powerful speech that I made on 14 February, from column 711 onwards, which he interrupted to make numerous concessions, but sadly not on that particular amendment.

Our case is the one that was just implied by my hon. Friend the Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan). The European Union already has a substantial budget, far larger than that of the proposed Electoral Commission, to promote its institutions. It has 45 million euros to spend on general information and communication work concerning the European Union. The budget document published by the European Commission says of the budget for information and communication work:

> these measures are designed to be an effective channel of communication and dialogue between the people of the European Union and the Community Institutions. They take account of specific national and regional characteristics, in close co-operation with the Member State authorities.

There is therefore no need for UK taxpayers to double-fund a function for which they are already paying through the Commission.

The Minister needs to take on board another issue. One of the institutions of which the Electoral Commission could promote public awareness, under clause 11, is the European central bank, which is a European institution. We could of course have a referendum on whether the UK should join the euro. Interest rates are fixed by the ECB, and the bank has responsibility for the conduct of monetary policy in Europe. The ECB's performance could therefore be at the heart of a debate about whether the UK should join the euro. Against that background, is it right that the commission should be involved in that debate by publishing literature about; and promoting public awareness of; the ECB?

The Minister mentioned the commission's voter education role, which I understand, but the commission also has a role to remain impartial and above the issues that may be raised in a referendum. For that reason, it should not embark on promoting awareness of European Union institutions. The commission, after all, would be the umpire in that referendum.

I shall use the argument that the Minister used on 14 February, when he said:

> It would be injurious to the perceived neutrality of such a body—

that is the commission—

> if it were seen to adopt a position on the question of alternative voting systems.

That argument is equally valid if one applies it to the question of joining the euro: it would be injurious to the perceived neutrality of such a body if it were seen to promote public awareness of the role of the European central bank.

Last time round, the Minister was less than convincing in his argument against the amendment. He simply said:

> It is important that the scope of the commission's voter education role should extend to explaining the institutions of the European Union to voters.—[*Official Report*, 14 February 2000; Vol. 344, c. 712.]

He repeated that argument again this evening. He went on to say that if the commission did not have that scope, turnout at European elections would remain low.

There are two responses to that argument. First, by entering the euro debate the commission would prejudice its impartiality. Secondly, there is already a huge budget

[Sir George Young]

to promote awareness of European institutions, so I was not reassured by what the Minister said today any more than I was on 14 February.

Mr. Robathan: My right hon. Friend and I agree entirely on this matter. Contrary to what the Minister said, I do not get excited when I read the word "Europe". Indeed, I can tell him that I am going on holiday in Europe this summer, God and the Government willing. Does my right hon. Friend agree that there is such a low turnout in European elections because people are moved by Europe only in a contrary manner? To involve the Electoral Commission—which, as he said, is meant to be entirely neutral—in arguing for European Union institutions might not only compromise its neutrality, but lead everybody to doubt the worth of the commission, with which we agree.

Does my right hon. Friend agree also that today's opinion poll, showing that 69 per cent. of people are now ill-disposed towards the European single currency, reinforces his argument? If the Electoral Commission argues against that opinion, is not that likely to lead people to think that it is in some way flawed?

Sir George Young: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. The Bill gives the Electoral Commission a duty, not an option, when it says:

> The Commission shall promote public awareness of . . . the institutions of the European Union.

One of the EU's key institutions is the European central bank, and it would be difficult for the commission to promote public awareness of that institution without in some way involving itself in what would inevitably be a controversial political argument about whether the ECB was doing a good job or a bad job. It would be better for the commission if it simply did not engage in that particular function at all.

I move on to amendment No. 159. I hope that the Minister can persuade me that it is not necessary, but he has not yet done so. The amendment is needed because the phrasing of amendments Nos. 9 and 10 allows grants to be made to promote change in particular areas or elections so long as the proposed system is in use elsewhere in the UK. For example, a grant could be given to promote the use of the additional member system, the single vote or the single transferable vote for elections to the House on the grounds that those systems are already in use elsewhere in the UK for mayoral elections and elections to the Scottish Assembly, the Welsh Assembly, the Northern Ireland Assembly and the European Parliament.

If amendment No. 159 is not made, the commission will get involved in exactly the sort of controversy that the Minister said he did not want it to become involved in. Although those systems do not at present apply to elections to the House, they are in use elsewhere in the UK. The position without the amendment would be inconsistent with the Minister's remarks on 14 February, when he said that

> it would be outside the powers of the commission to make a grant to an organisation to enable it to promote alternative voting systems.—[*Official Report*, 14 February 2000; Vol. 344, c. 712.]

The Government amendments do not achieve that, so I hope that the Minister will accept amendment No. 159 to close the loophole.

Mr. Stunell: I oppose the Conservative amendments—and I am not happy with the Government amendments, either.

I say to the hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan), who has said that some of his best friends are European and, indeed, that he is going on holiday to Europe, that he lives in Europe. One of the problems for Conservative Members is that they do not accept that they are part of Europe in the first place.

It would be a serious mistake to clip the wings of the Electoral Commission and give it the role of explaining what local government does and why it is a good idea to participate in the decision-making process—although not to promote a specific form of local government—but say that it cannot do the same for the European Union.

The Conservatives' argument is somewhat two-edged because if their complaint about Europe is that it is dominating our lives, passing laws that we do not control and generally disrupting the universe, that is surely all the more reason to explain that evil to the British electorate and encourage them to play a part in European democratic procedures.

Mr. Robathan: The hon. Gentleman has not only given way to me but given me a geography lesson. How can he refer to Europe as "it" if we are within it? He was talking about it as though it were a foreign body, yet, as he has so rightly pointed out, it is not because we are part of it.

8.30 pm

Mr. Stunell: That is an interesting argument; the same is true of local government, Parliament and all other bodies on which the Electoral Commission has been given a job, exactly as the hon. Gentleman says. In its collective form, the European Union is the same. I see no justification for the Conservatives' approach, and I could not see it last time either. I do not think that that is for want of intelligence on my part. Their ideas are fundamentally misconceived.

I understand the spirit in which the Government's concessions have been made and their entirely honourable intention to ensure that the commission is not drawn into controversy. In restricting what the commission can do on electoral systems, I hope that its duty to explain and promote systems in use in the United Kingdom will remain clear. Judging by some preliminary findings from discussions with colleagues from the London area about the mayoral election and the ballot paper with which London electors will be faced, there is a substantial job to be done. There is clearly a substantial job to be done throughout the country in pointing out the many advantages—and perhaps one or two disadvantages—of the closed list system.

I very much hope that, in clipping the wings of the Electoral Commission for some apparently very good reasons, the Minister does not cause it to go into its shell and fail to take necessary action. I especially hope that he will not in any way be tempted by the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) to support amendment No. 159. The right hon. Gentleman said that

different electoral systems in the UK were a problem and that the wicked Electoral Commission might be drawn into explaining to another part of the United Kingdom the voting system in, let us say, Northern Ireland in the European elections, Scotland in the Scottish elections or, for that matter, London in the mayoral election. Both Government and Opposition amendments could inhibit the commission's wider duty of promoting and developing democracy, and are to be regretted.

Mr. Robathan: Comments about Europe made by the Minister, the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) and, indeed, me, illustrate the difficulties into which the Electoral Commission could walk if it tried to educate people about the European Union and the institutions thereof. We are self-evidently European. I stress to both hon. Gentlemen that I am not anti-European; nor do I leap up and down at the mention of the word "Europe". Indeed, I spent much time studying European history. When I did so, there was a distinction between British and European history. For the benefit of the hon. Member for Hazel Grove, I am going on holiday on the continent of Europe and not to Cornwall.

The educational requirement could strike at the purpose of the Electoral Commission. If its purpose is to be above party politics and political and detailed argument, it must remain neutral at all times. The Minister will say that it can educate on European and other matters while remaining neutral. That is true if it educates on electoral systems about which all parties agree, but if such education extends to various EU institutions, especially the European central bank, which my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) mentioned, the commission will inevitably be drawn into detailed argument.

However the Minister puts his argument, he will discover accusations of bias—possibly from both sides of the House. Such accusations, even if they are from both sides of the House, will tend, in the eyes of those who take contrary views, to undermine the perceived neutrality of the Electoral Commission. That is important. If the Electoral Commission starts discussing Europe or proportional representation or methods of voting, there will be accusations that the commission is getting involved in matters on which it should be neutral. That is a straightforward argument.

I shall not repeat my right hon. Friend's argument, as he expressed it better than I could. The particular case of the European central bank and the single currency is a good example. I could write the argument from one side and the Minister could write it from the other, and we would both think that we were being neutral, but if the Electoral Commission wrote a paper on the ECB, setting out the pros and cons, the Minister—whose position on the European currency I do not know—and I might be able to criticise it equally well from either side. The danger is that by getting involved in the debate, the Electoral Commission would lose its perceived neutrality, however hard it might try to maintain it.

I question whether it should be the purpose of the Electoral Commission to get involved in such matters, when there is an office in Storey's Gate, run by Mr. Geoffrey Martin, whom the Minister may know. The office exists in order to publish the great benefits that the European Commission brings to these isles. I do not disagree with much that the office publishes; indeed, Mr. Martin and I often have genial conversations. However, what would be the purpose of such an office if the Electoral Commission acquired an educational responsibility? Might they not end up working in tandem and, again, might that not undermine the perceived neutrality of the Electoral Commission?

As was revealed by the Minister's ignorance about DG VII and VIII, and mine about DG V, the Electoral Commission would face an enormous task if it was required by the Government to educate people about the institutions of the European Union. The Minister and I do not know all the details of the EU, and we spend considerable time studying it, so that would be a huge task for the Electoral Commission, in which it might fail.

I shall not detain the House. The argument is important, although it is easily dismissed. The neutrality of the Electoral Commission could be undermined before it even started. I hope that the Minister will bear that in mind.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan) wants to go to Europe. We wish him well on his holiday, and from our point of view, the sooner he goes, the better.

Mr. Robathan: In that case, I shall go now.

Mr. O'Brien: That is a matter for the hon. Gentleman and his Whips. Our Whips are happy to give him permission to go.

Let us consider the argument and cut to the core of the concern expressed by the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) that there could be some mention of the European central bank. We have set up an Electoral Commission which will be above politics. The right hon. Gentleman welcomed the independence that the commission will have. It will be supervised by the Speaker's Committee. He welcomed the independent way in which that Committee will operate. There are many safeguards to preserve the independence and integrity of the Electoral Commission.

Will the right hon. Gentleman give that body some credit for common sense, when we appoint all these great and good people to run it, supervised, no doubt, by more great and good people from the House? There are enough safeguards. We want a neutral body that is not involved in questions such as whether we join the single currency or not. It would be ridiculous for the Electoral Commission to get involved in that debate. We want a body whose neutrality is not compromised, but we do not want a body that is neutered.

The right hon. Gentleman is proposing, in effect, to neuter the body that we are setting up to educate voters by providing basic information. Awareness of an institutional set-up such as the European central bank is unlikely to sway anyone one way or the other on whether we should join the single currency. I doubt whether the Electoral Commission wants to get involved in such a debate, or even provide information.

However, after the next election, and perhaps the subsequent election, a Conservative Government might—heaven forfend—return to office. The Conservative party is committed to not joining the single currency for only two

[Mr. O'Brien]

elections. It could subsequently determine that the time was right to join. The Electoral Commission might then decide to educate people about an institution of which we are a member. We are therefore making law for the future; it is wise to consider circumstances that may arise. Nobody wants the Electoral Commission's neutrality to be compromised. However, we do not want to neuter it.

Sir George Young: I appreciate that the Minister does not want to compromise the commission's impartiality. However, we feel strongly about amendment No. 157, and believe that it is important at this stage not to give the commission the duty that we are considering, and involve it in such a sensitive debate. At the appropriate time, we shall press the amendment to a Division.

Mr. O'Brien: I regret that Conservative Members take that view. The sort of problem that they fear is in no danger of arising. They display their usual hypertensive reaction to the word "Europe".

On amendment No. 159, the Government do not believe that it would be possible for the Electoral Commission to promote proportional representation for election to Parliament under clause 11(3) by giving grants. The right hon. Gentleman knows the implications of Pepper *v.* Hart. We do not believe that the Electoral Commission will be able to give any organisation grants to promote proportional representation for parliamentary elections.

The hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) was right to say that voter education was important. We must ensure neutrality on some of the more sensitive issues. The Government want the Electoral Commission to remain strictly neutral on controversial political issues such as Europe, proportional representation and regional government—many Labour Members feel strongly about the latter. It is better for the Electoral Commission to stay out of the fray on such issues. However, it can inform people about proportional representation in European elections, and regional government in the devolved assemblies, especially if assemblies were to be established in England. There are potential opportunities for the Electoral Commission to perform a useful function.

Sir George Young: I am not a solicitor and I am not as familiar as the Minister with Pepper *v.* Hart. Is he saying that even if Government amendment No. 9 allowed the commission to make a grant to an organisation that could promote alternative electoral systems, which existed elsewhere in the United Kingdom, the commission would not be permitted to do that because of Pepper *v.* Hart?

Mr. O'Brien: No. Such grants could not be made by the Electoral Commission under the Bill. That is our interpretation of the Bill. The case of Pepper *v.* Hart provides that the a Minister's words may be taken into account in interpreting the wording of legislation. I am therefore telling hon. Members about the way in which the Government intend the legislation to operate.

The hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan) believed that if the Electoral Commission participated in educating the public about institutions, it would inevitably become involved in controversy and thus compromise its neutrality. Every weekday in our schools there are teachers who teach politics. They do so in a way that is not party political. It is not biased and it does not involve controversy. The teaching is reasonably easy and it has not produced the compromise of neutrality among teachers that the hon. Gentleman suspects.

8.45 pm

We shall create an Electoral Commission that is composed of the great and the good. Behind it will be a Speaker's Committee, which will oversee it to ensure that its neutrality is not compromised. It cannot be reasonable to think that the members of the Commission would all lack common sense to such a level that they would embark on a dissertation on anything that would get them involved in the issues surrounding a single currency. They would not do so.

Mr. Robathan: I have no idea where the Minister went to school, but in my school I well recall people who taught me politics in a partisan manner. One was a Conservative and one was a Labour supporter. I won a bet with the Labour supporter on the result of the 1970 general election, on which he reneged.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): Typical.

Mr. Robathan: Indeed.

More importantly, the Minister is making my point for me. If the Electoral Commission becomes involved in controversial issues—*[Interruption.]* To help the Minister, I went to Merchant Taylors' school. If the commission becomes involved in controversial issues on which there are two passionately held arguments, it runs the grave risk of being accused of bias. It may not be biased and it may be composed of the great and the good and very good at doing its work, but that will be the accusation. That is when the commission's reputation will be under threat.

Mr. O'Brien: The sort of people that the occupants of the Conservative Front Bench have asked us to put on the commission are those who are above politics, who are of high repute and of independence and neutrality. They are precisely the sort of people who would avoid getting into the compromising situation which the hon. Gentleman is outlining. We are not dealing with real fears about the commission being compromised. I do not think that there is a realistic prospect of its members getting themselves into that silly position. Instead, we are dealing with the internal disputes, views and hypertension of the Conservative party about Europe. If the Opposition divide the House, that is all that we have.

Amendment agreed to.

Amendment proposed: No. 157, in page 8, leave out line 14.—*[Sir George Young.]*

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 110, Noes 308.

Division No. 103] **[8.48 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*	Beresford, Sir Paul
Amess, David	Body, Sir Richard
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael	Boswell, Tim
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*	Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Baldry, Tony	Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia

Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gray, James
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Heseltine, Rt Hon Michael
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ross, William *(E Lond'y)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Tim Collins and
Mr. Nick Gibb.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Ballard, Jackie
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Breed, Colin
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burstow, Paul
Butler, Mrs Christine
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Cann, Jamie
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Jimmy
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*

Martlew, Eric
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheffld Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
Organ, Mrs Diana
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Rendel, David
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tyler, Paul
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Winnick, David
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Robert Ainsworth and Mr. Don Touhig.

Question accordingly negatived.

Amendment made: No. 10, in page 8, line 14, at end insert—

'(1A) For the purposes of subsection (1) any system such as is mentioned in paragraph (a) or (b) of that subsection is pending at a time when arrangements for giving effect to it have been made by any enactment but the arrangements are not yet in force.'.— *[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

Clause 21

OFFICE-HOLDERS TO BE REGISTERED

9 pm

Mr. Stunell: I beg to move amendment No. 177, in page 13, line 12, after "must", insert "either—(a)".

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 178, in page 13, line 16, at end insert—

'; or

(b) where there is an approved federal party structure have overall responsibility for—

(i) the financial affairs of the federal party and for ensuring compliance with the provisions of Parts III to V and VII, and

(ii) notifying the Electoral Commission of the duly authorised treasurer of every other approved constituent part of the party.'.

No. 179, in clause 22, page 14, line 17, at end insert—

'(5A) Where a Party seeks to register an approved federal structure, it must demonstrate to the satisfaction of the Commission that its constitution includes specific provision for two separate bodies with responsibility for the same geographical area, where one of those bodies (the "Federal Party") has powers and duties relating to the whole of one or more of England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, and where each party has

(i) wholly separate functions, powers and duties, and

(ii) no duty either to approve accounts or submit accounts to the other.'.

No. 181, in schedule 8, page 123, line 43, at end add—

'(6) Where a party has an "approved federal structure" any reference to any national spending limits or accounting limits contained in Part V and Part VII Chapter II shall be deemed to be divided into two equal parts, with one part allocated to the "Federal Party" and the second part allocated to the "other approved parties"; each of the other approved parties shall have as its relevant expenditure and accounting limits that proportion of the second part of such limit as the number of parliamentary constituencies within the geographical area covered by that party bears to the total number of constituencies within the United Kingdom.'.

Mr. Stunell: All the amendments are part of a package that is designed to secure a particular possibility for the Liberal Democrats especially, and perhaps for other parties with a federal structure. We make it absolutely clear that there is no intention in any way to water down or debase the Bill as a whole. It is our strongly held view that the Bill needs to be enforced quickly, and that it needs strong provisions to safeguard the public and to ensure that abuses that have arisen on party political funding are eradicated.

I think that the Minister and other Members recognise that the Liberal Democrats have, throughout progress on the Bill, strongly supported the restrictions, the reporting requirements, the introduction of transparency and other provisions. However, we have a particular problem. At each stage at which it has been raised, the Minister has been sympathetic to our cause. We have had a meeting and an exchange of correspondence. I hope that the debate will advance that argument a little further.

Mr. Tipping: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's generous comments. The door is still open. There is a

need to make further progress on the matter. At the very least, I hope to offer him and his colleagues further discussions on the point.

Mr. Stunell: I welcome what the Minister has said. In all honesty, it is very much of a piece with his approach throughout the Committee stage. It is much appreciated.

I do not want to detain the House for too long, but it is such an important issue for us that I want to get it on the record and to say how we see the way ahead. The Bill makes provisions for parties that are structured in the first place as unitary parties—parties that are homogenous in structure throughout the United Kingdom, or at least throughout the constituent parts of the UK, in many cases excluding Northern Ireland.

Within the unitary party structure, the Bill makes provision for separate accounting units. Those might be local constituency parties, or wider groupings of constituencies, regions or states, but, in essence, there is a pyramid structure, with a reporting line going from the lowest level to the top of the pyramid. In terms of the Bill, that is the party treasurer, who takes the ultimate rap if there is any difficulty or any breach of the Bill at any level within the party. As a result of discussions in Committee, an alternative structure is permitted under the Bill: a confederation of different geographical units, each of which is, in essence, a separate party. There might be a party for Scotland, for Wales, for England and perhaps for Northern Ireland.

Both those models are clearly catered for in the Bill, or in the amendments that the Government have spoken of, but the difficulty is that we have a different structure—a federal structure. That is neither widely admired nor widely understood in the House. I understand that clearly, but I am not inviting the House to convert to federalism. I simply invite it to permit us to continue to practise our minority sport in that regard.

Although federalism is a somewhat unusual concept in the House and in the United Kingdom, it is far from being an unusual concept in democracies generally. The most obvious analogue of a federal structure is that provided in the United States constitution, with which some hon. Members will be familiar, at least in outline. The United States has separate state governments and an overarching federal Government, each of whom have different duties and functions, none of which overlap or interlink.

The government of Texas, for example, are not required to report their budget to Washington, to seek approval of or to validate their actions. The state, in performing its own duties and functions, proceeds as an entirely separate and independent entity.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): Does my hon. Friend agree that a characteristic of good law is that it should be fully operable for the foreseeable future? Is it not beyond a mere possibility that, in the next few years, at least one of the other parties might seek to adopt such a structure? At least one of those parties believes in subsidiarity, which is another feature of a good federal structure, whereas the other has promoted devolution across the United Kingdom and might well move in that direction itself.

Mr. Stunell: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments, which are particularly apposite. When I deployed that argument in Committee, the Conservative spokesman, the hon. Member for North Dorset (Mr. Walter), said that the point of view that I was expressing resonated with his Conservative colleagues in Scotland.

To develop the United States analogy a little further—perhaps beyond the point that the House would prefer—the latitude provided to states extends even to whether they should have the death penalty and, if so, how it should be implemented. The United States provides freedom to states to take decisions within the bounds of the powers that they possess. That is the essence of the federal structure. Simultaneously, however, the United States federal Government have duties and powers that apply in every state.

The United States analogy is appropriate in considering the position of the Liberal Democrats. We have a federal party that covers England, Scotland and Wales. Within the federal party, we have state parties for Scotland, for Wales and for England, each of which has an entirely separate range of functions.

Our difficulty with the Bill is that it requires a reporting link from the state parties to the federal party. To fulfil the Bill's requirements as they stand, we would be required to build in reporting links, responsibility links and, ultimately, the power for the central party to overrule an act proposed by a state party. We would have to do that to comply with the Bill, but it would completely undermine the concept of a federal party and of federal government. That is why we have tabled this group of amendments.

When a party's convenience and common practice conflict with a Bill's provisions, it is entirely proper for Liberal Democrats—or our Conservative, Labour or other colleagues—to amend their practice to conform with the legislation. We are not simply seeking an excuse to continue ancient ways that happen to be convenient. When it is necessary to change to secure good practice, we fully accept that we should make that change. I should add that our party federal headquarters has been notifying our constituency and regional parties of precisely what changes they will have to make.

Conversely, however, we ask the House and the Government to give serious consideration to how the Bill might be adapted to permit us to continue our form of federalism. In Committee, I moved amendments designed to achieve that aim. The Minister, and civil servants, quite properly came back to me to say, "That's fine, but it is not guarding against abuse." Perhaps some less scrupulous party might seek to set itself up as a federal party to bypass the sensible provisions for the prevention of abuse.

That brings me to the amendments. Amendments Nos. 177 and 178 outline a process by which a party could register with the Electoral Commission the fact that it intended to have a federal structure and specify the form for that. Amendment No. 179 sets that out in detail. There would be no self-certification. The party would have to establish clearly that it had a bona fide federal structure. The amendment explains the characteristics of that in language that I hope is simple and legally effective.

Perhaps the most important amendment in the group is No. 181, because it defines how we would ensure that there was no advantage in pretending to be a federal party in order to bypass the financial restrictions and limits in the Bill. We have supported all the financial restrictions

[Mr. Stunell]

and limits. Later, I shall support amendments tabled by the hon. Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) which would reduce the limits. We do not have a problem with the existence of the limits.

In discussions outside the Committee, the Minister pointed out the difficulty that our original amendments, at least on the face of it, would have entitled each layer to the full limits applicable to a party. That would effectively double the limits available. We do not want that and neither, understandably, do the Government. That is where amendment No. 181 comes in. It says that if a party has a federal structure approved by the Electoral Commission and in accordance with the other amendments, any applicable national limit should be divided into two equal parts, with one half attributable to the federal party and the other half attributable to the other bodies. In our case, those other bodies do not cover the whole of the United Kingdom, but relate to Scotland and Wales and regions of England. Their share of the second half would be in proportion to the number of constituencies within them.

Mr. Grieve: Do I take it that, under the system that the hon. Gentleman is putting forward, there could be no transfer of surplus funds from one part of the federation to another? If one area did not use up to its limit, would the other area be unable to benefit?

Mr. Stunell: As the amendments are drafted and as the rest of the Bill stands, it would be proper for a party to contribute to another party, as it would be, for instance, for a constituency party with the unitary construction permitted by the Bill to contribute to a national campaign, or vice versa. Nobody can trespass the limits that are set for their level. If they do, they will carry the can for that liability, rather than it transferring to a different level.

I fully accept that there may be some more drafting work to be done on our amendments, that there may be some avenues that I have failed to explore or loopholes that may appear. Our amendments are designed to take forward the discussion that we had in Committee and address the concerns and issues that the Minister and his civil servants brought to our attention. I hope that during this debate and the subsequent discussion that the Minister has generously offered, we can advance the argument a little further.

We are keen for the Bill to be enacted. We do not want to be the grit in the machine. We regret that we have introduced some complexities that the Minister probably could do without, but we consider this to be matter of principle. It has considerable ideological significance and real political importance, especially for our colleagues in Scotland, who operated in a much looser political framework in the past. We are happy that that framework has been drawn into the federal structure, and we should be most reluctant to see that structure broken now.

9.15 pm

Mr. Grieve: I shall not detain the House, save to say that the official Opposition do not want to stand in the way of the Liberal Democrat party's constitutional niceties. It would be churlish of us to object if it suited those niceties to require some alteration to this part of the Bill.

I remain uneasy, however, and my anxieties do not find a clear answer in the Bill. I intervened on the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) to suggest that the amendment could be to the manifest disadvantage of his party, or of any federal party. I assumed that it would mean that the usual flow of funds during a campaign to those areas thought to need more funds could not cross the federation's internal boundaries. The hon. Gentleman then persuaded me that the Bill provides for the transfer of gifts between political parties.

That illustrates the complexities involved in this matter. Moreover, I know that the Liberal Democrat party has links with the Alliance party in Northern Ireland. Although we shall not discuss it tonight, the question of Northern Ireland—and how to deal with it—arises. That problem has caused great concern to hon. Members of all parties.

For that reason, I shall listen very carefully to the Minister's response. Adjustments without downsides should always be made, but I am still not sure how the amendment squares with some of the other provisions—even though I have read the Bill 150 times.

Mr. Syms: I started off being sympathetic to the amendment, but then began to wonder—perhaps because my knowledge of the constitution of the Liberal Democrat party is lacking. However, although I can understand the amendment's application to Scotland, Wales and England, I cannot understand how the regions could be separated out. My hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) was worried about how money could be ring-fenced, and I share his disquiet.

I presume that the Liberal Democrats would register as one party under the Bill. Some line of authority must run through even a federal political party. If a party registers as a federal party, will it have to register as one party, or several?

Mr. Stunell: We would register as one political party, within a federal structure. For example, the United States is one country, but each state is separate. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman and I could explore the point in more detail over a cup of coffee in the Members' Tea Room.

Mr. Syms: The United States is an interesting example, but this country remains a basically unitary state, with the exception of Scotland.

Mr. Stunell: I apologise to the hon. Gentleman for intervening again so soon, but I want to draw a clear distinction between country and political party. The political party's structure is a matter for its internal organisation and its views. A party can have a federal structure in a unitary country, if it so wishes, and the Liberal Democrat party does so wish.

Mr. Syms: I understand the hon. Gentleman's point. I understand that the Liberal Democrats are organised in the way in which they would like to organise the state. It is a perfectly respectable point of view, but unfortunately we are not organised in that particular fashion.

I think that, in so far as it is possible to accommodate the needs of a responsible and major political party, we should try to do so. However, I think that this may be one of those instances in which there are issues under the

surface—issues that may not be entirely obvious—and that, especially given the regional structure in England, it will be difficult to incorporate the proposal in the Bill. I shall, however, be interested to hear the Minister's view.

Mr. Tipping: The hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) said that there had been quite a dialogue about this issue—and it is a difficult issue, as was pointed out by the hon. Member for Poole (Mr. Syms), who is new to our discussions on the subject.

The hon. Member for Hazel Grove raised the matter in Committee, and we had a helpful meeting involving Liberal party officials on 27 January. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for writing to me last week, on 7 March, describing the way forward as he saw it. Let me add, somewhat mischievously, that I think his letter took longer to write than we had anticipated—but no doubt that reflects the real difficulties that exist. In any event, the hon. Gentleman has taken the opportunity to explain the problem tonight. It is not just a Liberal Democrats issue; there have been representations from the Green party.

Mr. Grieve: Once a proposal of this kind was enshrined in law, it would surely be open to parties to organise on a village basis, and to register several thousand parties in a federation. It is a theoretical possibility, but it must be a possibility.

Mr. Tipping: I shall deal with the Government's view of the amendments shortly, but it would clearly be possible to devolve to a very low level. There are different ideas between and within parties about the extent to which it would be possible to devolve. I am quite radical: for instance, I believe strongly in home rule for Hucknall and for north Nottinghamshire.

I want to be positive and helpful. The hon. Member for Hazel Grove spoke of dialogue and the need to make progress, and I am keen to do that, but I think that the amendments involve fundamental problems, not least the problem of what

an approved federal party structure

means. Presumably it means a structure that the Electoral Commission has agreed, but the amendments do not provide a framework to help the commission to decide what such a structure might be.

I should also point out—as, indeed, did the hon. Gentleman—that parties will need to adapt to meet the new requirements. The hon. Gentleman acknowledged that his party was considering that, and that it, along with the other parties, would have to make changes. Let me repeat that I am trying to be helpful. I note that the hon. Gentleman's party has made changes to its "federal structure" to meet the provisions of the Registration of Political Parties Act 1998, and that, although it is a "federal" party, there is an official in the party who signs the forms for candidates throughout the United Kingdom. That shows how parties can change to meet the requirements of new legislation.

The scale of the problem involved in the registration of political parties, however, pales into insignificance when we deal with financial matters. It is important that we look at how we change the parties ourselves and acknowledge that federal parties are important for our political structure. Given the significance of the Liberal Democrat party and the Green party, it is important to find a solution.

The hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) suggested that the issue had ramifications for Northern Ireland. The Government have not been in a position to bring forward amendments on separate registration in Northern Ireland because we need to crack this problem first. This problem spills over into Northern Ireland.

I should like the opportunity to examine further the proposals put before the House by the hon. Member for Hazel Grove and which he submitted last week. Secondly, I would like to arrange a meeting between Home Office and Liberal Democrat officials. Following that, I should like to arrange a more political meeting involving the hon. Gentleman and other colleagues to try and find a way forward.

This is a difficult issue. I assure the hon. Gentleman that we are keen to find a solution. It is important that the Liberal Democrats, the Green party and other parties are not disadvantaged. We will work with him to take this matter forward. I would be pleased if I could guarantee to find a solution, but I cannot. However, I guarantee that over the next few weeks we will work with him and his colleagues to find a solution to what is a very important issue for the Liberal Democrat party. With that assurance, I hope that the hon. Gentleman will feel able to withdraw the amendment.

Mr. Stunell: I thank the Minister, and other right hon. and hon. Members who have contributed to the debate. The Minister is right to say that it took some time for us to formulate an appropriate response following the meeting. I am sorry if that caused increased difficulties for him and his officials. We now have, we hope, the basis of a good development of ideas and proposals for the Bill.

The hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) referred to 1,000 village parties. I shall look carefully at my amendment, because it did not specifically mention them.

Mr. Grieve: I appreciate that that was not what the hon. Gentleman was proposing for his own party, and that the structures were likely to be based on the various national component parts of the United Kingdom or on regions. I simply made that point to illustrate how small the groups could be under his amendment.

Mr. Stunell: I understand the hon. Gentleman's point. It is an interesting one, which further discussion and research could explore to the full.

Amendment No. 179 addresses the hon. Gentleman's point to some extent, and begins to address the Minister's point about what is an approved federal structure. It cannot be self-defining; it has to be approved. The wording of the amendment may be insufficient to specify what it should be. At its limit, it could affect an individual constituency party, although the practical difficulties of that would defy even the Liberal Democrats. The amendment attempts to address the point, and I hope that further discussion may move us forward.

9.30 pm

The Minister made the perfectly fair point that the Liberal Democrats have one person reporting on political party registration. That turned out not to be a terribly challenging point; the question was whether we could have a bird as a logo, a point not of the essence when it

[Mr. Stunell]

comes to whether we should have to report back on spending in future on elections or on political activity at any other time, which would entirely dismantle our federal structure. The Minister understands that point; a step designed to offer the minimum trouble for the approval of a bird as a logo is not quite the same thing.

I welcome the fact that the Minister said that he would take time to consider our proposals and that he wants meetings between officials and political meetings. One reason for delay is that our elected officials have changed, which has made the job more complex. However, we welcome what he said. I wanted to put on the record an issue important to us, but our hearts remain strongly with the Bill, with which we want full compliance. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 28

PARTY CEASING TO BE REGISTERED

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I beg to move amendment No. 11, in page 17, line 27, leave out subsection (4) and insert—

'(4) However, until the end of the financial year of the party which follows that in which its entry is removed from the register—

(a) the Commission shall, when considering applications made by other parties under this Part, treat the entry as if it were still contained in the register, and

(b) the requirements of Parts III and IV shall continue to apply to the party as if it were still registered.'.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss Government amendment No. 127.

Mr. O'Brien: The purpose of amendment No. 11 is to deal with phoenix parties. As the hon. Member for North Dorset (Mr. Walter) pointed out in Standing Committee, it is possible that, when a party becomes defunct and ceases to be registered with the Electoral Commission, others—possibly supporters of the extinct party—may wish to use its name. In the long run, there is no reason why defunct parties should enjoy any protection. However, in the short term, the immediate assumption of a defunct party's name by a different political group—no matter how similar its views—is likely to mislead voters.

In addition, clause 28 already requires that, where a party's entry is removed from the register, it will be required to continue to comply with the requirements of parts III and IV until the end of the financial year following that in which its entry was removed. For as long as the party continues to be subject to the supervision of the commission, there should not be another party making use of its name.

Amendment No. 11 is intended to afford de-registered parties some continued protection against the use, or misuse, of their names. The amendment is consistent with an existing provision of the Registration of Political Parties Act 1998: under section 8, the registrar must, in considering applications by other political parties for registration, treat a de-registered party as being registered for a specified period, which is set at three months from the date at which the party's entry is removed from the registers. The Bill proposes that the relevant period should be the period during which the de-registered party remains under a duty to continue to comply with the requirements of parts III and IV.

Amendment No. 127 amends the parliamentary election rules, which are set out in schedule 1 to the Representation of the People Act 1983. Its effect would be to require returning officers to send a copy of a statement to the persons nominated to the Electoral Commission. Returning officers would also need to forward to the commission a copy of any certificate issued by the nominating officer of a registered party authorising a candidate to stand in that party's name.

Under schedule 8(3) of the Bill, a party receives an expenditure allowance of £30,000 for each constituency contested. The overall expenditure limit for a party will therefore depend on the number of candidates it stands in an election. The amendment will ensure that the Electoral Commission has the information necessary to make that calculation. I commend both amendments to the House.

Mr. Grieve: I am grateful to the Minister for having taken on board the points made in Committee by my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Mr. Walter). I have one query on amendment No. 11. I realise that it prevents other political parties from making use of the name and identity of a party during the period in which the original party still has responsibilities. The Minister may be able to clarify easily the one point that is not clear to me: what would happen if a party had expressed a desire to de-register, part of that period had elapsed but, before it was completed, the party announced that it wanted to revive itself at the end of the period? At that point, if other individuals were competing with the party for registration in that name, would the party enjoy any preference?

I should be grateful if the Minister would consider that matter. One can foresee disputes in which a party that had previously allowed its registration to lapse would believe that it was grossly unfair that it could not revive itself, if its fortunes and circumstances had changed.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The commission will have to consider any applications. It is a material fact that the party that wanted to re-establish itself would be the same party that had previously been registered. That would seem to be an issue of which the commission would be entitled to take cognisance in reaching a decision. If that became a subject of controversy, the commission would have to determine how it wanted to proceed.

I shall consider the point made by the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) and shall examine whether there might be a reason for tabling an amendment in another place. The amendment will probably cover the matter, but I shall consider it in greater detail and if we need to make a change, I shall write to the hon. Gentleman.

Amendment agreed to.

Clause 37

ANNUAL STATEMENTS OF ACCOUNTS

Mr. Tipping: I beg to move amendment No. 12, in page 22, line 13, leave out "£1,000" and insert "£5,000".

Madam Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss Government amendments Nos. 13, 14 and 72 to 79.

Mr. Tipping: Clause 37 allows the Electoral Commission to prescribe different requirements, depending on the level of

their income or expenditure, as to the form and content of the annual statement of accounts prepared by registered parties and their accounting units. Small parties should be subject to a light touch, whereas larger parties with a greater income should be dealt with more thoughtfully and effectively.

As originally drafted, the Bill set out three bands of income or expenditure: the first was up to £1,000; the second was £1,000 to £250,000; and the third was £250,000 or more. In Committee, the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) argued that those bands were not appropriate and that, in effect, there should be four bands. After reflecting on the matter, we decided not to accept the solution offered by the hon. Gentleman. Amendments Nos. 12 and 13 would introduce three bands that would pitch the cut-off point between the first and second band at £5,000 rather than £1,000. As a result, the intermediate band will be more clearly focused on parties and accounting units that enjoy relatively significant rates of income and expenditure, and will extend the scope for applying a lighter touch to organisations that do not.

Amendments Nos. 73 and 76 pick up on an issue that was discussed in Committee, and will make the Bill compliant with the electronic age. They will ensure that any information received by the Electoral Commission will be in an appropriate form. We have all had the experience of computers that do not talk to one another, or of e-mails that do not arrive in the proper form. The amendments give the commission powers to ask for computer records in a legible form.

Amendment No. 73, which inserts new subsection (3A) into clause 134, also enables a person appointed by the commission to check the operation of any computer as a guard against fraud. I may well be asked if there are precedents on this. There are similar precedents in regulations on the Gaming Board of Great Britain.

Amendments Nos. 14 and 72 are also on the theme of access to records. In both cases, they make self-explanatory changes to ensure consistency with like provisions elsewhere in the Bill.

Amendments Nos. 74, 75, 77 and 78 extend the Electoral Commission's supervisory powers in clause 134 to candidates at elections and the agents of such candidates. Clause 133 already provides that one of the functions of the Electoral Commission is to monitor compliance with the existing controls on candidates' election expenses. The commission cannot undertake that role effectively without appropriate powers to inspect candidates' financial records and to demand explanations relating to what the commission may find in those records. These amendments will confer such powers on the commission.

I remind the House that the Neill committee argued, in paragraph 11.23, that

> the Electoral Commission should have the power to investigate allegations or suspicions that the existing candidate spending limits have been breached.

It is important to point out that the Electoral Commission will investigate these matters, but if criminal proceedings are to be taken, that is a matter for the police and the Crown Prosecution Service.

That leads me to amendment No. 79, which merely tidies up the definition of a supervised organisation in clause 134(8) to make it clear that the supervisory powers in that clause are exercisable in respect of the central organisations of a party as well as its accounting units.

As has so often been the case during the Bill's passage, these amendments were suggested in other forms in Committee, and I am delighted that the Government have been able to respond, I think appropriately.

Mr. Grieve: I shall be brief. I welcome the amendments and am grateful to the Minister for having taken note of the arguments that were made in Committee. The earlier amendments in the group are especially important. The change from £1,000 to £5,000 offers much greater scope and flexibility for very small parties. If the Bill had remained unamended, the second bracket would have extended up to quite substantial levels of party income and expenditure. We regarded that as undesirable.

This is another example of some very sensible work taking place in Committee. I am grateful to the Minister for having listened carefully and improving the Bill substantially as a result.

Mr. Stunell: I largely echo the points that the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) has made. I seek reassurance from the Minister on only one aspect. The Government have changed the limits, but not in the way that we proposed in Committee. A band of income and expenditure by accounting units between £1,000 and £5,000 has been shifted down a gear, if I may put it that way, but the guidance that the Electoral Commission will publish in relation to the three bands is not yet known to us. The Electoral Commission, looking at that, might decide to introduce for the lowest band proposals that were suitable for an organisation spending £4,900, thereby making things more complex for those spending less than £1,000.

Mr. Tipping: In Committee, and again tonight, the hon. Gentleman has emphasised the nature of Mrs. Brown in his constituency, who needs a light touch on these matters. In Committee, and tonight, I have given an assurance that the light touch will apply in the nought to £5,000 band.

Mr. Stunell: I thank the Minister for his reply. Perhaps I should make it clear that Mrs. Brown is the hypothetical treasurer of a very small branch of the Liberal Democrats.

Mr. Evans: They are all small.

9.45 pm

Mr. Stunell: Voices suggest that my example is not so hypothetical. Certainly the branch's accounts are small.

In the light of the Minister's assurance—I might return to it on another occasion for it to be repeated in even stronger form—I welcome the amendments. They offer a major reassurance. As I said in Committee, we face a problem that is parallel to the one facing school governing bodies. We are imposing more complex and onerous procedures on people who are, in essence, volunteers and who do things out of the goodness of their hearts. If we make things too difficult for them, they will stop and that will not benefit politics in this country. I welcome the Minister's assurances.

Amendment agreed to.

Amendment made: No. 13, in page 22, line 14, leave out "£1,000" and insert "£5,000".—*[Mr. Tipping.]*

Clause 39

SUPPLEMENTARY PROVISIONS ABOUT AUDITORS

Amendment made: No. 14, in page 23, line 29, after "all", insert "reasonable".—*[Mr. Tipping.]*

Clause 45

DONATIONS FOR PURPOSES OF PART IV

Mr. Evans: I beg to move amendment No. 156, in page 27, leave out line 13.

I do not know what Mrs. Brown would think of this amendment.

Mr. Stunell: I can tell the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Evans: I wait with bated breath.

The amendment deals with the provisions in clause 45 about sponsorship. Clause 45(2)(a) to (e) are fairly straightforward and deal with gifts of property and money to a party, subscriptions, fees, gifts in kind and money lent to a party. Those provisions are clearly defined.

However, it is in clause 45(2)(e) that the Government—and not just the Government—are in a stew. Lord Neill has been unclear as to what constitutes sponsorship of a party. Pepper *v.* Hart was mentioned earlier, and I hope that the Government will take this opportunity to tell us clearly what constitutes sponsorship of a political party.

As I said, the clause contains clear and unclear areas, and it is the grey areas that we should attempt to clarify. The Government have said that, under the Bill, they will not give tax concessions to people making small contributions to political parties, but all the political parties are looking for smaller donations from a wider variety of sources. That is healthier for democracy, so the provisions for sponsorship should be clarified.

I do not believe that the Government intend to stop the Motorsport Industry Association from asking Members to drive motor racing cars for charity. However, hon. Members have to approach businesses in our constituencies to raise funds and, last year, the limit on that was £1,000. Goodness knows what it will be this year. Such approaches do not benefit the political parties as such, but there is a relationship between firms in the constituencies and individual Members of Parliament. I assume that the Government have no intention of preventing such relationships.

The grey area is demonstrated by a letter of 17 January 2000 from the Home Secretary to Lord Neill. The Home Secretary asks for a clearer definition and refers to the fact that my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) is looking for clarification about the treatment of exhibition stands at party conferences. That is an issue of increasing interest to all political parties, because such stands provide a tremendous opportunity for firms to meet party representatives, councillors, Members of Parliament, Ministers and members of Her Majesty's Opposition. I cannot see any problem with that.

The Home Secretary goes on to say in his letter that he is

> inclined to think that we ought to amend the Bill so as to clarify the matter

of exhibition stands. There is also the point about whether the stands are from a permissible source, which could affect exhibitions by the Government of Gibraltar and charities. There would perhaps be no need for shareholder approval for those stands to be made available at party conferences.

The Home Secretary goes on to talk about the possibility that sponsorship from companies in the range of £20,000 to £40,000 a year would not need shareholder approval. Lord Neill is not so keen on that abstention, and says that over several years that could amount to a large sum.

On stands, Lord Neill says to the Home Secretary that this

> broad sub-set of "donation" would exclude those examples of transactions that you describe in your letter as "plainly of a purely commercial character" and exhibition stands provided at or below a commercial rate.

Lord Neill also mentions dinners where people are asked to pay large amounts of money. I do not know about other hon. Members, but when I am asked to pay about £150 to go to a dinner, I do not expect to get £150-worth of food—indeed, some of us would be hard put to eat £150-worth of food—so I expect that some of the money will be a donation to the cause concerned. In the United States it is common to have dinners that cost $1,000, $2,000 or even $5,000 a plate, where diners can listen to the President or other senior politicians. That is an interesting issue that needs to be considered.

What constitutes a commercial rate? That is an important point. If a political party holds a big dinner, and companies buy tables at, perhaps, £500 per head, one aspect of whether that is a commercial rate is whether the contributions need shareholder approval. Brochures containing advertisements may be available at the tables, and the menu card may be sponsored. The dinner itself or individual courses may be subsidised or sponsored by a particular company. What is a commercial rate for such activity? I should like the Minister to address that question.

At some of the dinners that I have been privileged to attend over the past few years, Lord Archer and several other people have been feted for doing auctions. That poses another problem about what is commercial, and it is a serious point. I have been at functions where a painting has been made available or someone has been commissioned to do a painting if a guest bids a sufficient sum. The painting itself may be worth £10,000 and the winning bid may be about £15,000. Does the fact that someone has offered a painting worth £10,000 count as one donation, and the fact that someone has paid £15,000 for it count as another donation, so that donations of £25,000 have been made for the same item?

Mr. Stunell: Will the hon. Gentleman turn his mind to a situation that sometimes faces the Liberal Democrats: the bid is for only £5,000?

Mr. Evans: And that is for the entire political party! I would say that the person had been had.

Let us take another example of tickets. I was at a dinner the other day where four tickets for the England-Wales rugby game were on offer. Their face value was about £160, but much more would be bid for such scarce tickets. Indeed, ordinary punters find it difficult to get hold of them.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Will my hon. Friend explain how he manages to retain his youthful figure while going to all these dinners?

Mr. Evans: I am sponsored by Whitbread plc—it is declared in the Register of Members' Interests—which allows me regularly to use its gym at County Hall. I am sure that my right hon. Friend would be more than welcome to join me in one or two sessions.

We need clarification of sponsorship in respect of tickets for Wimbledon or other sporting occasions—the value often vastly exceeds the face value—especially when companies have bought them. Indeed, we do not know whether it has paid over the odds in order to get hold of such tickets.

At one Labour party conference, a famous leading supermarket sponsored the ribbons that held passes that Labour representatives and delegates wore around their necks. We do not know how much the supermarket paid for the privilege.

Companies often sponsor forums at conferences. I remember one a couple of years ago that was sponsored by Sky, which had something to do with sport—I believe that it held such a forum at every party conference—at which food was available. Such sponsorship must be taken into account.

Will the Minister say something about a raffle in which somebody buys many tickets? For a valuable first prize, somebody might buy a lot of tickets as a way of making a donation and circumventing some of the sensible rules and regulations proposed. We need clarification. We have tabled the amendment not to prohibit sponsorship but to clarify matters on which Lord Neill has proved inadequate. Such a grey area is enormously difficult; I look forward to the Minister's response.

Mr. Stunell: The Committee discussed this matter on several occasions; it concerns a series of anomalies and paradoxes. There is the question of commercial value, whether scarcity should be taken into account—the auction point—and whether there could be some objective assessment.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce) and I moved an amendment proposing that the Electoral Commission set guidelines that could be quoted as, say, alibis for valuations submitted by parties—in the absence of the availability of anything else. The Minister did not seem inclined to accept the proposal, but in the light of further expositions of the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans), perhaps he will bear in mind the fact that the Bill does not address significant grey areas.

Some of the grey areas are amusing. For example, what happens if bids at auction are lower than the market value for the prize? That might be unheard of in Conservative circles, but I assure hon. Members that it is not in others. Can we have a discount? Such issues appear trivial, but we are working in the context of quite small voluntary organisations. We are not speaking of high-powered accountants and solicitors, and legal eagles working out all the rules.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

It being Ten o'clock, the debate stood adjourned.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 15 (Exempted business),

That, at this day's sitting, the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill may be proceeded with, though opposed, until any hour.—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

Question agreed to.

Question again proposed, That the amendment be made.

Mr. Stunell: The examples provided in Committee can be seen in the Committee record. The Minister was present and is familiar with them. It is a little disappointing not to see at this stage an amendment reflecting that discussion. Perhaps the Minister will tell us how the problem is to be tackled and give us some advice about the way ahead.

I am not persuaded by the amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Ribble Valley, which he said was largely exploratory. We explored the issue twice in Committee and left Ministers baffled. It has been raised again, and I understand the difficulties, but progress needs to be made.

Mr. Syms: I echo the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans). There are many problems—for example, when someone with a professional background works as a volunteer for a political party and uses that professional background to give the party a valuation, legal advice, a bookie's advice or whatever it may be.

My hon. Friend mentioned the problem of party conferences, especially the stalls at party conferences. Companies sometimes use them for advertising because they know that many members of the press are there, but it is debatable whether that is of great benefit to the party, or whether a service is being provided. Guidance is required.

We all know that national organisations such as newspapers sponsor debates and events at party conferences. There may be a spin-off for the media, rather than for the political party. All that needs to be clarified.

Tickets for events are another example. If a company takes a table, should that be declared, and will the political party necessarily know who buys tickets for events? Real difficulties arise in the management of such events. If a ball is arranged to which there are 1,000 tickets, and a company buys 20 tickets in the name of Mr. Jones, who happens to work for Shell, how does one know whether that should be declared?

We need guidelines. Everyone wants to make the measure work, but we all want to ensure that everyone is operating the same system. That is the point that the Opposition are making.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We have had a useful debate, which highlighted a difficult area. The view of the Neill committee was clear and firm. It recommended that the definition of a donation should include sponsorship. The Bill gives effect directly to that recommendation.

[Mr. Mike O'Brien]

However, the debate has brought out a number of issues on which hon. Members are unclear and which merit further dialogue with the Neill committee.

Mr. Grieve: I am grateful to the Minister. It is clear from the Neill report that the committee thinks that sponsorship should be part of the total picture, but did the committee understand what sponsorship was?

Mr. O'Brien: We have received assurances from the Neill committee that it did understand that. The right hon. Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor), who spoke earlier in the debate, was a member of the committee, and there were representatives on the committee from other political parties, including the Government party, so there were committee members with experience of such matters.

It is not difficult to understand the reasons for the committee's recommendation. The committee took the view that even if the motive for providing sponsorship is different in a company's eyes from the motive for making a simple donation, the effect on the receiving political party's finances is not substantially different.

It is difficult to draw a clear line legally between sponsorship and a simple donation. That is part of the problem. It would not take a great deal of imagination to make a substantial donation in the form of sponsorship. If there is a boundary, it lies not between sponsorship and a donation, but between sponsorship and purely commercial activity. We raised that matter in the White Paper that was published last July and, more recently, in a letter that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary sent to Lord Neill. A copy of that letter and Lord Neill's reply are in the Library.

The Government are sympathetic to the proposition that the cost of renting stands, especially at party conferences, should not be regarded as a form of sponsorship or donation. Lord Neill's reply to the Home Secretary's letter suggests a method of providing more certainty about what constitutes a donation: for example, payments for dinner plates at premium prices; and what does not: for example payment for an advertisement at commercial rates. We are closely considering that further advice from the Neill committee, with a view to introducing a clarifying amendment in another place.

However, the hon. Members for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) and for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) made pertinent points. Despite Lord Neill's reply, some issues require further clarification. As the hon. Member for Hazel Grove pointed out, political parties are often organised by part-time volunteers. They need clarity, especially if they are at risk of breaking a law that is not sufficiently clear. The implementation of the law also needs to be practical.

We also believed it right to consult Lord Neill on the suggestion that companies might be allowed to spend a de minimis amount on sponsorship without shareholder consent. That matter properly belongs under part IX. Clearly, that idea does not find favour with the Neill committee.

We believe that it is not necessary to define sponsorship, and that any attempt to define it would be more likely to create confusion and, possibly, loopholes than it would greater certainty. As clause 45 stands, a party would do well to regard any money passed to it—other than payment for goods or services provided on a commercial basis—as a donation. That is the position under the Bill, and the result that the Neill committee intended. I can understand the logic of that; it is straightforward.

We have yet to be convinced of the necessity of removing paragraph (f) of clause 45(2). We do not support the amendment. However, we are listening, and we are anxious to have further dialogue with other parties. Parties need to discuss the issue and ascertain what would happen about the painting or the rugby or Wimbledon tickets that were mentioned. As the Bill stands, and according to the Neill committee's view, they are donations, and would have to be declared. Consequences would flow from that.

We are thus providing for a complex accounting system, which political parties would have to undertake. Holding appropriate discussions, taking a view and discussing it with the Neill committee might be a way forward, but that is for another time. In view of the points that I have made, I hope that the hon. Member for Ribble Valley will withdraw the amendment, which he described as a probing amendment.

Mr. Evans: All hon. Members acknowledge that there is a problem and a grey area. I suspect that there will always be grey areas, despite our attempts to define them clearly. Amendment No. 156 would remove paragraph (f) of clause 45(2). As the Minister knows, we did not intend to do that; we simply wanted clarification. Members of political parties will have to try and work through the muddle as best we can. Some grey areas will remain even after that.

We should ensure that there is a proper mechanism so that if a problem arises about a grey area at the time of the party conferences, parties may approach the Electoral Commission for an adjudication. However, we might not want to wait two or three months for that adjudication because companies may want immediate answers before deciding whether to exhibit or organise other functions at our conferences.

I welcome what the Minister said, but understand that the matter has been discussed a number of times as the Bill has progressed through the House. I hope that we can make speedier progress before it becomes law.

I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 48

PERMISSIBLE DONORS

Mr. Linton: I beg to move amendment No. 162, in page 29, line 28, at end add—

'(g) an individual who is by reason only of his age incapable of being included in any register of electors and is ordinarily resident in the UK.'.

Madam Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss amendment No. 163, in page 30, line 30, at end add—

'(10) No donation by an individual under subsection (2) (a) above may exceed £250,000 in any financial year.'.

Mr. Linton: Amendment No. 162 would allow young people aged under 18 to give money to political parties.

Hon. Members may be surprised to know that the Bill forbids that. The list of permissible donors says that they have to be registered voters and clearly people cannot become registered voters until they reach their 18th birthday. Clause 61 disregards donations of less than £200. That is usually referred to as the de minimis rule from, I believe, the Latin de minimis non curat lex, which means something like, "The law does not concern itself with trivialities". However, we should be careful here. Calling the measure the de minimis rule does not suggest that donations by under-18s are legal, but merely that they are disregardable. Similarly, clause 61 does not say that donations under £200 are permissible, but simply that they may be disregarded.

The minimum age for joining the Labour party is 15 and I look to Members from other parties to tell me the minimum age for joining the Young Liberal Democrats or the Young Conservatives.

Mr. Forth: Thirty-seven.

Mr. Linton: That is the maximum age, I think. Even the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) has left the Young Conservatives by now, in years if not in spirit.

All three main parties and other parties represented here—Plaid Cymru, I dare say—have youth movements. This is not a trivial point and it is insulting to young people that they should be included in the Bill only as an afterthought. Youth movements should be one of the first thoughts of political parties because there is enough apathy among young people already without giving under-18s who choose to join a political party the feeling that they are not even considered important enough to be declared permissible donors.

I am not suggesting that young people should be asked for a fee of more than £200 a year to join a political party, but we should make donations from under-18s permissible, along with those from over-18s. Under-18s may want to donate more than £200 and it is not the Bill's function to make that illegal. I have made that point to my hon. Friends, who said that it is of no consequence, but it is a complete oversight that no one has realised, until this point, that the Bill does not allow such donations. I have two daughters who joined the Labour party as teenagers and I would like to protect the interests of all young people who want to join political parties. It is excellent for them to show interest in the political arena at that age and I hope that my hon. Friends will agree to the amendment simply to clarify the status of young people.

Amendment No. 163 proposes an upper limit on permissible donations from an individual. I do not deny that £250,000 is an arbitrary figure, but any figure will be called arbitrary. The Liberal Democrats proposed £50,000 in their evidence to the Neill committee. I think that that is a bit low. I dare say that donations of £50,000 or £100,000 are all too infrequent, but they are unlikely to buy favours from a Government. We run the risk of creating that perception if we allow individual donations of more than £250,000 or £500,000. As a donations limit, £250,000 is a high figure.

10.15 pm

In Quebec, parties are legally not allowed to accept donations of more than $3,000, which is about £1,500. In the United States, individuals cannot give more than £17,000 in total, which is $25,000. It is true that there are currently proposals in the US to increase that figure, but only to $50,000, which is nowhere near the figure proposed in the amendment. I do not know whether the hon. Member for Beaconsfield can give me the figure, but there is certainly a donation limit in France as well. The amendment proposes a much higher limit, because we should allow as much freedom as possible and go for the mischief in the system—the individual £1 million donations.

In its evidence to the Neill committee, the Labour party left the issue of donations limits open. It said:

> The Labour Party invites the committee to examine the question of contribution limits and assess their implications.

The Neill report came out against donations limits for a number of reasons. It felt that disclosure of donations above £5,000 would continue the arms race between the main parties. I find that naive if not disingenuous, because many countries have disclosure—the United States has had disclosure of donations above $100 for the past 25 years—but that has not stopped people making donations: it has merely made them more blatant. Anyone who knows anything about the United States political system will know what I mean.

It is argued that if there were a limit on donations, it would be easy to evade it by spreading resources among friends, setting up subsidiary companies and using other such easy devices. The Bill makes it illegal to spread donations among friends or even among members of the same family. In Quebec, big companies used to be able to get round the donations limit of $3,000 by handing out money to a group of executives who would each write a personal cheque for $3,000—typically at a Liberal party lobster dinner or some such event.

Mr. Stunell: The hon. Gentleman is kidding.

Mr. Linton: Indeed, yes. The Liberal party in Canada is much richer than the Liberal Democrats in this country. The electoral commission in Quebec was well up to plugging those gaps when they appeared. There will always be attempts at evasion, as with any taxation system, but it is perfectly possible to impose a donations limit and to make it stick.

A third argument that has been used is that the proposals on tax relief, which the House discussed earlier, would encourage parties to switch from a few big donations to a large number of small ones. The Neill committee said that

> it is therefore unnecessary to introduce a new ban to produce the same result.

The Neill committee regarded its proposal for tax relief on political donations as a substitute for an upper limit on individual donations. As the House has rejected the proposals for tax relief, the logical other side of that coin is to entertain the arguments for an upper limit on individual donations. That would be in keeping with the logic that the Neill committee used.

The argument against a donations limit, which is in the Neill committee report, is that individuals should have the freedom to contribute to political parties, and parties should be free to compete for donations. We have seen what happens when parties compete for big donations. I only have to mention Asil Nadir, John Latsis, Li Ka-shing,

[Mr. Linton]

C.K. Ma and, indeed, Bernie Ecclestone. Before the election, Labour had no choice but to try to match Tory spending by seeking large donations. Now we are in government and introducing a Bill on the subject. Not only Labour Members but the whole House have a chance to close that door for ever and to ban funding of political parties in this country by individual millionaires.

The amendment deals simply with individual donations because I do not think that corporate donations of more than £1 million from, for example, trade unions or companies are necessarily a problem. It is individual donations that render parties vulnerable to corruption or to the perception of corruption. No matter how well intentioned, a party that relies on individual £1 million donations will always feel beholden to the millionaire donor, will always feel nervous of offending that person, and will always feel anxious not to jeopardise the possibility of another donation.

After the last election, many people said, "Thank goodness. Never again will we see political parties funded in that way." Many of the electorate felt that, with the election, we were turning a new leaf and that there would be a new chapter in which such funding would never need to occur again. Even at this late hour, I hope that my right hon. and hon. Friends will see that funding is the crux of the Bill and that, if we do not close that door, we will not have completed the task that we have set ourselves in the Bill. It is a question not just of the size of donations, but of the vulnerability of political parties.

Mr. Walter: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Linton: No, I am just finishing my remarks. I am sorry.

It is a question of the perception in the public's mind of corruption. The Bill should deal with those issues.

Mr. Grieve: The hon. Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) has raised two interesting amendments, although I am slightly more interested in, and possibly sympathetic to, one than the other. Perhaps I can start with the one with which I have some sympathy, albeit that I do not think that it necessarily goes as far as he would wish: amendment No. 162.

There is no doubt that the hon. Gentleman has identified what might potentially be a problem with the Bill. Notwithstanding the comment by my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) about the minimum age, in practice, of membership of the Young Conservatives, I believe that we admit persons over the age of 15 to membership of the party. They would be incapable of making a donation of more than £200.

The hon. Gentleman makes a good point—whether a donation of under £200 from an impermissible donor is ipso facto permissible. I shall be interested to hear the Minister's comments about that. In reality, it never has to be declared, so it would never be identified, but the hon. Member for Battersea certainly has a point. If the Bill criminalises the acceptance of a donation of £5 from a 16-year-old for his annual membership of the Conservative party, that will pose a problem.

Mr. Tipping *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Grieve: I see the Minister shaking his head, approving of my view that that is not what the Bill does. In those circumstances, I am disinclined to go along with the amendment.

One point emerged during consideration of the Bill in Committee. The Government were able to justify denying the right to make donations to all who were not on the electoral register because if one started to allow other categories, as Lord Neill suggested—I think without his committee really applying its mind to the consequences—it would create enormous bureaucratic problems of validating donors. Therefore, unless the Minister can persuade me that such a provision would not cause such problems—I do not know why it should not cause them—I would not be in favour of complicating the issue.

We might reasonably consider another issue. Although I certainly think that persons under 18 who do not have the vote should be encouraged to make small donations to political parties, I am not sure that it would be in the public interest for young people to be encouraged to make very substantial donations to political parties. Although that is perhaps a more esoteric point, I think that it is perfectly proper for the House to say that the donation limit should stick at £200, which—in view of the Bill's other provisions—is where it will be in reality.

The hon. Member for Battersea also expressed his concern—I was about to call it the bee in his bonnet, but that would perhaps be very slightly unfair—to establish £250,000 as the absolute maximum that an individual may give annually in political donations. The logic of his argument was very difficult to follow. At one point, he told us that he thought that, although it was inherently corrupting to allow donations of more than £250,000 from an individual, it was not inherently corrupting to allow such donations from a company. That beggars belief.

If a company is paying huge sums to a political party, it might be said that it was doing so for corrupt purposes, allowing the company to promote its self-advantage and interests. Moreover, it would be difficult to dissociate such potentially huge donations from companies from donations from individuals.

Mr. Linton: The point that I was seeking to make is that if a company gives a donation, it has to conduct a ballot of all its shareholders to allow it to do so. Before a trade union makes a donation, every one of its members has to vote in a political fund ballot. In those cases, a decision to make a donation, or to change that decision, can be taken only collectively by a large group of people. The decision to turn on and off the tap does not rest in one person's hands. That is what is different about individual donations.

Mr. Grieve: I find the hon. Gentleman's argument on that point a little flawed. Although a private company may have shareholders, the shareholders may be only two or three in number. Therefore, in reality it seems unlikely that there will always be shareholder control over decisions by a private company to make donations.

Moreover, private companies, if they are incorporated in the United Kingdom, may frequently be vehicles for perfectly legitimate donations of substantial sums.

The Bill currently allows—we have not considered the issue on Report, but may well have to return to it later—donations by certain categories of European Union company that do not require shareholder approval at all. Therefore, it seems extremely optimistic to think that such an approach will provide proper control or an ability to remove the possible taint of corruption.

The other reason why we should not believe that it would be desirable to make amendment No. 163 is that the electorate themselves will make their decision. The hon. Member for Battersea has criticised—implicitly, if not explicitly—the Labour party for accepting, since it came to office, substantial individual donations exceeding the £250,000 limit. However, he has not yet told us that, consequently, he will not support the Government at the next general election.

Mr. Linton: As I said, before the previous general election, the Labour party and other parties had no choice but to seek donations to match those received by the Conservative party.

Mr. Grieve: Surely that is the point. As long as there is transparency about the source of gifts, the electorate—through the media, which will undoubtedly thoroughly investigate those matters—will indicate very precisely their view on whether it is proper for a political party to accept such donations. In Committee, some Labour Members argued that the Conservative party was damaged by the donations that it received in the early 1990s. That is a legitimate argument. If we follow that line of reason, the electorate showed their disapproval of the donations from those individuals.

10.30 pm

However, just as the electorate may disapprove, they may also be entitled to approve of such donations. Philanthropists prepared to give substantial sums of money from undoubtedly high motives do exist. It is an essential part of our civil liberties that individuals should be allowed to dispose of their money as they see fit. Whatever may happen in other countries, it is wrong to put a fetter on that.

The hon. Member for Battersea asked what the limit was on political donations in France. I am ignorant of the ceiling there. Indeed, I was not aware that there was such a limit, but I accept what he says. However, French politics has suffered over the years from serious examples of corruption both by individuals seeking their own ends and by corporations—there has been a lot about that in the French press recently. If such limits exist, they do not seem to have had any impact on improving the standing of politicians in that country. That is another reason why we should reject the amendment.

Mr. Stunell: I take almost exactly the opposite view to that of the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve): I think that the first amendment is mistaken and the second is desirable. I shall set out my case briefly.

If I were a millionaire living in—to take a country at random—Belize and had sent my son to Eton, I might give him a Christmas present of, let us say, £1 million. If, when we got to somewhere near Easter, he made a voluntary decision to make a donation to a political party of, let us say—picking a random number—£1 million, it would be permitted under the amendment. I doubt whether that is what the hon. Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) intends. That should be sufficient to cause him to seek to withdraw it.

A donation of £200 is an adequate and sensible limit for those under 18. We might want to raise that limit in the future, but not now. For the record, I have taken advice and I believe that the minimum age for membership of the Liberal Democrats is 14. We are certainly on the record as wanting a voting age of 16, so in due course we shall want to move towards what the hon. Gentleman is suggesting, but at the moment his amendment would do what we have tried to guard against: it would create a loophole for one situation that provided a gap through which the less scrupulous could march with impunity. He has made a nice case, but he has left an enormous loophole.

The Liberal Democrats have argued for a ceiling on individual donations. Speaking personally, I should like a ceiling on donations from other sources as well, to answer the point made by the hon. Member for Beaconsfield However, amendment No. 163 is better than no amendment, so it finds favour with the Liberal Democrats. Amendment No. 162 certainly does not.

Mr. Miller: To answer the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) and the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve), the limit in France is 50,000 francs. I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to look at the situation across Europe and consider the contradictions in the pattern of funding from individuals and corporate donors. It seems to me that further research is needed. The reliance on European Commission decision 270\83 against France on the question of corporate donors must be examined further, as it covers insurance companies, not political parties. There is no pattern to the donations by companies, trade unions and individuals: the matter is a complete hotch-potch. I accept the integrity of the observations made by my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea, but the amendment does not stand up in the context of clause 48.

I urge my hon. Friend the Minister to study clause 48 again, as some significant improvements could be made. If the decision in case 270\83 were rejected, the clause could be tightened satisfactorily.

Mr. Tipping: Amendment No. 163 takes us back to familiar territory, as my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) pushed the case for it hard in Committee. Amendment No. 162 breaks new ground and, although members of the Committee will remember that its subject was discussed in passing, this is the first time that the House has had the opportunity to discuss it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Battersea pointed out that people under 18 cannot be permissible donors, but he readily acknowledged that, under the de minimis provisions, a young person under 18 could contribute £200. The hon. Member for Beaconsfield asked whether a £5 subscription fee would be included in that £200. I can tell him that it would.

The hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) described the £200-limit as adequate and sensible, and I agree. As I see it, the only point of amendment No. 162

[Mr. Tipping]

would be that it would allow young people under 18 to contribute sums greater than that. I heard some Labour Members comment that any young people who wanted to do that must be off their heads. However, the hon. Member for Beaconsfield made the more serious point that, under the Bill, people must be on the electoral register before they can contribute to a party. To break that link by accepting the amendment would be a step too far. I hope that my hon. Friend will withdraw the amendment.

Amendment No. 163 has attracted much argument both in Committee and in the House this evening. If there is to be a limit on donations, what should it be? The Government's libertarian view, supported by the Neill committee, is that people should be entitled to spend money as they think fit. I agree with that principle.

My hon. Friend the Member for Battersea was sceptical, to put it mildly, about whether the new reporting provisions would bring about a change in climate. The Bill is about transparency and honesty. I draw my hon. Friend's attention to what has happened with the Register of Members' Interests. As the reporting requirements have become more onerous, hon. Members have become more careful about what they do and what they receive.

It is widely accepted that the Bill will bring about changes in culture and in attitudes. All hon. Members support the notion that political parties should look for smaller donations, and that they should not rely on large donations. The attitude of the press and the public means that large donations will always be questioned. There is nothing wrong with them, but I think that the public will see them as suspicious, feeling that no one gives large sums for nothing. I do not think that the £250,000 cap is necessary.

Mr. Walter: Does the Minister agree that there is something slightly incongruous in the placing of a £250,000 limit on donations made by "permissible donors" to British political parties, when, under the European convention on human rights, foreigners are allowed to make contributions of up to £500,000 as third parties in general elections and as permitted participants in referendums?

Mr. Tipping: The hon. Gentleman is following the path of my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller). I understand that his amendment has not been selected, and that he has used this as a peg on which to hang his point.

The hon. Member for Beaconsfield said that hon. Members might want to pursue the issue, which does, I think, involve some uncomfortableness and tension, and I assure my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston that we shall consider what he said.

Ultimately, my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea said that £250,000 was an arbitrary limit, and I agree. I think it right, in this context, for us to be judged on and guided by what the Neill committee said, and I think it right to maintain a libertarian spirit.

Given all that, I hope that my hon. Friend will withdraw his amendment.

Mr. Linton: My hon. Friend the Minister defends a £200 maximum for teenagers, but rejects a £250,000 maximum for over-18s. I would rather liberate teenagers and restrain millionaires; but, as I am clearly getting nowhere with that argument, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Amendment made: No. 15, in page 29, line 32, leave out subsection (4).—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Clause 55

REPORTS TO BE MADE BY REGISTERED PARTIES

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I beg to move amendment No. 16, in page 35, line 14, at end insert—

'(10A) However, for the purposes of subsections (3) to (7) in their application in relation to the central organisation and any year by virtue of subsection (10), any donation—

(a) which is accepted from a permissible donor by any of the accounting units during that year, but

(b) which is not required to be recorded under subsection (4) or (6) (as they apply by virtue of subsection (10)) as a donation accepted by the accounting unit,

shall be treated as a donation accepted from the donor during that year by the central organisation.'.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): With this, it will be convenient to discuss Government amendments Nos. 94, 95 and 17 to 21.

Mr. O'Brien: Last summer's White Paper said that a disclosable donation should include a series of donations, which together total £5,000 or more, from a single source, made either to the central party organisation or to a number of accounting units, or to both, within the same year. Clause 55 as it stands does not meet that objective; amendment No. 16 will remedy the deficiency.

Amendments Nos. 94 and 95 make consequential amendments to schedule 5, which details the information that a party must submit to the Electoral Commission in its donation reports. Where the new aggregation rule applies, a party will declare the donations as if they had been accepted by the central organisation of the party. That will avoid the bureaucracy of having to record in a donation report each and every accounting unit to which a donor has made his or her donations.

Amendments Nos. 18 to 21 are essentially technical amendments to clause 59. The clause sets out the form of the declaration that a registered treasurer must make when submitting a quarterly or weekly donation report to the Electoral Commission. Subsection (2) is defective as it stands, in that the terms of the declaration do not fit the case of a treasurer making a nil return—that is, a return stating that there were no recordable donations in the period concerned. Amendment No. 21 therefore introduces a new subsection (2A), which sets out the form of the declaration to be returned in such circumstances.

Amendments Nos. 18 to 20 are paving amendments for amendment 21. Amendment No. 17 is a drafting amendment. The substance of clause 58(8) is already covered in clause 57(9), so the former provision is unnecessary.

Mr. Walter: The amendments reflect the spirit of the Standing Committee, where a number of proposals were made and a number of flaws in the Bill identified. The substance of the amendments does not concern me

greatly; many are consequential and drafting amendments. However, I was somewhat surprised by amendment No. 94, which inserts "(i)" and by amendment No. 95, which inserts a provision beginning with "(ii)". I thought that something was slightly odd, because paragraph 4 of schedule 5 appears to contain two sub-paragraphs (a). The Minister might also like to consider that as a drafting amendment at a later stage. Otherwise, we are relatively content with the amendments.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I will certainly consider that.

Amendment agreed to.

Schedule 5

DETAILS TO BE GIVEN IN DONATION REPORTS

Amendments made: No. 90, in page 109, line 5, leave out—

'the following provisions of this paragraph'

and insert—

'sub-paragraphs (2) to (8) and (10) below'.

No. 91, in page 109, line 8, at end insert—

'or, in the case of a donation falling within sub-paragraph (9) below, the information required by that sub-paragraph.'.

No. 92, in page 109, line 38, leave out "falling within section 48(4)(a)" and insert—

'to which section *(Payments etc. which are (or are not) to be treated as donations by permissible donors)*(2) applies'.

No. 93, in page 109, line 39, at end insert—

'(10) In the case of a donation to which section *(Payments etc. which are (or are not) to be treated as donations by permissible donors)*(3) applies, the report must give the full name and address of the donor.'.

No. 94, in page 110, line 5, after "report)", insert—

'(i)''.

No. 95, in page 110, line 6, at end insert—

', or

(ii) in the case of a donation to which section 55(10A) applies, indicate that it is a donation which falls to be treated as made to the party by virtue of that provision.'.

No. 96, in page 110, line 6, at end insert—

"(1A) In the case of a donation to which section *(Payments etc. which are (or are not) to be treated as donations by permissible donors)* (3) applies, the report must in addition give—

(a) the date or dates on or between which the visit to which the donation relates took place, and

(b) the destination and purpose of the visit.'.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Mr. Tipping: I beg to move amendment No. 136, in page 110, line 20, after "each", insert "recordable".

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to discuss Government amendments Nos. 101, 102, 137, 32, 33, 107, 108, 57, 64, 112, 113, 115 to 117 and 83.

Mr. Tipping: The amendments are merely minor technical and drafting points. I would of course be happy to respond to any specific points—dotted i's, small a's, or any other ways in which the Bill can be improved.

Amendment agreed to.

Clause 58

SUBMISSION OF DONATION REPORTS TO COMMISSION

Amendment made: No. 17, in page 38, line 3, leave out subsection (8) and insert—

'(8) Section 57(9) applies for the purposes of this section.'.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Clause 59

DECLARATION BY TREASURER IN DONATION REPORT

Amendments made: No. 18, in page 38, line 10, after "(2)", insert ", (2A)".

No. 19, in page 38, line 11, after "55", insert—

'(other than one making a nil return)'.

No. 20, in page 38, line 19, leave out "so".

No. 21, in page 38, line 19, at end insert—

'(2A) For the purposes of subsection (2) a return under section 55 makes a nil return if it contains such a statement as is mentioned in subsection (9) of that section; and in the case of such a report the declaration must state that, to the best of the treasurer's knowledge and belief—

(a) that statement is accurate; and

(b) during the reporting period no donations from any person or body other than a permissible donor has been accepted by the party.'.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Clause 62

REGISTER OF RECORDABLE DONATIONS

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I beg to move amendment No. 22, in page 40, line 2, after "6" insert "(a) or (c)".

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to discuss Government amendments Nos. 56, 70 and 123.

Mr. O'Brien: The amendments merely ensure public access to information. I hope that they will have the support of the House.

Amendment agreed to.

Amendment made: No. 23, in page 40, line 5, at end insert—

'and (in the case of a donation falling within sub-paragraph (1A) of that paragraph) the details given in pursuance of that sub-paragraph.'.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Further consideration adjourned.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Bill to be further considered tomorrow.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

INDUSTRIAL ORGANISATION AND DEVELOPMENT

Motion made and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

That the draft Milk Development Council (Amendment) Order 2000, a copy of which was laid before this House on 14th February, be approved.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Question agreed to.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

That the draft Appropriation (Northern Ireland) Order 2000, which was laid before this House on 28th February, be approved.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Question agreed to.

SUPPLEMENTARY VOTE ON ACCOUNT 2000–01

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That, at the sitting on 14th March, Standing Order No. 55 (Questions on voting of estimates, &c.) shall apply as if the words '(aa) supplementary votes on account for the coming financial year;' were inserted after line 21.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

Multiple Sclerosis

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

10.48 pm

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): It is a little over a year since I last secured an Adjournment debate on the subject of multiple sclerosis. The Minister of State who is responding this evening responded to that debate as well.

At the outset of this short debate, I must declare an interest. I now have the privilege of serving as the honorary president of the Sutton branch of the Multiple Sclerosis Society.

What has happened in the past year? In my Adjournment debate last year, we learned that the Government were minded to refer beta interferon to the National Institute for Clinical Excellence, and that referral has taken place. The result is that those with the secondary progressive form of MS are left in limbo, waiting to see whether the drug will clear the affordability hurdle. Those with relapsing-remitting MS are waiting to see whether the goalposts will be moved for them too.

In the meantime, postcode prescribing continues. Where people live still matters more than the criteria used to assess whether they are eligible for beta interferon treatment. Just two in every 100 of the United Kingdom multiple sclerosis population receive beta interferon. The European average, by contrast, is 12 in 100. Even given the criteria published by the previous Government in executive letter 95/97, which set out eligibility for access to beta interferon for those with relapsing-remitting MS, people who qualify do not receive the drug.

I want to draw attention not only to the drug, but to the services surrounding MS. A survey undertaken last year found that six out of 10 health authorities could not estimate or had not estimated how many people might benefit from beta interferon. Those that had made an estimate found that fewer than half of those who could benefit were being prescribed beta interferon. It is nothing short of a scandal that prescribing is so low, and left so much to chance.

Beta interferon is not the only matter on which MS sufferers face a postcode lottery. Support services that help them to manage their symptoms are similarly affected. In November 1998, a group of senior neurologists signed a statement that made clear their concern about the availability of MS health services. The signatories included leading specialists in MS who work in neurology centres across the country. They declared:

> We believe that the National Health Service has failed to respond adequately to the needs of people with MS and that services for them, with some shining exceptions, are seriously deficient in most parts of the country.

A year later, Ministers announced that they would introduce national guidelines on the management of MS in England and Wales. Last Wednesday, the Multiple Sclerosis Society organised a mass lobby of Parliament to press for action on services and for an end to postcode prescribing. More than 1,000 people made the trip to Westminster to lobby their Members of Parliament. I am sure that the lobby will have done much to raise awareness among Members, but I hope that Ministers

have taken note of it too. Those people said—certainly those from my constituency to whom I spoke said—that the issue will not go away.

The catalyst for my debate last year was a constituency case. In February 1999, Josephine Timms wrote to me, saying:

> I am 39 years old. I have a husband and two sons, one aged 12, and the other 9. At the end of July 1998 I was diagnosed as having Multiple Sclerosis. The initial expectation was that I would have an attack, and then it might be several years until I suffered a further one. This was regrettably not the case. I had two further very bad "episodes" which have left me disabled.

I became quite involved in the case, and it took many letters over a long time, from Josephine and from me, before the local health authority finally realised even that she was resident in the area and therefore its responsibility. At that point, she was finally referred for assessment by neurologists.

I am delighted to tell the House that Josephine started a course of beta interferon on 24 February. However, in a recent letter, she summed up matters as follows:

> All I need is a little bit of time to see my two young sons grow into men when they don't need their mummy quite so much. Hopefully this treatment will buy me that time.

Buying time is what beta interferon can do. It is not a cure, but for Mrs. Timms and thousands like her it is the light at the end of a very long tunnel.

Josephine's case highlighted not just the availability of the drug, but the lack of planning and support services for people with MS. MS leads to a range of complex symptoms that usually worsen over time. Symptoms include problems with mobility, speech impairment, memory loss, incontinence, pain, spasticity and extreme fatigue. As a result, a variety of health care services are necessary for effective management of MS, including occupational therapy, speech therapy and continence care. Because of the illness's progressive nature, there is a need for patients to be properly monitored so that they can receive appropriate medical and social care for their needs at a given time.

A significant number of patients do not receive specialist advice after they have been diagnosed. After diagnosis, many types of information are relevant to people with MS, such as information about disability discrimination rights, social security entitlement and symptom management. However, for many people with MS, that information is not signposted. A survey of 16,000 people with MS throughout the UK, conducted in 1999, found that more than eight out of 10 respondents were not given written information about MS to take away and read when they were diagnosed.

General practitioners will encounter few MS patients during their professional careers, and they cannot therefore reasonably be expected to gain a high level of understanding of managing MS. The lack of specialist MS care can result in some people with MS developing unnecessary complications.

One form of specialist care is the development of MS nursing. At the Manchester royal infirmary, patients can take advantage of such specialist nursing services. People with MS and their carers are able to receive information and counselling from the time of diagnosis onwards. That nursing service also monitors the condition of vulnerable patients in the community and can intervene to prevent patients from developing serious complications, such as urinary tract infections.

An evaluation of the impact of MS nursing in Manchester showed that in-patient admissions for some patients fell because of the service. However, Multiple Sclerosis Society research showed that eight out of 10 MS patients do not have access to such specialist nursing.

Closer to home, I have been told by the chief executive of the Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth health authority that there are no specific budget or policies for the care of people with MS. There is no disease register for people diagnosed with MS in my health authority district. How can sensible planning be undertaken when we have no idea of the prevalence of a disease? However, to be fair, many members of the Sutton branch of the Multiple Sclerosis Society have been enthusiastic in their praise of Atkinson Morley's hospital and its assessment clinics and staff.

Looking beyond my patch, evidence from local health decision makers reinforces my concern about the quality of MS services. In last year's debate, I referred to the 1998 survey carried out by the Association of Quality in Healthcare; its findings were disturbing. In 1999, the survey was repeated. It found major gaps in MS provision across the country.

The total population in the areas of authorities responding to the survey was 27 million. Six out of 10 of the health authorities that responded had no separate contract for MS services. Only two authorities in 100 had issued a consultation document on MS services. A third had held no consultations before setting out its MS policy. That is despite the fact that health authorities have a duty to consult their local population before commissioning services. Only 23 per cent. of authorities specified the range of services that must be provided by clinicians.

In March last year, I asked the Government for their response to the AQH survey. Finally, in October, the Minister of State, Department of Health, the hon. Member for Southampton, Itchen (Mr. Denham) wrote to me. The letter stated:

> Turning to the Association for Quality in Healthcare (AQH)'s report on Health Authorities' approaches to MS, the Department has not followed this up specifically.

Why not? Lack of planning and lack of consultation leave health authorities ill equipped to commission services for MS sufferers.

In 1997, the Multiple Sclerosis Society conducted a major symptom management survey of people with MS. The sample of 223 people with MS included people of different ages and degrees of disability. It also looked at people who had suffered from the illness for different periods of time. In particular, the survey found that only 8 per cent. of people were seeing rehabilitation specialists.

A more recent survey of 150 MS patients conducted by the National hospital for neurology and neurosurgery found that only one third of people with severe disabilities were seeing a physiotherapist. When will the new guidelines, promised last November, be published? What status will they have? What resources will they command?

Beta interferon has been shown to reduce the number of MS relapses by an average of one third in a year. Fewer

[Mr. Paul Burstow]

relapses mean fewer hospital admissions and a better quality of life. The drug can reduce not only the number of relapses, but their severity.

I have several points to make. First, services that treat symptoms are no substitute for drug therapy that treats the disease. Nursing cannot slow the progression of the disease—beta interferon can do so.

Secondly, Ministers have said that the National Institute for Clinical Excellence will need to assess whether the drug can be better targeted. Can the Minister assure the House that targeting will not lead to a catch-22 situation? The current guidance on beta interferon already targets the drug. Only MS sufferers who have had two relapses during the past two years are considered. The search for better ways to target the drug should not be used as a way of denying it completely.

Thirdly, NICE has the option of recommending a clinical trial to address outstanding research questions, such as effective targeting and the results of combining the drug with other therapies. Clinical trials can make a valuable contribution to our understanding of MS and how best to treat it. However, does the Minister agree that it would be ethically unacceptable for MS patients to have access to beta interferon only by joining a clinical trial?

The rules governing clinical trials usually insist that patients have a real choice to enter a trial. That is particularly the case where the treatment is experimental and could damage the patient's health. However, in the case of beta interferon the drug is licensed for both forms of MS. Many neurologists wish to use the drug because, in their clinical judgment, it will benefit their patients. However, if the only way for someone like my constituent Josephine to get the drug is through a clinical trial, she really has Hobson's choice. For her, the drug buys time for herself and for her young family.

Although I am delighted for Josephine that she is now receiving the drug, many thousands of other people just like Josephine are waiting for the drug; and this Hobson's choice gives just a 50:50 chance of obtaining the drug because such trials, obviously, are placebo controlled.

Many neurologists regard the recruiting of people for such a trial as unethical. The MS research group of the Association of British Neurologists found that the majority of neurologists would not recruit patients with relapsing-remitting MS on to a one-to-one placebo trial. A United Kingdom trial would be ethical only if the drug was available to be prescribed outside the trial.

I should like to know what the Government's position is. In August 1999, 54 neurologists wrote to the then Secretary of State for Health, the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson), to protest about the rationing of beta interferon. In his reply on 15 October 1999, the Minister of State, the hon. Member for Itchen said:

> appraisal by NICE may in turn help to identify some of the issues which could subsequently form the basis for ethically valid research.

Can the Minister confirm that the reference to ethics in that letter means that the Government accept that a placebo-controlled trial of beta interferon in the UK would be unethical?

In conclusion, MS patients are dealt with in a very disorganised and unsystematic way. In many cases, follow-up of diagnosed patients is poor. As a result, many patients with relapsing-remitting MS are left to deal with their attacks in the absence of medical help, with only an untrained and hard-pushed relative as a carer.

There is an astonishing lack of understanding about MS, its various forms and the implications for patients of having the disease, at all levels in the NHS and beyond it, in social care. What is needed is a well-planned and properly delivered service for MS patients. It is in that context that the best returns are likely to be achieved from beta interferon.

I should like the Minister to answer two questions tonight. First, when will the new guidelines be ready? Secondly, do the Government accept that a placebo-controlled trial of beta interferon in the UK would be unethical?

I want to finish with a further quote from my constituent Josephine Timms.

> I appreciate that Beta interferon is not a cure but I see it as the light at the end of a very long tunnel, which has taken up so much of my time and valuable energy.

What happens to the people like Josephine who do not have the energy and persistence to chase and cajole both their MP and their health authority to get the drug and other support? It is those people who do not have that energy who need some answers from the Government.

11.3 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Hutton): I start by once again—we have been here before—congratulating the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) on bringing forward this subject for our debate tonight. The hon. Gentleman has shown on many occasions that he takes a close interest in these issues, as many hon. Members do, and his knowledge and understanding of some of these issues clearly showed in his comments.

The hon. Gentleman was right to say that multiple sclerosis is one of the most common diseases of the central nervous system. It is estimated to affect between 80,000 and 90,000 people in the United Kingdom. Multiple sclerosis can be very difficult to diagnose and treat, and at present there is no conclusive diagnostic test. The symptoms experienced by patients can be symptomatic of many other conditions.

Multiple sclerosis often strikes people when they are young adults—the peak age of onset is between 20 and 40—and is thought to arise from damage to the myelin sheath around nerve fibres that help conduct nerve impulses efficiently through the central nervous system. When such damage happens, disabilities can vary from impairment to speech, vision and movement to incontinence, as the hon. Gentleman said, or even severe paralysis.

The disease course in multiple sclerosis is unpredictable. People most often present initially with relapsing-remitting MS, in which relapses or acute attacks of neurological disability are followed by periods of remission. Later, as chronic problems accumulate, the disease may become more progressive, with more acute relapses. Management of MS therefore involves treatment

of relapses caused by increased disease activity, and a care programme to minimise and control specific problems such as spasticity, bowel and bladder problems.

The different phases of the disease mean that people with MS have a wide range of health and other needs and that these needs, particularly for health care, will not remain static but will nearly always change over time. Patients with long-term conditions such as MS therefore require different levels of support and health care at different times. Most health authorities now have procedures in place to ensure that people with MS receive the treatment and care that they need.

Everybody, wherever they live, expects fair access to the most effective treatments, and the Government are taking steps to improve consistency. The new policies are designed to improve the quality of care and treatment that the NHS offers its users, to improve access and equality, and to ensure that service users have a greater say in what services are provided and how they are delivered.

There are now real opportunities to develop innovative care approaches for people with long-term care needs. We have introduced long-term service agreements built on pathways of care. The agreements will link primary care, secondary care and social care where appropriate. We expect that to be a better approach for people with long-term conditions such as MS. Discussions about care pathways will involve users and carers as well as health service professionals. Care pathways are expected to include an appropriate range of preventive, diagnostic, palliative, rehabilitative and supporting care components that are intended to produce an integrated programme of care for the individual service user. The care pathway approach will be particularly helpful for long-term medical conditions where, following accurate and timely diagnosis, a patient's care will generally be managed outside an acute setting. That is likely to be the case for many neurological conditions, including MS.

The development of such pathways reinforces the need for seamless working between health, social services and other agencies such as those involved in housing. People with illnesses such as MS know only too well how failures to deliver the right package of care can produce frustration and unnecessary difficulties in the daily activities of living. The hon. Gentleman referred to the problems that his constituent has experienced, and we take those issues very seriously.

Solving such long-standing problems means that care agencies must work more closely together to ensure that treatment and support systems operate in ways that help people to lead active lives. That includes making sure that they are able to work as long as possible—retaining people with health problems in their jobs is another priority for the Government. Health and social services are expected to play their part in helping people to stay at work as part of our welfare to work programme. The flexibilities created by the Health Act 1999 will enable health and social services partners to provide more joined-up care to MS sufferers and other groups of patients. I very much hope that health and local authorities, including those in the hon. Gentleman's constituency, take advantage of the new opportunities.

I know that some NHS services in the recent past have been the cause of concern to voluntary organisations dealing with neurological disease. Indeed, last year, the Multiple Sclerosis Society published "A Survey of Multiple Sclerosis Provision in England 1998–99". The survey was designed to establish how commissioners approach provision of MS services and to build a picture of service provision in England. It is true to say, as the hon. Gentleman did, that a somewhat mixed picture of MS service provision emerged.

The Multiple Sclerosis Society organised a very successful lobby of Parliament last Wednesday where it highlighted some of the results of a forthcoming survey on community provision, which is expected in the summer. I understand that the survey shows that as many as one in four people with MS do not receive any community care services at all and that a majority did not receive either written information or specialist support at the time of diagnosis. That is clearly unacceptable, and I hope that that is not the case with people who have been diagnosed recently. The society has, together with people with MS and the National hospital, also developed comprehensive guidance on standards for the provision of health care for people with MS.

Other changes, such as the introduction of a small number of regionally commissioned specialist services and the move towards primary care group commissioning, have raised further anxieties among neurological voluntary organisations that neurological services will not receive proper attention during the new commissioning process and that the services might be commissioned by people with insufficient knowledge of neurology to ensure that services meet neurological patients' needs.

To address those anxieties, a compendium of good practice on the commissioning of neurological services is being developed. The compendium is pulling together all the good practice that has been produced by many of the voluntary organisations in the neurological field and will act as a single, succinct source of information for health care commissioners.

Mr. Burstow: On this issue, as with all the developments that the Minister has outlined so far, groups outside the House will most want to hear about time scales. When will the compendium be ready?

Mr. Hutton: I am afraid that I cannot be specific about when the compendium will be available. Obviously, I hope that it will be ready as soon as possible. I hope that the hon. Gentleman understands that a lot of work has to go into that, and obviously the only point in drawing up a compendium is to get it out to the health service as soon as possible. We do not initiate such projects simply to amuse ourselves; we do it for a purpose, which is to improve the commissioning of health services. We have actively engaged neurological voluntary organisations such as the MS Society in that work and they have made a substantial contribution to its development.

As I have already said, the commissioning compendium has direct patient involvement in its development. Such involvement has always reflected best practice, and now the Government are seeking to make it standard practice, not just in the development of national policy but in the commissioning of local services. I am pleased that the MS Society is working with the NHS to develop specialist MS nursing schemes.

[Mr. Hutton]

The hon. Gentleman did not refer to research—I perfectly understand why—which is important in supporting the policy developments for which he and others are calling. He will be aware that the Medical Research Council spent approximately £640,000 on multiple sclerosis in 1998–99. The MRC also gives considerable additional amounts to fund basic underpinning research on issues such as nerve function and damage, which are not included in the figure of £640,000.

Another area of considerable interest to many people with MS is the therapeutic use of cannabis. The Department of Health supports the evaluation of the therapeutic use of cannabis by clinical trial, and is working closely with the Royal Pharmaceutical Society to put research on to a better scientific footing. In the short term, that has led to an MRC grant of almost £1 million being awarded to the neurology department of Plymouth hospital NHS trust to undertake a multiple randomised controlled trial of cannabinoids on spasticity in multiple sclerosis. The trial will recruit 660 patients with MS from throughout the country who have significant spasticity in some of their leg muscles. The hon. Gentleman might be interested to know that it will be the largest single study of symptom treatment in MS ever undertaken in this country.

I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will be interested to hear also that we are supporting a particularly important study being undertaken by Dr. Jeremy Hobart of the Institute of Neurology. Its aim is to develop a patient-based measure of outcome in patients with MS for use in clinical trials and clinical audit. To guarantee that the measure is appropriate and clinically useful, MS patients are central to the development process. The project is costing some £160,000. It started on 1 November 1997 and is due to end this April. The overall aim of the health technology assessment programme is to ensure that high-quality research information, cost-effectiveness and the broader impact of health technologies are properly assessed.

Mr. Burstow: The Minister is further illuminating the subject, and I am grateful for that. Would the Government regard it as unethical to have a clinical trial that effectively ring-fenced the prescribing of beta interferon so that it was not available outside the trial?

Mr. Hutton: If the hon. Gentleman will be patient, I will come on to what NICE is doing about that. If I do not get to that point by the end of play, I will certainly write to the hon. Gentleman and give him the details that he seeks.

In the light of the progressively expanding evidence base, the health technology assessment programme has gone on to commission secondary research in the broader field of MS treatment. In consultation with clinical neurologists and representatives of the Multile Sclerosis Society, reviews are being commissioned on the five topic areas identified as being of greatest clinical, patient and policy concern.

There are other funding streams that we make available to support work in that general area, including funding that we make available directly to the Multiple Sclerosis Society, under the section 64 scheme. We are funding several projects, one of which involves developing and maintaining databases on MS treatment and trials so that clear and authoritative information can be given to people with MS.

The hon. Gentleman spent most of his time talking about problems surrounding the availability of beta interferon. I want to address the concerns that he and many other hon. Members have expressed in recent debates in the House.

The Government have a substantial agenda of work in place that is designed to improve the quality of treatment offered by the NHS. As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, that includes setting up NICE, the introduction of clinical governance and improving the way in which the NHS commissions and uses research. However, we of course recognise that the licensing and prescribing of beta interferon is an issue of concern.

I understand that evidence is that beta interferon drugs reduce the rate of relapses in relapsing-remitting MS by some 30 per cent.—the hon. Gentleman referred to that—on average in a range from 14 to 44 per cent. Betaferon was licensed for treating secondary progressive MS on the basis of evidence that, if used for three years, it might delay disease progression by up to one year.

Clinicians treating patients and those advising health authorities on their overall policy need to take account of both the clinical effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of beta interferon. It appears that there is evidence that some patients with relapsing-remitting and secondary progressive forms of multiple sclerosis can benefit from the use of beta interferon, but that, sadly, those short-term improvements are temporary. The cost of beta interferon treatment is estimated at approximately £10,000 a year per patient.

Let me make it clear that the Government are committed to improving standards of health care and to ensuring that, when newer treatments, including new medicines such as beta interferon, represent a genuine therapeutic advance and are cost-effective, they are introduced into the national health service as fast as possible. In fact, beta interferon has taken on an even higher profile since its licence was extended to the treatment of secondary progressive MS at the beginning of last year.

Not surprisingly, the licensing of beta interferon has for the first time given people with MS some hope that there might be a pharmaceutical remedy for their condition. However, it is terribly important that no one raises any false expectations about the ability of beta interferon or any other drug to combat MS. To be fair to the hon. Gentleman, he made that point clearly, too. Beta interferon is not a cure for multiple sclerosis; there is no cure for MS.

Evidence from trials on the clinical effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of beta interferon appears to many commentators to be far from clearcut. That is why different health authorities and their clinicians are arriving at different conclusions, which can result in differences in the pattern of provision of beta interferon. That is exactly

why we have asked NICE to carry out an authoritative appraisal of the evidence. The work of NICE is the common-sense way in which to end the variations that the Conservatives' internal market did so much to create.

The great advantage of NICE is that it brings together the expertise not just of clinicians, but of managers and of patient groups, in order to make an authoritative assessment of evidence emerging from trials. NICE guidance will support front-line clinicians and help to reduce the confusion, which I am perfectly prepared to accept currently exists. I obviously cannot pre-empt what NICE will conclude, but I think that it is undisputed that the NHS should seek to use its resources to achieve the greatest possible health gain for patients. With this in mind—

The motion having been made after Ten o'clock, and the debate having continued for half an hour, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *adjourned the House without Question put, pursuant to the Standing Order.*

Adjourned at eighteen minutes past Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 14 March 2000

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

CITY OF NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE BILL *[LORDS]*

Order for Third Reading read.

To be read the Third time on Tuesday 21 March.

GREENHAM AND CROOKHAM COMMONS BILL *(BY ORDER)*

Order for Second Reading read.

To be read a Second Time on Tuesday 21 March.

Oral Answers to Questions

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

EU Enlargement

1. **Mr. Peter Luff** (Mid-Worcestershire): What recent meetings he has had with the President of the European Commission to discuss enlargement of the European Union; and if he will make a statement. [112868]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Keith Vaz): My right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary regularly have discussions with the President of the European Commission, including on enlargement. We agree that enlargement is essential if we are to spread peace, stability and shared values throughout the continent. The United Kingdom is committed to a swift and successful enlargement of the European Union, and is working with the European Commission as well as other member states and the candidate countries to achieve this. I have also met Commissioner Verheugen to discuss these matters.

Mr. Luff: I am delighted to be able to agree with the Minister's response to my question, but can he explain how an unreformed common agricultural policy, a single currency and generally deeper integration will assist in the historic purpose that he so eloquently described?

Mr. Vaz: As the hon. Gentleman knows, discussions and negotiations are a matter for the candidate countries and the Commission. The chapter on agriculture has not yet been opened, although 23 of the 31 chapters of the acquis have been. They will be tough negotiations, and I am sure and I hope that they will have a successful and swift conclusion.

Mr. Gordon Marsden (Blackpool, South): Although I welcome the emphasis and attention that the Government are giving to the enlargement process, may I urge the Minister and his colleagues to pay particular attention to building up non-governmental organisations and the process of political development not just in countries such as Hungary and the Czech Republic, which have made substantial progress, but in others, such as Romania and Bulgaria, where progress still needs to be made?

Mr. Vaz: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. It is clear that the tough on-going negotiations are important. However, at the level of political engagement between applicant countries and the Commission and the United Kingdom, we must ensure that such links are made. My hon. Friend will be pleased to know that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and I have made a number of visits to the applicant countries, and we regularly receive Ministers from them. It is essential that the positive engagement between the United Kingdom and the applicant countries continues.

Mr. Richard Spring (West Suffolk): May I congratulate the Minister on his triumphantly successful and newsworthy speech in Washington? Are those who were present at it now anxious about memory or hearing loss, or both?

Does the Minister agree that there is genuine concern among applicant countries about the potentially spiralling costs of the common agricultural policy and its implications for enlargement?

Mr. Vaz: There will always be discussions on these matters, and clearly agriculture is extremely important. As the hon. Gentleman knows, the United Kingdom is committed to ensuring that the CAP is reformed, but we will not hold up enlargement before it is reformed. Clearly, the agricultural chapters will be watched very carefully.

On my speech in Washington and the misquote that was ascribed to me by *The Mail on Sunday*, I assure the hon. Gentleman that if I know the date of the general election, he will be the first to know so that he can prepare for his redundancy pay.

Uganda

2. **Dr. Doug Naysmith** (Bristol, North-West): If he will make a statement on the United Kingdom's relations with Uganda. [112869]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Peter Hain): Britain and Uganda have a close relationship and we are supporting Uganda's economic, social and democratic development.

Dr. Naysmith: Will my hon. Friend seek to strengthen our ties with Uganda and will he reassure the House of the importance that we attach to a party-based democracy in that country? Does he believe, as I do, that the World Service of the BBC, which can regularly reach 68 per cent. of the population of Kampala, has a part to play in that?

Mr. Hain: We will certainly strengthen our ties with Uganda, which probably has the best anti-poverty record in Africa, and we are supporting it. I am, however, concerned about a number of aspects of the coming referendum on a no-party democracy. I have expressed them to President Museveni and pointed out the need for a level playing field between those in favour and those against his proposals. It is not obvious that such a level playing field is being provided at the moment. It should include free access to the media, and the role of the BBC World Service, as my hon. Friend says, could be important in that.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): Is the Minister aware that there are 15 million people in the Horn of Africa, including 750,000 Ugandans, who are in fear of starvation and disease as a result of the complete crop failure in that area? Can the House be reassured that the Government are planning preparatory measures to deal with this incipient crisis? Is this not yet another example where arranging for bases in Africa to stockpile equipment and foodstuffs against such emergencies might be helpful?

Mr. Hain: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising this important issue, and I very much share his concerns about the drought and the worsening food problem in that area, which are affecting countries as far south as Kenya. I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development is making the preparations that the hon. Gentleman has identified and will make every effort to ensure that the problem is addressed, as she has so effectively done in other parts of Africa.

Kali Mountford (Colne Valley): Has my hon. Friend had time to read early-day motion 515, in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Stevenage (Barbara Follett)? Is it not worrying that elements in Uganda are flagrantly breaching sanctions, as are some of their neighbours? Does not that inflict terrible damage on the effectiveness of sanctions and international agreements? Is it not time to name and shame?

Mr. Hain: I have indeed seen early-day motion 515, and I am very concerned about the evidence that it contains. In particular, there is a reference to a senior member of Ugandan society. I am sure that President Museveni, who assured me that he would investigate all such reports of sanctions busting involving the supply of UNITA, will want to consider that closely.

One of the reasons why I am travelling to New York straight after Question Time is to join Ambassador Fowler in his campaign with the United Nations to make sure that sanctions are enforced properly to starve UNITA of the fuel, guns, munitions and other supplies that it uses to maintain its murderous war.

EU Enlargement

3. **Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown** (Cotswold): What representations he has made to the Commission on the document, "Adapting the Institutions to make a Success of Enlargement"; and if he will make a statement. [112871]

15. **Mr. Christopher Chope** (Christchurch): What representations the Government have made to other EU member states on the proposals set out in the Commission's document, "Adapting the Institutions to make a Success of Enlargement"; and if he will make a statement. [112883]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Keith Vaz): The Government are in regular contact with the Commission on a range of issues, including the intergovernmental conference. However, IGC decisions will be made by member states alone. The Government's position is set out in the White Paper laid before the House by my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary on 15 February.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: Does the Minister not realise that the document completely reverses the current situation in which voting by unanimity is the norm and qualified majority voting is confined to certain policy areas? If he does not take this opportunity to make it clear that he is opposed to that, he will be seen by Brussels as giving it the green light to take control of a huge range of policy areas such as structural and cohesion funds.

Mr. Vaz: The hon. Gentleman should calm down. Nobody is trying to take over this country—or, indeed, him. The Commission is entitled to put forward its view, and it has made its opinion clear. We have a short and focused agenda of what we shall achieve. We shall fight very hard at ministerial and official level to make sure that our agenda is accepted. Certainly, in relation to the development of the IGC, everything that the UK has asked for is proceeding according to plan. I assure the hon. Gentleman that in the end, as I said, the decision will be taken by the member states and the European Council, and not by the Commission, although of course we always value the Commission's input in those deliberations.

Mr. Chope: Does the Minister not accept that the document shows that the European Commission is using enlargement as a Trojan horse for the creation of a federal European super-state? Can he explain why the Government have not set out in their White Paper any response to the pernicious proposal for European-wide voting lists, which would involve Members of the European Parliament being elected by an electorate of more than 300 million adults? How is that compatible with democracy and national sovereignty?

Mr. Vaz: I feel sorry for the hon. Gentleman if he is so obsessed with the idea of a federalist state that he thinks that everything that emanates from Brussels is a step on the long march to a federalist state. We have made our position absolutely clear. I commend the IGC

document to him. If he has not received a copy of the White Paper launched by my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary on 15 February, I will send him two copies.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): Are there not two problems bedevilling the enlargement process? One is the failure to reform the common agricultural policy, and the other is the freedom of movement of labour. How can there be such freedom when at this very moment most member states are tightening their immigration laws? What would happen in an enlarged Europe with those tightened regulations?

Mr. Vaz: I understand my hon. Friend's point, but the IGC has a short and focused agenda. The purpose of the IGC is to prepare the European Union for enlargement. We have a strict timetable, which means that the IGC must be completed by the end of 2000. If we do not stick to a very short and focused agenda, we will not complete it by the end of 2000, and we will not be ready for enlargement. The issues raised by my hon. Friend are important. We have a tough but fair immigration policy, and we are certain that our European partners will operate on the same basis.

Intergovernmental Conference

4. **Mr. James Paice** (South-East Cambridgeshire): What representations he has received on his White Paper on the IGC; and if he will make a statement. [112872]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Robin Cook): There have been no formal representations on the White Paper, but the response from the applicant countries has been universally positive. Over the past two weeks I have discussed the proposals with the Foreign Ministers of Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Romania. All of them welcomed the fact that the Government are giving such a strong commitment to the reforms needed for enlargement.

Mr. Paice: Does the Foreign Secretary agree that such matters are outwith the real concerns of the majority of the British people? Their concern is that the European Union as at present constructed is still very imperfect, not least because many countries apparently flout many of the regulations to which they have appended their names. Many British people would not support the extension of the Community into other policy areas, be it the existing 15 member states or the applicant countries. Will the Secretary of State give his commitment that he will concentrate at the IGC on making Europe work better at what it is doing now—including the applicant countries as they join—rather than on any further extension of its activities into policy areas in which it is not currently involved?

Mr. Cook: I am happy to agree with the hon. Gentleman that those of us who support the European Union and want Britain's membership of it to be a success also want the European Union to be reformed. That is why one of the issues that we have proposed within the IGC is for reform of the European Court of Justice, particularly its rules of procedure. As I think the hon. Gentleman may agree, although many of his colleagues may not, it will be easier to achieve that if we can get qualified majority voting as the basis for decision making.

Mr. John Cryer (Hornchurch): Are there any areas into which my right hon. Friend would resist the extension of QMV?

Mr. Cook: Yes, there are, and I have repeatedly stated them to the House. They are border controls, defence, social security, taxation, treaty amendments and the financial resources of the European Union.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Does the Foreign Secretary share my concern that the IGC and the enlargement programme might be jeopardised by strained relations with Austria within the EU?

Mr. Cook: No, I do not share that anxiety. I have heard the Austrian Foreign Minister address meetings of the European Union, particularly the General Affairs Council. She made clear her commitment, and the commitment of the Chancellor for whom she works, that they will make sure that the business of Europe continues. It is important that those in Austria who want the European Union to succeed and the other member states of the European Union make it plain that we will not allow Mr. Haider's xenophobic views to wreck the European Union.

Mr. Francis Maude (Horsham): Does the Foreign Secretary accept that the mainstream majority of the public are strongly opposed to further legislative interference from Brussels? Are there any areas of legislation where the Government are prepared to contemplate the extension of qualified majority voting in the course of the IGC, or is the right hon. Gentleman prepared to rule out today any further erosion of the legislative—I stress "legislative"—veto?

Mr. Cook: On public opinion, I was struck by *The Daily Telegraph* poll last week, which found that 50 per cent. of the public recognised the Labour party as representing their views on Europe, and that only 34 per cent. recognised the Tory party as representing their views. I warn the right hon. Gentleman that on this one, we seem to have more of the public with us.

Given the right hon. Gentleman's record, I do wish that he would give up posturing as the champion of the veto. He was, after all, not only the Minister who signed the Maastricht treaty, but who said that he was very happy to sign it. He owes it to the House to tell us now whether he is still happy that he signed it. Is he happy that he signed away 30 years of the veto? If he is, will he please give up posturing as the champion of the veto?

Mr. Maude: By harping on the Maastricht treaty, the Foreign Secretary illustrates the central point. He does not understand the difference between driving to the end of the pier, and carrying on driving when he has reached the end. Does he not understand that such equivocation encourages the Commission to introduce proposals such as it is bringing forward later today, which would get rid of the veto on taxation and social security? Is it because

the Liberal Democrat Member of the European Parliament, Andrew Duff, was right when he said on the IGC recently that the Government's attitude

is in fact much more flexible than certain public declarations suggest . . . ?

Is not that another example of the Foreign Secretary saying one thing in Britain and agreeing to something else in Brussels?

Mr. Cook: I cannot improve on the right hon. Gentleman's metaphor, since he speaks for a party which at the last election constituted the end-of-the-pier show.

We have not only repeatedly explained in the House where we stand on qualified majority voting, but I have published a White Paper on it. Eighty per cent. of decision making in the European Union is done by qualified majority voting, largely as a result of the extension to which Conservative Members agreed when they were in government. There is only limited room for further extension, but we are no more afraid of it than the right hon. Gentleman was when he was a Minister. He once told the House that the number of times we were outvoted "is tiny." That is why it is sometimes in our interest to agree to majority voting.

Gibraltar

5. **Mr. Philip Hammond** (Runnymede and Weybridge): If he will make a statement on Anglo-Spanish relations, with particular reference to the issue of Gibraltar. [112873]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Keith Vaz): Relations with Spain are generally strong. We have a developing dialogue and co-operation across a wide range of bilateral, EU and other international issues.

We believe that co-operation, dialogue and the development of confidence remain the basis for improved relations between the United Kingdom, Spain and Gibraltar.

I had the pleasure of meeting His Royal Highness the Crown Prince Felipe on his recent highly successful visit to London.

Mr. Hammond: In welcoming the new Spanish Government, will the Minister make it clear that the UK expects Spain to abide by all its EU treaty obligations on Gibraltar? Spain has been in flagrant and long-term breach of some of those obligations, especially on border controls and transport between Gibraltar and Spain, direct-dial telephone access to Gibraltar from Spain and Gibraltar travel documents. Will the Minister make it clear to the Spanish Government that unless they move quickly and decisively to resolve those problems, Britain will take action under article 227 to ensure their future compliance?

Mr. Vaz: We will maintain our strong relationship with the Spanish Government, and we shall continue to work with them to resolve any outstanding difficulties. We have made our position on border controls absolutely clear. The Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary—and I when I met Commissioner Vitorino—pointed out our anxiety about the way in which Spain approached border controls. The commissioner told me that the border delay problem was being examined and actively pursued by the Commission. We shall continue to pursue the matter. The way to tackle the problem is not through the sort of dramatic confrontation that the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) suggests, however, but by working with Spain and Gibraltar to ensure that all outstanding problems are resolved.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): Surely the underlying and inescapable matter that the Government must tackle is the acute democratic deficit for people whose Parliament is ultimately this place but who are not represented here. Is it not time that the British Government considered giving representation—albeit limited—in the House to those who are governed by this place despite the existence of a local House of Assembly? That would be consistent not only with the practices of the other principal democracies in relation to their comparable territories but with our human rights obligations and legislation.

Mr. Vaz: My hon. Friend is a great champion of Gibraltar, and I am not surprised that he has raised that matter. He knows the Government's position on the Matthews judgment. We are bound by it, we will honour it and we are considering ways in which to ensure that the people of Gibraltar are enfranchised and can take part in European parliamentary elections.

Mr. John D. Taylor (Strangford): When will Her Majesty's Government cease to contravene the decision of the European Court of Human Rights that the people of Gibraltar, being in the European Union, should have votes in the European parliamentary elections?

Mr. Vaz: The right hon. Gentleman will know from my previous answer that we are bound by the decision of the ECHR and we are seeking ways to ensure that at the next opportunity, when there are elections to the European Parliament, there is enfranchisement under that judgment.

Burma (Human Rights)

6. **Ms Helen Southworth** (Warrington, South): If he will exert pressure on the Burmese regime to respect the human rights of the Burmese people. [112874]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. John Battle): The whole House is appalled by the human rights violations and the lack of democracy in Burma. That includes killings, rape, torture, forced relocation, forced labour, political detentions and a lack of press freedoms. The Government take every opportunity to condemn those violations and to urge the regime to change the situation.

Ms Southworth: I thank my hon. Friend for taking that position. It is essential that we speak out on behalf of the Burmese people and in defence of human rights internationally. Will the Government use their partnership with the International Labour Organisation to take every opportunity to ensure that the Burmese regimes end forced labour?

Mr. Battle: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. Forced labour is one of the large number of human rights

violations. A 1998 ILO report, which highlighted its use, made clear recommendations for the regime to implement, but they have done absolutely nothing about that. However, we shall raise the matter at the March Governing Body of the ILO, which meets at the end of this week, and continue to put pressure on the regime over the use of direct forced labour.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): Is not the despicable catalogue of malpractices of the Burmese regime mirrored across the border in the People's Republic of China? Is it not the case that Burma at least does not threaten its neighbours as China threatens Taiwan and the exercise of Taiwanese democracy? Could not the Government be consistent in their application of an ethical foreign policy? Were they to be so, they might get some praise, and justifiably so.

Mr. Battle: The crucial difference is that the Burmese regime has locked up the democratically elected opposition and will not engage in conversation with them at all. Let me make it clear that at least the Chinese regime is willing to enter into dialogue and discuss human rights. We believe that we should have critical engagement, and have raised with China Tibet, democratisation, freedom of religion, torture, judicial independence, political detainees, Falun Gong and many other issues. Only recently, and as a result of our pressure, we achieved agreement that the all-party group on Tibet can now visit Tibet. The death penalty panel will discuss a strategy for the abolition of capital punishment and we have established a working group of experts on the ratification of the two United Nations human rights covenants. We are making progress to get China to change, but there is no way forward in Burma because the regime will not enter into critical engagement. I hope that the Opposition might at least acknowledge that there is a difference between the two situations.

Mr. Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Hall Green): On human rights, will my hon. Friend make representations on behalf of Mr. U Aung Khin, who was arrested in 1989 by the military authorities and sent to Insein prison? He appears to have disappeared without trace. I have written twice to the embassy asking for information, but it has declined to reply. We must not allow people to disappear without trace.

Mr. Battle: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and I will raise that matter with our embassy staff in Rangoon. We will work with our European Union partners for a resolution even tougher than last year's to be adopted at the forthcoming UN Commission on Human Rights meeting. Individual cases will represent some of the reasons for toughening our approach.

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): Will the Minister tell the House what plans he has to ban investment in Burma by British companies?

Mr. Battle: In June 1997, the Government announced that they would not encourage UK companies to trade or invest in Burma. We suspended all financial support for trade missions to Burma and for trade promotions activities in Burma. British companies that inquire about trade with Burma are informed of the dire political situation, its appalling human rights record and the poor state of the economy. Those are effective sanctions. We did all that as soon as we came into government. It is interesting that the Conservative Government did nothing to raise the issue or to take any action to try to change the situation in Burma.

Mongolia

7. **Mr. James Gray** (North Wiltshire): If he will make a statement on relations with Mongolia. [112875]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. John Battle): Our relations with Mongolia are particularly strong. The Mongolian Prime Minister visited the United Kingdom as a guest of Government from 27 February to 3 March. I understand that the hon. Gentleman visited Mongolia as part of the Inter-Parliamentary Union team. I understand also that it was a successful visit.

Mr. Gray: I am grateful to the Minister for that reply. Will he join me in welcoming the Mongolian delegation, which is visiting Parliament this week, following the successful visit by the Prime Minister last week?

Will the hon. Gentleman congratulate Mongolia on its determination to remain a beacon of pluralistic, democratic free marketeering—surrounded as it is by China on one side and by Russia on the other? In trying to preserve that beacon to the rest of that part of the world, will the Minister seek ways of encouraging mutual exchanges of students from Mongolia to the UK and, to a lesser extent, from the UK to Mongolia?

Mr. Battle: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. The delegation of 10 Mongolian MPs who are here now is most welcome. I hope perhaps to meet them tomorrow. My hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike) has established an all-party group on UK-Mongolia relations. The sixth UK-Mongolia round table is scheduled for 8 to 10 May, when there will be discussions on commerce, the environment and education. We support Chevening scholarships to allow the exchange to take place. I think that the scholarships have been extended to a further two. The spirit of the hon. Gentleman's question is welcome.

We also support, through the EU TACIS programme with Mongolia, funds to help the country's move towards democracy and the opening up of its economy—I think some 30 million euros are now in that programme. We shall continue that positive support.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): My hon. Friend will know that every one of the Mongolian MPs who is visiting the UK has said that the prime objective is to learn from this country about democracy while they are here. Will he make sure that every support is given to that objective? Will he ensure also, through my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development, that the UK does everything possible to ensure that the steps towards democracy are not hindered by the tragedy of the appalling weather conditions which have led to the death of so much livestock in Mongolia?

Mr. Battle: As I said, my hon. Friend has been active in establishing an all-party group. He led the delegation

to Mongolia, and I was grateful for his report-back. The answer is yes. We want to do all that we can to encourage understanding of democracy. The Mongolian MPs have a full programme and I understand that they are visiting the House tomorrow. They are meeting a range of people who have views on our system of democracy. I shall pass on my hon. Friend's message to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development, to ascertain whether we can continue our efforts.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): I am sure that the Minister is well aware that the Mongolian economy was much affected by the collapse of the Russian economy. The fact that Russia took troops home from Mongolia also took quite a lot out of the economy. Will the hon. Gentleman consider what we can do in this country to develop trade links to help Mongolia with its mining industry—I understand that it has considerable mineral deposits? Will he have conversations about how the economy, being improved, will back up the excellent democracy that Mongolia now has?

Mr. Battle: I remind the hon. Gentleman that a trade and economic agreement has been in place between Mongolia and the European Union since 1997. It has granted Mongolia most-favoured status for most of its products. The sixth UK-Mongolia round table—it was originally intended as a bi-annual event—which was postponed owing to Mongolia's internal political troubles in 1998–99, is now back up and running, and is scheduled for 8 to 10 May. It will cover themes of bilateral interest, especially commerce and trade, and I think it will be a productive meeting.

Iran

8. **Mr. Gareth R. Thomas** (Harrow, West): If he will make a statement on his recent talks with the Foreign Minister of Iran. [112876]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Robin Cook): Dr. Kharrazi's visit in January was the first official visit to Britain by a Foreign Minister of Iran since the revolution 20 years ago. His visit enabled us to take forward our co-operation in areas of mutual concern such as the drugs trade. We are now contributing more than £1 million to assist Iran in combating the drugs trade. I impressed on Dr. Kharrazi the importance that we attach to Iran's commitment concerning Salman Rushdie, and our concern about a number of issues, including the continuing detention without trial of members of the Jewish community and others.

The subsequent elections in Iran produced an impressive majority for reform. The clear mandate of the people of Iran for modernisation justifies our strategy of critical dialogue with those in Iran who want to engage with the modern world.

Mr. Thomas: I am grateful for that answer, but will my right hon. Friend think carefully before agreeing to visit Iran? Will he bear in mind that the Government of Iran continue to provide funding, weapons and training for terrorist groups opposed to the middle east peace process? Will he also consider the case of the 13 Jews in Shiraz, who were arrested on apparently dubious charges of espionage? Are they not entitled to proper legal representation and to a fair trial that is open to international observers?

Mr. Cook: I assure my hon. Friend that I share his anxiety. I impressed on Dr. Kharrazi the importance that we attach to the middle east peace process and the severe damage that would be done not only to the peace process, but to relations between Iran and the rest of the world if anything were done to disrupt that peace process.

I pressed Dr. Kharrazi on the question of the remaining Jewish detainees. I am pleased that three were subsequently released on bail and that a trial date has now been set. We shall do everything possible to ensure that the trial is fair and open.

Sir David Madel (South-West Bedfordshire): Did Iran's Foreign Minister say that his Government support the middle east peace process? If they do, should not the Government of Iran recognise the state of Israel?

Mr. Cook: I very much hope that the Government of Iran will eventually recognise the state of Israel; that would plainly be expected as Iran engages with the outside the world. However, I have to admit that, no, I did not get a statement of Iran's support for the peace process. I hope that the new mandate will ensure that the Government of Iran listen to those of us who urge restraint on them so that they do not disrupt the peace process.

Russia

9. **Mr. Mike Gapes** (Ilford, South): What assessment he has made of recent political developments in Russia; and if he will make a statement. [112877]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Robin Cook): I visited Moscow last month and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister visited St. Petersburg at the weekend. It is in the interests of Britain and the west that we engage with Russia at the highest level. My right hon. Friend and I both expressed Britain's deep concern about the level of military violence in Chechnya and the unnecessary human suffering that it has caused. Mr. Putin assured my right hon. Friend that Russia will permit access to Chechnya by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson, and by international bodies such as the Red Cross and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

It is important to our international interests that we are able to talk frankly to Russia about issues on which we disagree, such as Chechnya, and to strengthen our working relationship in respect of matters such as the Balkans and arms control, in which we need Russia's co-operation to succeed.

Mr. Gapes: I am grateful for my right hon. Friend's answer. In December, I was in Siberia in my role as an OSCE observer of the Duma elections. Russia is now developing into a vibrant democracy that covers 11 time zones. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is vital to build good relations between the UK Parliament and the newly elected Russian Parliament, and to build on the

welcome visit by our right hon. Friend the Prime Minister? Does the Foreign Secretary agree that the new Russian Duma, with six parties represented and 100 independent Members, will be far more effective than its predecessor? Does he share my hope that that Parliament will ratify the START 2 treaty as soon as possible?

Mr. Cook: I commend my hon. Friend on his dedication in going to Siberia in December. His work and that of many others enabled us to conclude that those elections were free and fair, and I am pleased that Russia has invited the OSCE to monitor the forthcoming presidential elections as well.

We welcome the changes within the Duma, and I agree entirely that more parliamentary exchanges will be helpful in our efforts to support it. In the past year, we have had 14 Russian parliamentary delegations to Britain, but there have been only four from Britain to Russia, so we are behind. The more we do to maintain such contacts, the more able we shall be to support arms control initiatives of the sort mentioned by my hon. Friend.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): Do not the Government feel some discomfort about breaking bread and sharing salt with Mr. Putin? He is the man who directed the campaign in which Chechnya was turned into a wasteland and innocent men, women and children were subjected to indiscriminate bombing and shelling. Before we offer advice on the reform of the Russian economy, should we not insist on a commitment from Mr. Putin that, both in word and in deed, he and his Government will respect the human rights of the people of Chechnya?

Mr. Cook: I agree with the right hon. and learned Gentleman that the situation in Chechnya is deplorable and unacceptable. My right hon. Friend and I have engaged at the highest level in Russia to express that view. If we have criticisms to make, we should not resist making them in person to the people who can change the policy. I share the conclusion of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs that Chechnya is a reason why Britain should be more, not less, involved in dialogue with Russia.

Mr. Tony Lloyd (Manchester, Central): Is my right hon. Friend aware that many Labour Members support that position? We need active engagement in Russia for precisely the reasons that he has just outlined. We must get across to the present Russian Government that there can be no excuse for murder and torture of civilians, and no suggestion that there is a parallel between atrocities that have certainly been carried out by Chechen guerrillas and the actions of the Russia state. It is only by face-to-face confrontation that that message can be delivered to President-in-waiting Putin.

Mr. Cook: I agree very much with my hon. Friend's conclusion. I also share his view that the international community must have greater expectations of actions by a state than it has of actions by individuals. That is why I very much welcome the fact that Russia has indicated that the United Nations Commission on Human Rights and the OSCE can visit Chechnya. When we visited Russia, my right hon. Friend and I impressed on Mr. Putin the importance of transparency as the best safeguard against violations of human rights.

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): There is something not quite right about the answers that the Foreign Secretary is giving us. We know that the Prime Minister prefers to enjoy a night at the opera in St. Petersburg rather than criticise Russian actions in Chechnya. Even the French press have today said that if the Prime Minister

> wants to appear as a grand master of diplomacy he will have to wash his hands first.

The Foreign Secretary told us that he was frank with the Russians over Chechnya, but the Russian press, which is unspun, told another story. They said that the Foreign Secretary had been

> mild in the highest degree . . . extremely favourable to Moscow

and that he was opposed to a toughening of the stance on Chechnya. Are not he and the Prime Minister making an art form of saying one thing and doing another? Will he be joining the Prime Minister at the basin?

Mr. Cook: If the hon. Lady really believes that the Moscow press is unspun, she should spend more time in Russia. I vigorously rebut the suggestion that I said one thing in private and another in public. I assure the House that what I said at the press conference in Moscow was what I said in the meeting.

It is a bit rich for the hon. Lady to criticise Government Front-Bench Members when the former Conservative spokesman under whom she served until only last month said that the sooner the Russians won the better. At least we have the courage to criticise the Russians, whereas the Conservatives egged them on.

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): Will the Foreign Secretary confirm that, in his meetings with the Russian Foreign Minister and the Russian Government, he is demanding the withdrawal of Russian troops from Chechnya, the engagement of a political process to bring about a solution there, and a guarantee that they will not engage in military activities in similar situations in Russia? It cannot be said that Russia is a vibrant democracy if it is bombarding part of its country using first world war methods against people who have a different view of the world from that held in Moscow.

Mr. Cook: I did not demand the withdrawal of Russian troops from Chechnya, which, as my hon. Friend has just acknowledged, is part of the Russian Federation. The difficulties of the past two years may have arisen because all troops were withdrawn from that area. I concur with my hon. Friend on the other points that he made, and I assure him that I pressed for a political process. Our criticism of what has been done in Chechnya has all along been that military violence alone will not work, far less the excessive military violence that we have witnessed and that has caused the suffering to which my hon. Friend referred.

Kosovo

10. **Mr. Mark Oaten** (Winchester): What recent discussions he has had with his colleagues in the United Nations regarding Kosovo; and if he will make a statement. [112878]

12. **Mr. David Chidgey** (Eastleigh): What recent discussions he has had with Foreign Ministers of other countries regarding Kosovo; and if he will make a statement. [112880]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Robin Cook): I most recently discussed Kosovo with Kofi Annan this morning. As I said after the meeting, we agreed that much progress had been made. A total of 800,000 refugees have returned to Kosovo; the first 350 local police drawn from all ethnic communities have completed training; and 90 per cent. of children have been able to attend school, something that they were denied for a decade by Belgrade.

Much remains to be done, particularly to tackle crime. Today I have announced that Britain will be responding to the appeal for international judges and prosecutors. Forty British lawyers have expressed an interest, and I hope that some of them will be able to take up their posts next month.

We take seriously the problems that remain in Kosovo, and we will take every responsible step to resolve them; but we should never forget that the problems would be much worse if we had not acted, and had left nearly 1 million refugees without homes during the winter.

Mr. Oaten: Does the Foreign Secretary share Madeleine Albright's fear that the European Community is not pulling its weight in delivering hard cash quickly to help to deal with the reconstruction problems in Kosovo?

Mr. Cook: I met Madeleine Albright last week and we discussed the state of Kosovo at some length. Let me point out that the European Union is funding the majority of UNMIK's administration budget, and that this country, of which the hon. Gentleman is a Member of Parliament, has funded the utilities, the prisons, the transformation of the Kosovo Liberation Army, the formation of the Kosovo protection force and the health service in Pristina. It has provided civil experts for UNMIK, is supporting de-mining and, over the coming year, will fund reconstruction of the health and social services and the registration of electors. We are investing considerable resources and we are working hard to make a success of what we are doing.

Mr. Donald Anderson (Swansea, East): My right hon. Friend will be pleased to learn that last week we heard universal praise for the British contribution—for the professionalism of our soldiers, the contribution of our police and our civil administrators. There was, however, deep-seated concern about what was seen to be the proposed precipitate withdrawal of the team from the Department for International Development in Kosovo, which could, it was felt, lead to a great gap and to great disturbance. Will my right hon. Friend, in co-operation with our right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development, undertake to review the contribution of that Department, to ensure that there is, at best, a more phased withdrawal?

Mr. Cook: I read with interest the reports from Pristina of the visit by my hon. Friend and members of the Foreign Affairs Committee. I am pleased about the visit, and look forward to discussing it with them when I give evidence to the Committee on Thursday.

I think that there has been a misunderstanding in regard to the point raised by my hon. Friend. It is true that a change is in progress in the Department for International Development in regard to who is responsible for the support work in Kosovo: it is shifting from the section that deals with humanitarian crises to the section that deals with reconstruction, because that is what is happening in Kosovo. I can, however, tell my hon. Friend that only last week the DFID confirmed that its budget in Kosovo this year would be £29 million, which will help reconstruction. The DFID will be fully involved in that.

Mr. Martin Bell (Tatton): Is the Foreign Secretary aware of recent instances in which the activities of the international police force in Kosovo have been frustrated and obstructed by the French military and the French-controlled sector?

Mr. Cook: I read last week's report in *The Times* with interest. I made inquiries, and I am sure that the report was not correct in saying that British policemen had withdrawn from Mitrovica because of criticism. It is important for all members of KFOR, the French and everyone else, to co-operate fully with the police and to provide rapid access to scenes of crime.

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West): I welcome my right hon. Friend's announcement of the supply of additional judges to Kosovo. When we were there, we were made very much aware of the problem experienced by the police, who could arrest people but could then do nothing other than caution and release them.

Will my right hon. Friend ensure that there is a uniform policy across Kosovo of dismantling paramilitary forces, whether they are the KLA or the Serb paramilitary in Mitrovica, so that there can be a real return to civil government?

Mr. Cook: I entirely agree: it is important for Kosovo to be ruled and governed by the UN international mandate, rather than by men who happen to have managed to hold on to their weapons.

We have worked hard to try to reduce the volume of weapons in Kosovo. Eight thousand have been handed in voluntarily, and a further 4,000 have been confiscated as a result of KFOR's work. I agree that it is important for us to continue to press home that work, to ensure that Mitrovica does not remain an enclave under paramilitary control but is part of the UNMIK mandate throughout Kosovo, and to ensure that those expelled from their homes there have the opportunity to return.

Mr. David Wilshire (Spelthorne): Following the discussions that the right hon. Gentleman has just reported to the House, is he able to tell us the number of Kosovar Albanians forced out of Kosovo, as distinct from the number terrorised out of their homes prior to the start of the NATO attacks on Yugoslavia?

Mr. Cook: A total of 850,000 were forced out of their homes during that period of conflict. As to those who were forced from their homes in the period preceding the conflict, that, of course, will depend on the period that is taken, but, in October of the preceding year, when Holbrooke attended negotiations in Belgrade, 250,000 Kosovar Albanians had already been forced from their

homes. The idea that the ethnic cleansing of Kosovo began with the NATO bombing is totally in defiance of the history of that troubled province in the preceding year. It was the victim of repeated oppression.

Egypt

11. **Mr. Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield): What recent discussions he has had with the Government of Egypt concerning the treatment of Christians in Egypt. [112879]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Peter Hain): When my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary visited Cairo in January, he discussed inter-faith issues with members of the Government, including President Mubarak. We were concerned to hear reports of violence in early January in upper Egypt. The Egyptian authorities have pledged to carry out a thorough investigation.

Mr. Sheerman: My hon. Friend will be pleased to know that that will be greatly welcomed by the Christian community in this country, but is he aware that the conservative estimates are that, last year, tens of thousands of Christians were killed for their faith? Is he further aware that in not only Egypt, but Indonesia and Pakistan, there are real concerns about the use of blasphemy laws to imprison and to torture Christian prisoners? Will he stand up time and again not only for pluralism, but for religious tolerance in all those countries?

Mr. Hain: Indeed I will. I am happy to acknowledge and pay tribute to my hon. Friend's close and dedicated interest in the matter. Britain has a proud record, having a multi-faith, multi-cultural, multi-ethnic society. We press that as a model for the rest of the world. We criticise, condemn and ask for an end to any attacks on Christians throughout the world, just as we do any attacks on members of other faiths.

Mr. Francis Maude (Horsham): Was the treatment of the Coptic Christians discussed during the visits to Egypt last October and this February by Lord Levy? Is the Foreign Office told what he gets up to in his role as the Prime Minister's personal special envoy? While the Minister is at it, will he confirm that No. 10 has taken over responsibility for policy on the middle east, the United States, Russia and the European Union? Does he recall that, on one of the Foreign Secretary's earlier forays in the middle east, *The Jerusalem Post* asked:

> with a diplomat like Cook by his side, how can Blair fail to loom as a giant statesman?

Is that the Foreign Secretary's main role: to make the Prime Minister look good?

Mr. Hain: On that performance, the right hon. Gentleman will be shadow Foreign Secretary for as short a time as his predecessor. Is he really suggesting that the Prime Minister should not take an interest in those international issues and support the Foreign Secretary's work?

Every fair-minded citizen will condemn outright the grubby and pathetic little campaign being waged by the Opposition in certain sections of the media against Lord Levy. He travels as the Prime Minister's envoy—on his behalf—representing interests, whether economic or others, in all parts of the middle east, from Morocco to Damascus. For example, when he spoke to the Syrian Government, he was instrumental in starting the negotiations between Syria and the Israelis. He should be applauded for that, not condemned. As he travels at his own expense and in his own time, the House should be grateful for his work and for the fact that Britain's interests are being represented through him, with the Prime Minister's agreement. He reports regularly to the Foreign Secretary and to Ministers such as me. It is time that the right hon. Gentleman stopped the snivelling little campaign against Lord Levy.

Intergovernmental Conference

13. **Mr. Owen Paterson** (North Shropshire): Which items Her Majesty's Government have ruled out for an extension of qualified majority voting at the intergovernmental conference; and if he will make a statement. [112881]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Keith Vaz): The Government have made it clear on a number of occasions, in the House and in our White Paper on the intergovernmental conference, that we shall consider the possible extension of qualified majority voting on a case-by-case basis. When it is in Britain's interests to support QMV, we shall do so. However, when key national interests are at stake—such as treaty changes, border controls, social security, taxation, own resources and defence—we shall insist on retaining unanimity.

Mr. Paterson: Will the Government refuse to sign any treaty that extends QMV to cover any sphere of British taxation?

Mr. Vaz: Yes.

Cameroon

14. **Mr. David Chaytor** (Bury, North): If he will make a statement on human rights in Cameroon. [112882]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Peter Hain): Cameroon's recent human rights record has been poor, and Cameroon has made little progress towards fulfilling the commitments on human rights and governance made on joining the Commonwealth in 1995.

Mr. Chaytor: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. May I draw his attention particularly to the case of members of the Southern Cameroon National Council who were arrested on 8-9 January, in the south-west province? Will he make specific representations to the Government of Cameroon on the fate of those SCNC members? Does he share the view

expressed in the report by the United Nations Commission on Human Rights on the routine use of torture in the central prison in Yaounde?

Mr. Hain: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that issue—in which he has taken a close interest, and which we raise with the Cameroon Government. The Cameroon Government's human rights record is very poor. There is widespread use of torture and detention without charge. A special Government unit, the Brigade Anti-Gang, is responsible for hundreds of extra-judicial killings in the north—where there should have been another trial of 76 north-west detainees, who have been detained without charge for two years, and of whom seven have died in detention. That is completely unacceptable, and the Cameroon Government must honour their obligations to their citizens and—as a Commonwealth member—to the Harare declaration.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Given that twice in two years Cameroon has come bottom of the Transparency International corruption perception index, how has the hon. Gentleman satisfied himself that no British financial assistance to Cameroon has been in any way misappropriated or contributed to the abuse of human rights?

Mr. Hain: We have satisfied ourselves to the greatest possible extent on the matter. However, if the hon. Gentleman has any evidence to the contrary on it, I should be very pleased to hear it. We have also taken a very tough line within the Commonwealth. At the meeting of the Commonwealth ministerial action group in New York, which I attended, I pressed for a Commonwealth mission to go to Cameroon to make an assessment for itself. Cameroon entered into certain obligations when it joined the Commonwealth in 1995, but it is not honouring those obligations. Its continued membership of the councils of the Commonwealth is therefore in question.

Iraq

17. **Mr. Tam Dalyell** (Linlithgow): If he will investigate the reasons for the recent resignations of *(a)* Hans von Sponeck and *(b)* Jutta Burghardt from UN agencies involved in Iraq. [112885]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Peter Hain): No. We are looking forward to the appointment of replacements who will channel their efforts into getting the best out of the United Nations humanitarian programme, as improved and enlarged by Security Council resolution 1284

Mr. Dalyell: On sanctions, who did Kofi Annan support—von Sponeck and Burghardt, his own officials, or the British or American Governments?

Mr. Hain: On sanctions, Kofi Annan supported the policy of the United Nations, which is articulated in the new Security Council resolution 1284—on which Britain led in securing its passage through the Security Council. The resolution provides for extra humanitarian relief by lifting the limits on oil for food. It also provides for the suspension of sanctions if Saddam Hussein agrees to an arms inspection regime going in.

I respect my hon. Friend's interest and close involvement in the Iraqi situation—he deserves credit for that—but I find it most difficult to comprehend what alternative is being proposed by the critics of sanctions. Would they, by lifting sanctions, allow Saddam Hussein the freedom to attack neighbours—as he did in the cases of Iran and Kuwait; to attack the Kurds in the north and the Shi'ites in the south; and to continue to attack his own citizens? He has a dreadful, tyrannical record. I have yet to hear a coherent alternative to sanctions, although we must all be concerned about the humanitarian suffering that the United Nations' new resolution is designed to deal with.

Dangerous People with Severe Personality Disorder

3.30 pm

Mr. John Heppell (Nottingham, East): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to amend the law with respect to the assessment and detention of dangerous people with severe personality disorder.

As the title suggests, the Bill would allow the assessment of individuals with a severe personality disorder and their detention if they were felt to present a danger to the public. It specifies that they should be detained in establishments that provide a reasonable level of security for the public and services for the management and treatment of the disorder, although, unlike at present, it would not be a condition of any detention order that such treatment should be likely to alleviate or prevent deterioration in a person's condition. The Bill would allow for the periodic review of any detention and the release on licence of any individual who was no longer considered to present a danger to the public.

The Bill is not a panacea. It would not deal with everyone with a personality disorder. Some of them present a very low risk, and some no risk at all, to the general public. It would not deal with all paedophiles, although a small proportion of the people whom it would affect may be paedophiles. It would deal only with a small minority of people, but at present the risk that they pose to the public is not dealt with adequately and attempts to treat them are insufficient.

Every day, psychiatrists, psychologists and other clinical specialists, as well as police, probation officers and social workers, make life-and-death decisions about how much risk individuals present to the public and whether that risk has reduced enough to allow them into the community. Those who make the decisions are trying to protect the rights of the individual and the community. The Bill would not change that. Such decisions still have to be made. I recognise that the decisions are not always clear cut and that those who make them are in a no-win situation. Inevitably, sometimes they get it wrong. Often they are criticised for taking someone's liberty away when the risk is low. More often, they are criticised—usually with the benefit of hindsight—for releasing someone into the community who offends or reoffends. I do not want to join in that criticism. I recognise that for every case that goes tragically wrong in a blaze of media attention, there are hundreds in which we have got the balance right and the correct decision has been made. The aim of the Bill is to make it possible for a small number of people to be detained under a similar process when, after a proper assessment, they are shown to be a serious danger to the public.

I am proposing the legislation not because of a morbid interest in the subject or as a theoretical exercise, but because the problem exists and to ignore it and do nothing is not an option. Last year I was faced with the prospect of a special unit being set up in Nottingham prison in my constituency to house paedophiles. My immediate reaction was hostile, as was that of the local press and people in the area. The story was not an example of good communications by those involved. News about the unit leaked out before there had been any consultation, including with me.

Because people were not aware of all the facts, many invented their own. Dozens of rumours began to circulate. Because I did not know the truth, I could not squash those rumours. At one stage I was told that 30 paedophiles were coming to the area, some of whom would be resident, while others would visit on a daily basis. I was told that a door would be built in the prison and they would have keys so that they could go in and out as they wanted. It was all nonsense being peddled as truth, but I found it impossible to undo later much of the damage that was done at that time. Many local residents were whipped up into a fury. Without the full facts, that was understandable, but even when we had the facts many questions were left unanswered.

Initially, it was planned to house three dangerous offenders. In the end, only two bedsits were constructed. Two notorious paedophiles are now in occupancy away from the community. Initially I was not thrilled at the prospect. I met my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, Ministers, civil servants and experts in dealing with such offenders. Only then did I realise that the alternative to having them housed inside the prison behind five locked doors, with closed-circuit television cameras and 24-hour surveillance, was for them to go out into the community. Admittedly, that may not have been in Nottingham, but it would be somewhere in the community where they would have much more opportunity to reoffend. I was told that those people would reoffend: not that it was possible or probable, but that it was certain. Everybody agreed on that—the police, the probation service, the psychiatrists and the psychologists.

Unfortunately, as the law stands, if someone is dangerous and a psychiatrist says that they can be treated, they can be held somewhere secure for that treatment. However, if someone is dangerous but a psychiatrist says that they cannot be treated, it is deemed that they cannot be held anywhere. That is not quite as daft as it sounds, and I appreciate why that is the case. Nevertheless, one does not need to be the Lord Chancellor to recognise that, in many circumstances, that is unacceptable.

The six months that the paedophiles have been in Nottingham prison have been a great success. I acknowledge that there has been no incident during that time, and that no child has been at risk. I am sure that children would have been at risk had those people been out in the community. However, that is not a long-term solution, which must involve new legislation and new resources. The Bill is an attempt to develop that long-term solution and to take the first tentative steps towards it.

This is a complex area of law that requires careful legislation. To remove someone's liberty without trial is not a course of action that anyone should contemplate without careful consideration. Unlike some sections of the media, I do not condemn the Government for not introducing legislation. The last thing we need is a knee-jerk reaction to the problem. It was right and proper that, before legislation was embarked upon, there should have been proper consultation with all the relevant agencies. I have used opinion B in the Government's consultation document as the basis of the Bill.

I see the Bill as a practical solution to a real, not theoretical, problem. I am grateful to the agencies which have contacted me and offered advice and constructive criticism: the Royal College of Nursing, the Royal College of Psychiatrists, MIND and Liberty have all given good advice on the pitfalls of legislation. I have said to

[Mr. John Heppell]

all of them that I see the difficulties and the problems. I recognise that it is important that we get the Bill right and, with careful deliberation, we can get it right. I am determined to press ahead unless someone can furnish me with a real alternative.

Many people were upset when I would not demonstrate against the Government putting two paedophiles in Nottingham prison. The reason for that was not pressure from the Home Secretary, or any other Minister. I was under no pressure—there are no votes in the House on these issues, and no whip is applied. There was not a party line for me to follow. The reason why I would not join others in condemning the proposals was simple: I could think of no real alternative that did not put children at risk. I still think that I was right, and I am in a similar position now in that I see no real alternative to the Bill.

Some of my constituents have offered solutions ranging from marooning those individuals on a desert island to drowning them. The most common solution put forward was the one that seems to be the standard solution proposed to almost every problem—I refer, of course, to chopping off their goolies. I apologise if that is unparliamentary language, Madam Speaker, but that is how it is often put to me. That is not a real option, and we can see that it is neither practical nor possible within the law—and, as has been said, it does not work.

Today, coincidentally, the Select Committee on Home Affairs has published its report on managing dangerous people with severe personality disorders. Some may not believe it, but that is a coincidence. If anyone believes that I have enough influence to persuade the Whips to give me a ten-minute rule Bill spot on the day that the Select Committee produces a report that proposes the same conclusions as my Bill, they must think that I have the same reputation as Machiavelli.

The Bill would provide a good option for dangerous people with severe personality disorders. It would offer them more than they are offered at present and would also offer protection to the public.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. John Heppell, Mr. Vernon Coaker, Jane Griffiths, Mr. Nigel Griffiths, Mr. Steve McCabe, Siobhain McDonagh, Mr. Ian Pearson, Ms Bridget Prentice, Mr. Terry Rooney, Mr. David Taylor, Mr. David Watts and Mr. Phil Woolas.

DANGEROUS PEOPLE WITH SEVERE PERSONALITY DISORDER

Mr. John Heppell accordingly presented a Bill to amend the law with respect to the assessment and detention of dangerous people with severe personality disorder: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 21 July, and to be printed [Bill 88].

Orders of the Day

Supplementary Vote on Account 2000–01

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That, at this day's sitting, Standing Order No. 55 (Questions on voting of estimates, &c.) shall apply as if the words '(aa) supplementary votes on account for the coming financial year;' were inserted after line 21.—*[Mr. McNulty.]*

3.41 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): This matter caught my eye when it was first sneaked on to the Order Paper on Friday. When I read the motion, I began to muse on why the Government would wish to table something that contained the phrase

shall apply as if the words

for the consideration of the House, especially on a Friday afternoon. I began to wonder whether some skulduggery was involved.

I am delighted that the procedures of the House allow for a full and proper debate on the matter which, as I hope to illustrate, is rather more important than the Government believe. The provenance of the motion is, I believe—subject to any correction—Standing Order No. 54, which states:

Three days, other than Fridays, before 5th August, shall be allotted in each session for the consideration of estimates.

One of the most important elements of the relationship between the House of Commons and the Executive was always the consideration of the provision of Supply by the House of Commons to the Government. I submit that anything that relates to that should be the subject of a full debate. However, the motion appears to provide—I am, of course, open to correction when the Minister replies—for the matter to be debated in substance but only under the condition that there is no debate after 10 o'clock. That will not do. I suspect that the main business today, which includes several amendments and Third Reading, means that there is only a very slim chance that the substance of later motions will be discussed before 10 o'clock.

The motion that we are being asked to approve will probably allow later motions to slip through without proper debate. That cannot be acceptable. The helpful introductory note to the supplementary vote on account states:

The Vote on Account provides finance to allow existing services to continue during the early months of the coming financial year, pending Parliament's consideration of the main Supply Estimates.

In other words, the motion is a mechanism to allow government to function and to allow the continued spending of moneys before the House has a proper opportunity fully to consider the matters.

Rather impertinently, it goes on:

The amounts in the Vote on Account are normally a standard 45 per cent. of the amounts already voted for the corresponding services in the current year.

That is all very cosy. There is not much opportunity for the House of Commons to give proper consideration to the substance of what it is being asked to agree. The motion was slipped in on Friday, and again late last night. Thanks to the eternal vigilance of an hon. Member whom I am too modest to name, it is now—rightly—the subject of debate on the Floor of the House. However, the motion

states that there can be no debate after 10 o'clock, and that makes me suspect that the Government believe that the matter will not be properly considered.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): A moment ago my right hon. Friend demanded a full debate on this matter, but has he noticed that the Leader of the House is not present, even though the motion is in her name? Her deputy, the Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office, is here, however. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Government must ensure that the debate continues for as long as is needed for the right hon. Lady to hop, skip and jump to the Chamber?

Mr. Forth: My hon. Friend is normally a charitable man, but he is probably being a bit hard on the Government. I am a fair man, and must concede that the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, in whose name the vote on account motion has been tabled, has been courteous enough to attend. I am confident that he will give us a full reply to this debate. Perhaps the Leader of the House's deputy will tell us about the procedural matter, and then the Financial Secretary will tell us something about the substance of the motion.

The final page of the document from which I have quoted leaves me rather confused. The table listing the allocation to votes contains two salient figures. The first is the sum of £7 million, the existing provision voted on account. The second figure is the real substance of the matter—a sum of £1,000 that is to be added to the estimates.

Normally, I am prepared to go a long way to accept matters at their face value, but that second figure tries me to the limit. The Government have tabled a separate motion, under the provisions of Standing Orders Nos. 54 and 55, and it has appeared in the Order Paper on three successive days. When passed, it will secure for the Government additional funding of £1,000. That seems rather odd.

It is the small size of the Government's request that leads me to think that we should be a given a full explanation. I do not believe that the Treasury is that strapped for cash, as we are led to believe that it is rather flush right now. Perhaps the Financial Secretary will expatiate on the Government's war chest before he explains why he needs the House to vote him an extra £1,000.

I raise these questions because I do not know the answer to them. I hope that the Minister will tell us why he seeks to detain the House over a sum of £1,000. The footnote to the final table in the document states that the sum includes provision

for expenditure on the Crown Prosecution Inspectorate which is being set up under the Crown Prosecution Inspectorate Bill which received Third Reading in the House of Lords on 3 February 2000.

That is a little teasing. If the Government can set up such an inspectorate for £1,000 I shall be more impressed than I usually am at their efficiency. However, if the Minister assures me that that is what he is going to do, I shall be the first to vote for the proposal, to demonstrate the gratitude of the taxpayers of Bromley and Chislehurst. I will take a bit of persuading, however, because something tells me that that is not necessarily the whole story.

I would like to think that we could have debated the substance later in the day. However, as we will probably not be able to vote on it later in the day—because one way or another, I suspect that we will get to 10 o'clock without that opportunity arising—we need to know why the Government are trying to sneak through this measure, whatever the amount may be, without being sufficiently confident of their case to give it a proper opportunity for debate on the Floor of the House. Those are the questions that I want to ask today.

3.50 pm

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): I would like to refine what my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) has just said. The House is indebted to him for his eagle-eyed attention to the business. At least four questions need to be specifically addressed.

First, footnote a. to the estimates tells us what is really happening. We are told that the sum shown includes provision for expenditure on the crown prosecution inspectorate. When the word "includes" appears, we can be quite sure that other matters may be included as well. Will the Financial Secretary be good enough to tell us whether any other items of expenditure fall outside that provided for under the crown prosecution inspectorate? Otherwise, the word "includes" would be otiose.

My second point is about substance. We are being asked to vote £1,000 on account of the crown prosecution inspectorate. I am the first to believe that the inspectorate is a very worthy organisation, but we are entitled to know a little more about it. How many officials are we sanctioning? What will be its annual cost? How many officials have so far been recruited? When does the expenditure start? If we are being asked to vote money, we have a right to answers to those questions.

Mr. Forth: I hope that my right hon. and learned Friend does not assume or expect that the expenditure has already started, since we have not yet approved it. Presumably, he is anticipating it as future expenditure.

Mr. Hogg: I never make concessions of that kind in favour of the Government. My right hon. Friend raises a very fair point, and I hope that Ministers will address it. We need to know how many staff there will be, when they will be recruited, and when the money will start to be spent.

Mr. Bercow: Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that it would be a matter of legitimate concern to the House if, in anticipation of the likely approval of the sum of money, applications for staff had already been received, or advertisements in pursuit of staff had been made by the inspectorate? If the House decided not to approve the sum in question, there would be a number of disappointed and angry people with reason to be dissatisfied with the conduct of the Government.

Mr. Hogg: Interestingly, that point leads to my next question—namely, the relationship between a money resolution and the supplementary estimates. Will the Financial Secretary be good enough to tell us the extent to which the matter has already been covered by a money resolution and, for the purposes of the supplementary estimates before us, the exact relationship between the money resolution, for which he was no doubt responsible, and the supplementary estimates?

Mr. Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks): Has not my right hon. and learned Friend touched on the kernel of

[Mr. Michael Fallon]

the matter? The expenditure in question relates not to an Act but to a Bill, and it would probably be better approved during the course of proceedings on the Bill. Instead, the House is being asked to authorise expenditure to a body that is not yet law.

Mr. Hogg: There is a great deal of force in what my hon. Friend says. I have not checked *Hansard*—that is a failing on my part—but the Ministers who have the conduct of the Bill should have told us of its spending implications when they were taking the matter through the House. They may have done so. It would be helpful if the Minister would tell us what he told the House when the Bill was debated on Second Reading.

Mr. Forth: Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that much of what has already been said in this brief debate would have been rendered otiose if, at the beginning of it, the Minister had had the courtesy to explain to the House why he wanted the matter to be approved? Instead, he sits in his place—albeit most courteously and patiently—while we speculate on the matter with no information from him.

Mr. Hogg: I shall not accuse the Minister of discourtesy; I, too, have been a Minister, so I know what he was hoping. He hoped that my right hon. Friend would not hop to his feet—not an unworthy hope and one that I understand.

Mr. Bercow: It was unrealistic.

Mr. Hogg: Indeed—but it was not unworthy. The Minister hoped that the matter would go through on the nod. However, happily from the point of view of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst intervened to ask for a full explanation.

We are being asked to approve £1,000. Does it include the cost of printing the motion, or is that an additional cost? In order that the matter may be wholly transparent, what is the cost of printing the document?

3.56 pm

Mr. William Ross (East Londonderry): I am pleased that the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) initiated a debate on the motion, because it proposes certain changes to departmental expenditure in the Northern Ireland Office. The Northern Ireland appropriation order will soon come before the House, but the estimates before us deal with expenditure that falls outwith that order. This debate seems to offer us our only opportunity to consider that increased expenditure. As other hon. Members have pointed out, it is impossible—

Madam Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman needs to be clear that we are dealing with a procedural motion—not the Northern Ireland Office.

Mr. Ross: The procedure of the House is that the estimates deal with expenditures in Northern Ireland. Hon. Members have already referred to expenditure elsewhere. I note that the document refers to expenditure in respect of the Saville inquiry—

Madam Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is being somewhat repetitious. I have warned him. He is considering the wrong estimates.

Mr. Ross: I procured the document before me from the Vote Office; it covers the Northern Ireland Office estimates. They do not fall within the appropriation order for Northern Ireland; they are completely different. We rarely debate them in the House—

Madam Speaker: Order. I have tried to explain to the hon. Gentleman that this is a procedural motion; it relates only to one narrow point. If the hon. Gentleman approaches the Chair, I will give him the documents that he may need. In the meantime, perhaps another Member would like to speak.

3.58 pm

Mr. David Wilshire (Spelthorne): I shall try to return to the document that I was given by the Vote Office—I hope it is the same one that you have, Madam Speaker—so that we can have a meaningful dialogue.

One of the greatest responsibilities on the shoulders of all Members of Parliament, and one of our least-used powers, is the scrutiny and control of expenditure. I have been a Member of the House for 13 years, yet I am still amazed at how often we nod through £1 billion here or £1 billion there. I make no apology for talking about this £1,000; with hindsight, I wish that I had spent more time talking about the billions of pounds.

The process of wresting control of expenditure from the Executive has been central to the development of the parliamentary democracy that we now enjoy. If we allow that scrutiny and control to wither completely, we should not be surprised if our parliamentary democracy withered and died as well. It is in that spirit that I put my questions about the document to the Minister.

My first question arises from paragraph 2 of the document's introduction. It states:

> The main Supply Estimates for 2000-01 will be presented in April 2000.

However, a request has been made under that provision before the main estimates appear before us in April. We are entitled to assume therefore that it is a matter of some urgency. However, the Financial Secretary did not have the courtesy to explain to the House what that urgency is. Before we vote on the matter, I hope that he will explain why this £1,000 is so urgent and why it cannot be dealt with at the same time that the House deals with the estimates involving billions of pounds. I am sure that he will understand why I feel apprehensive. Something is going on that we should know about. Will he either tell us what is going on, or put my mind at rest by offering another explanation? We have yet to hear any explanation whatever.

My second concern arises from paragraph 4 of the document's introduction, which says:

> The Vote on Account may reflect a higher or lower amount

than the usual 45 per cent. There is a norm of 45 per cent. for votes on account, but it does not apply to this case. It is an exception and, because it is an exception, there is yet another imperative on the Government to tell us what is so exceptional about the procedure. That would put our suspicious minds at rest. We would then understand the

Government's integrity and honesty, if not their openness, when it comes to expenditure. Why does this item not involve the standard amount? We need an explanation.

My third concern relates to sub-paragraph c of paragraph 4. This vote on account is for the sum of £1,000 and sub-paragraph c states that

> if the Supply Estimate is for a token sum of £1,000 for self-financing services, no Vote on Account provision is sought but the continuation of the services in the new financial year is noted.

From that, we are entitled to conclude that this item is not a self-financing exercise because the House's authority, through a vote on account, is being sought. All my concerns about the role of Parliament in our parliamentary democracy are correct. The estimate is not just a matter of accounting to put things right while money is brought in to pay for something that the Government are doing; it is real expenditure of taxpayers' money. However, we have not been told what it is for. We can look through the document for something that relates to the use of taxpayers' money, but we shall not find it. Perhaps the Financial Secretary will tell us.

The fourth concern arises out of paragraph 5 of the introduction. It refers to a "token Supplementary Vote", and the word "token" is the one that worries me. The Government are using smoke and mirrors. They want us to agree to giving them £1,000 so that they can do what they like. It is not the sum that the Government want, but just a token. Why have they not had the goodness and decency to tell the House what they are up to and what they really want? Instead, they have shuffled forward with a piece of paper saying, "Give us £1,000." They will then continue to do what they wanted to do in the first place. That is no way to treat Parliament and it is no way for an Executive to operate in a democracy; it is an abuse of democracy.

Mr. William Ross: I must confess that I am always confused by the way in which the estimates are written. However, it seems that the class V estimate for the Lord Chancellor's Department is £1,625,000,000, so £1,000 will not keep the Department running for very long.

Mr. Wilshire: That is exactly my point. It is a token sum, and we need to know the real figure.

You will be relieved to hear, Madam Speaker, that I turn now to my fifth and final point, which also arises from paragraph 5. It says:

> Token additional provision is being sought to draw to the attention of Parliament the intention to use Vote on Account money for the new service specified in the footnote.

The Government say that the procedure is being used to draw their intention to the attention of the House, but it was not used to draw anything to our attention; it was used twice to get something through on the nod when nobody was looking, in the hope that we would not notice it. Yet here we have a so-called explanation of a wish to draw something to the attention of the House. I offer no apologies to the House for ensuring that we have a proper debate. That is what the Government want, as the document says.

Mr. Hogg: One way forward for the future might be for the Government to annex to these orders an explanatory memorandum, so we would have the answer in brief form before the debate. We might then know whether we collectively wanted to address the matter on the Floor of the House.

Mr. Wilshire: I am sure that my right hon. and learned Friend is absolutely correct. It is essential that we do all in our power to ensure that no Executive—Labour or Conservative—slip money, whether it is £1,000 or £1 billion, past the House, on the nod, late at night. My right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) is to be commended for his vigilance. I feel guilty for not being as vigilant as he is.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): I am listening to my hon. Friend extremely carefully. Is not he highlighting to the House, badly attended as it is for this debate, the inadequate way in which it deals with votes on Supply and estimates? Will he take note of the increasing concern expressed not only by the Procedure Committee, which I chair, but the Public Accounts Committee and, what is more, the influential Liaison Committee?

Mr. Wilshire: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I wish him well in his endeavours to ensure that this does not happen again. It is absolutely proper that we debate these issues, and it is remiss of the Government to try to slip them through on the nod and to have offered no details at the start of the debate. The document provides no details; it refers simply to a Bill and a figure, which it says is a token.

I suggest that the Government read their history books and note that quite a few members of past Executives have ended up in clink, and one or two have lost their heads trying to defy Parliament on taxation.

4.8 pm

Mr. Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks): I join my colleagues in asking questions about the supplementary vote. The Financial Secretary is perfectly entitled to put the request for a supplementary vote before the House, but we are equally entitled to ask questions about it. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) for ensuring that we are doing so.

As I said earlier, it is unfortunate that the new service that is singled out as the justification for the supplementary vote is being set up by a Bill, rather than an Act that has already been passed. The House may well change the nature of the expenditure involved in the Bill before it becomes an Act. You will be aware, Madam Speaker, that the Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate Bill has only just arrived in the House, and we have not yet properly debated it or seen the various money resolutions that the Financial Secretary may want to attach to it.

My right hon. Friend may well want to note that paragraph 5 of the Treasury document refers to expenditure for a new service, but the explanatory memorandum that accompanies the Bill says:

> There is no increase in expenditure as a direct result of the Bill.

The Financial Secretary has come to the House, asking for additional resources, when the explanatory notes to the Bill make it clear that it does not involve an increase in expenditure. I can tell the House that the running costs for the inspectorate are some £2.5 million in the next financial year. Of course, the inspectorate exists already. The purpose of the Bill is to put it on a statutory basis.

[Mr. Michael Fallon]

The explanatory notes are more than helpful. They point out that although there is an increase in expenditure in the next year, that is largely the result of the need for the inspectorate to find accommodation separate from the Crown Prosecution Service.

I repeat: there is no increase in expenditure as a direct result of the Bill. Therefore, I am mystified as to how the Financial Secretary can pick out this item of expenditure and justify it to the House as being needed

for the new service specified in the footnote to the table.

That footnote specifically states:

Includes provision for expenditure on the Crown Prosecution Inspectorate which is being set up under the Crown Prosecution Inspectorate Bill which received Third Reading in the House of Lords.

Precisely because of the confusion about whether new money is required for the inspectorate to be put on a statutory basis, it would have been better to wait until the Bill had been considered by the House. We could have decided whether or not to assent to the money resolution that the Financial Secretary may or may not table to the Bill. However, he has not done that, so all that we can rely on is the proceedings in another place. I suggest that the Financial Secretary should be asked to take the document away and try again.

4.11 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Stephen Timms): I am grateful to Opposition Members for providing me with the opportunity to explain the significance of the supplementary vote on account.

I remind the House that the purpose of the vote on account is to provide finance to allow existing services to continue during the early months of the coming financial year, pending the consideration by Parliament of the Supply estimates, which take effect from mid-July. Where it is intended that new services currently before Parliament, like the one mentioned in this brief debate, will be funded between 1 April and the passing of the Appropriation Act, that is drawn to Parliament's attention by means of a footnote. That is the standard procedure for dealing with such matters.

Our Standing Order No. 55(2)(a) covers votes on account and specifies that questions arising from such votes on account should be tabled not later than 6 February. The documentation for the vote on account 2000–01 was submitted last November, and both Houses agreed it on 16 December.

Because the most appropriate vote for the crown prosecution service inspectorate had not been confirmed by last November, the vote on account 2000-01 did not include a footnote referring to the Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate Bill. I am pleased to tell the House that parliamentary progress on that Bill has been faster than anticipated at that time. A supplementary vote on account for spending in the period from the start of the new financial year until mid-July will make it possible to implement Parliament's decision in respect of the Bill when Royal Assent is achieved.

The motion amends—

Mr. Fallon: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Timms: I shall give way just once, then I must make progress.

Mr. Fallon: The Minister is referring to progress on a particular Bill. Will he confirm that the House has not yet started its consideration of that Bill?

Mr. Timms: Indeed, but the Bill has reached Third Reading in the House of Lords and is on its way to be considered here. It is normal for initial spending on such measures to be authorised in this way.

The motion amends Standing Order No. 55—

Mr. Hogg: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Timms: No, I cannot give way again.

Mr. Hogg: Will the Minister give way? He is not short of time.

Mr. Timms: No, I will not give way again.

The motion amends Standing Order No. 55 for today, so that we can take the necessary vote on account resolution with the spring estimates to be considered tonight, rather than with the winter supplementary estimates with which the earlier vote on account was taken. That is the standard procedure to meet the requirements of the House when it has to take estimates at times different from those normally allowed for in Standing Orders. For example, that procedure was adopted in January 1992 when the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) was a Minister at the Foreign Office, and a supplementary vote on account was required to provide cover for a late new estimate for the European Communities budget. I am sure that the right hon. and learned Gentleman recalls that. The procedure is perfectly standard.

Mr. Hogg: Will the Financial Secretary give way?

Mr. Timms: I shall not give way because I do not want to detain the House longer than necessary.

The procedure is intended to draw Parliament's attention to the fact that the vote on account will be used to fund an important new service as soon as Royal Assent is given to the Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate Bill.

Opposition Members also referred to the £1,000 token votes. Again, that is standard procedure; there are 13 in the spring supplementary estimate. They are a device for drawing the House's attention to the intention to incur spending on a new service.

I commend the motion to the House.

Question put:—

The House divided: Ayes 320, Noes 16.

Division No. 104] **[4.16 pm**

AYES

Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Barron, Kevin
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dobbin, Jim
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Fyfe, Maria
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Gunnell, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harris, Dr Evan
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Rt Hon Adam
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Linton, Martin
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McIsaac, Shona
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moore, Michael
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Rendel, David
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Sanders, Adrian
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Shipley, Ms Debra
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham

Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Tynan, Bill
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mrs. Anne McGuire and
Mr. Kevin Hughes.

NOES

Chope, Christopher
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Fallon, Michael
Gill, Christopher
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Robathan, Andrew
Ross, William *(E Lond'y)*
Shepherd, Richard
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Taylor, Rt Hon John D *(Strangford)*
Townend, John
Wardle, Charles
Wilkinson, John
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Eric Forth and
Mr. David Wilshire.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That, at this day's sitting, Standing Order No. 55 (Questions on voting of estimates, &c.) shall apply as if the words '(aa) supplementary votes on account for the coming financial year;' were inserted after line 21.

Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill

As amended in the Committee and in the Standing Committee, further considered.

Clause 63

SPECIAL PROVISION FOR NORTHERN IRELAND PARTIES

4.29 pm

Mr. Robert Walter (North Dorset): I beg to move amendment No. 152, in page 40, line 15, leave out clause 63.

Madam Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following: Government amendment No. 24.

Amendment No. 169, in page 40, line 18, after "party", insert—

'with its Headquarters and/or registered office in Northern Ireland.'.

Amendment No. 170, in page 40, line 19, leave out—

'such period as is specified'

and insert—

'a period of one year'.

Amendment No. 171, in page 40, line 23, leave out—

'such period as is specified'

and insert—

'a period of one year'.

Amendment No. 166, in page 40, line 25, at end add—

'(1A) The Secretary of State may by order further extend the periods laid down under subsections (1)(a)(ii) and (1)(b)(ii) above, but no further period of extension shall be for more than one year and there may be no more than two such further extensions.'.

Amendment No. 167, in page 40, line 26, at end add

'a party which has its headquarters, UK headquarters or registered office in Northern Ireland which is.'.

Amendment No. 168, in page 40, line 27, leave out "one" and insert "six".

Amendment No. 172, in page 40, line 29, leave out "one" and insert "four".

Amendment No. 173, in page 40, line 30, after "Commons" insert—

'who have taken the oath or made the affirmation and are'.

Amendment No. 164, in page 40, line 33, at end add—

'(4) The Secretary of State shall not make an order under subsection (1) (b) above unless the following conditions are satisfied—

(a) a draft of the order has been submitted to the Electoral Commission; and

(b) the Commission has stated that, in its opinion, the contents of the draft order are compatible with the effective enforcement in individual cases of the provisions of section 54 relating to evasion of restrictions on donations.'.

Amendment No. 174, in clause 144, page 92, line 13, at end add—'(aa) section 63 (1A)'.

Mr. Walter: Many hours have been spent in the House discussing the situation in Northern Ireland. The clause that we seek to delete gives the Secretary of State power to make special provision for Northern Ireland parties.

I think that there is agreement on both sides of the House on the necessity of the peace process. I think also that there is agreement that we wish to see a normal economic and political climate return to Northern Ireland. While not wishing to labour another debate on Northern Ireland and the current state of the peace process, we are debating a clause that would exacerbate the current failure of the peace process. That is, the failure to deliver a return to democratic institutions in Northern Ireland. If clause 63 remains part of the Bill, that failure will be compounded.

It is an affront to the people of Northern Ireland to make special provision for supporters of and sympathisers with terrorism. It is an affront to the political parties of Northern Ireland represented in the House of Commons—those Members who have taken the Oath and taken their seat—to allow others, the friends of terror, special privileges denied to parties in the rest of the United Kingdom.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): Does my hon. Friend agree that the affront is even greater than he describes? The clause confers a power to make orders that are subject to the negative procedure, not the affirmative procedure. In consequence, the Secretary of State can exercise his power to extend the range of permitted donors without obtaining an affirmative vote in the House.

Mr. Walter: My right hon. and learned Friend is absolutely right: clause 63, like other clauses, gives the Secretary of State such powers. We shall discuss that issue later.

The basic premise behind the amendment is that there should not be special provisions for Northern Ireland. Lord Neill suggested that provisions should exist, because there were special circumstances in Northern Ireland. I do not entirely accept all his arguments in that respect. The Neill report reached us in October 1998, and the game has moved on since then. The report reached us after the signing of the Good Friday agreement, but before the election and creation of the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Northern Ireland Executive. In addition, the report reached us before Sinn Fein—to name but one Northern Ireland political party—became an effective part of the political process. The rest, as they say, is history.

If Great Britain is to be subject to the requirements for financial propriety and transparency enshrined in the Bill, it is unacceptable that a part of the United Kingdom with the most vivid history of political corruption should be excluded from the provisions of the Neill report. I do not want to go over Northern Ireland's political history, but I emphasise that it would be wrong effectively to turn a blind eye to practices that have been declared unacceptable in the rest of the United Kingdom.

I hope that, as a result of the events of the past year, there will be an end to the violence used to further political causes in Northern Ireland. Like other hon. Members, I hope and believe that the arms that have been used by terrorists will be handed in and decommissioned. I wonder when that will happen, although that is a subject to be debated another time. Over the years, intimidation has been used to a great extent in Northern Ireland. Therefore, we must not, by allowing the clause to remain part of the Bill, create an environment in which it is perpetuated.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Among other attributes, my hon. Friend has a fertile imagination. Why should the clause provide for a possible extension of the categories of permissible donors, given that six such categories are already provided for in clause 48(2)?

Mr. Walter: The Committee considered the issue of why, having introduced a regime in Great Britain in which foreign donors were precluded from funding our political parties, and having laid down specific categories of permissible donors, we should allow the Secretary of State to announce exclusions in respect of political parties whose financial and democratic propriety some of us might call into question.

Mr. Hogg: The effect of the proposal in clause 63(1)(b), if it stands as it is, is that a foreign donor could be brought within the class of those deemed to be permissible donors. Not only that, but a foreign donor could be excluded by the Secretary of State from the requirement to give specified information.

Mr. Walter: My right hon. and learned Friend is absolutely right. We discussed in Committee the possibility of permitting donors from the Irish Republic to make donations to political parties not only in Northern Ireland but throughout the United Kingdom. My hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) and I made it clear in Committee that we were not prepared to tolerate a situation in which donors in the United States or other foreign countries could continue to fund the activities of Northern Ireland political parties, as they have done in the past, and thus get away with funding the forces of terror, of which we have seen the effects in Northern Ireland and throughout the United Kingdom.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): If permissible sources were to include citizens of the Irish Republic, the Neill committee makes it clear in paragraph 5.41 of its report that

> there would exist the possibility of overseas donations reaching the Republic,

and thereby Northern Ireland. This clause would be a facilitator for Noraid and all its works.

Mr. Walter: Not only that, but the clause specifically does not mention the Republic of Ireland. It allows exemptions to be made regarding the list of permissible donors that would enable Noraid and any other organisation, whether in the United States or elsewhere, to fund Northern Ireland political parties. It is within the Secretary of State's power to specify which political parties he wishes to exempt from the rule. As the Bill is drafted, he could specify just one party to be exempted, so he might feel it politically expedient to specify a party that has traditionally received most of its funding from the United States, and perpetuate a situation that the rest of us in the House would regard as completely unacceptable.

Mr. Hogg: I am sorry to press my hon. Friend, and I am grateful to him for giving way so generously. Is there not another risk? I am not accusing the Government of having this in mind, but we must face the consequences. Any Government at some time in the future could use these exempting powers to assist the funding of a

[Mr. Hogg]

particular party with which that Government—not this one—had friendly relations. The exempting powers can be used in a partisan manner.

Mr. Walter: My right hon. and learned Friend is correct. These powers can be used not only for political expediency, but in a partisan way by a political party that wants to aid and abet its friends in the north of Ireland.

Mr. Bercow: My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) has just raised a serious point. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is incumbent on the House to have serious regard to the possibility not only of a future abuse occurring under a future Secretary of State, but of an abuse by the present incumbent of the office, who, for all his distinctive talents, is a distinctly manipulative specimen?

Mr. Walter: We can only presume from the fact that the Government have included clause 63 that, when drafting the Bill, they speculated about the possibility that they would want to use it and to make an exemption for a particular Northern Ireland party—or, possibly, a number of Northern Ireland parties—allowing that party, or those parties, to receive funds from foreign sources that are denied to the rest of the United Kingdom.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Mike O'Brien): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Walter: I will give way for the last time to the Minister.

Mr. O'Brien: In fact, the hon. Gentleman has not given way before this occasion, but I am grateful to him for doing so.

Our amendment No. 24 will ensure that any order under clause 63 applies to all Northern Ireland parties. It will not be possible to specify particular parties.

Mr. Hogg: That is not in the Bill.

Mr. O'Brien: We tabled the amendment in response to concerns expressed in Committee.

I hope that what I have said reassures the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) that such mendacious thoughts are not in our minds.

Mr. Walter: I am cognisant of the amendment, but as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham pointed out, the provision is not yet in the Bill. Moreover, I fear that if the clause were altered to refer to "each" rather than "a" Northern Ireland party, as the amendment suggests, another can of worms would be opened in connection with political parties engaging in activities not only in Northern Ireland but in other parts of the United Kingdom. We shall, in the context of other parts of the Bill, discuss problems that could arise in regard to parties that might have sister organisations in different parts of the United Kingdom. I think that deleting clause 63, as amendment No. 152 suggests, is the simplest and most straightforward way of dealing with the matter.

Let me return to the Neill report, and the White Paper that constitutes the Government's response to it. I want—without prejudging anything that Northern Ireland Members may say later—to quote the Unionist parties' response to the White Paper. They adopted a more or less unanimous view:

> It is not acceptable to argue that Northern Ireland must be treated differently because Sinn Fein are organised on an all-island basis. The same law should apply to all parties which stand for election in the United Kingdom. This should not be dismissed as a political point. The fact that it is difficult to police donations to the Republican Movement is no excuse for not trying.

It is donations to the republican movement with which we are concerned here, and cutting off the flow of funds to that movement should be at the forefront of our minds when we consider clause 63.

I wholeheartedly agree with the Unionist parties' view that there is no excuse for not trying to police political donations, as we shall do in the rest of the United Kingdom—although it will be difficult, partly because some donations to Northern Ireland parties, and to nationalist parties in Scotland and Wales, come from foreign sources. If contributions from the Scottish and Welsh diasporas are from impermissible sources, they will be rejected by the treasurers of those parties. There is no reason why the treasurer of a Northern Ireland party should not similarly reject donations from people who are not permissible donors within the meaning of the Bill. If Northern Ireland is to be regarded, as we believe it should be, as an integral part of the United Kingdom, it should be subject to the rules that apply to the rest of the UK, including those relating to donations to political parties.

4.45 pm

We do not want the Secretary of State to have the power to make orders that relate only to Northern Ireland, to one Northern Ireland party, to several Northern Ireland parties, or to all the Northern Ireland parties. It might have been politically expedient for the Government to suggest that Sinn Fein—the party that immediately comes to mind—should be exempt from various provisions or regulations that apply to other parties: but it should not. We cannot have one rule for one party, or group of parties, because it is politically expedient, and another rule for other parties. The basic premise behind the amendment is that the same rules must apply to all parties in Northern Ireland as apply to all parties in the rest of the UK.

Mr. Martin Linton (Battersea): I look forward to hearing what Ministers can report about the discussions that have been going on with parties in Northern Ireland. As they know, my amendment, No. 164, is concerned not so much with the Republic of Ireland as with the possibility that the clause could be used to enable donations from other countries to find their way to this country.

My concern lies not so much with clause 63 as with clause 54, which makes it an offence to give false information; indeed, it is punishable by a year in jail. However, it is only an offence for a UK citizen. Even if it is committed by a UK citizen, it can be investigated only if it is committed in this country.

A London banker who gives, shall we say, £5 million to a Euro-federalist party could be investigated under clause 54 to see whether the money had really come

from him, but a Dublin banker who gives £5 million to Sinn Fein, or, indeed, to the Ulster Unionist Council would not be breaking an Irish law and would not be subject to British law. Because, presumably, those offences would not be covered by Interpol, people will not be extraditable for party funding fraud.

I come back to the simple proposition: we can ban foreign funding, one of the fundamental purposes of the Bill, only from people who are subject to British law. As it stands, the Bill creates a new type of permissible donor, who is beyond its reach because he or she is an Irish citizen living in the Republic of Ireland. That opens the way to what has been described as re-routing, where money can go from, for example, an American citizen to an Irish citizen, from an Irish citizen to a Northern Ireland political party and, indeed, from a Northern Ireland political party to a British political party. Perhaps the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland can prevail on the Taoiseach to introduce a Bill as part of the peace process banning Irish citizens from acting as conduits for donors to UK parties.

I understand that the talks with the Northern Ireland parties may touch on those possibilities, but there has to be some fire-break—I believe that discussions have taken place on the matter—between Belfast and London parties, so that money cannot pass between them. I look forward to hearing how those particular problems can be addressed.

What if the same party qualifies as both a Northern Ireland party and a British party? Conservative Members have not mentioned that possible self-interest in the clause. In recent years, the only party in the House that comes remotely close to being simultaneously a British and a Northern Ireland party has been the Conservative party.

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): In view of our amendment No. 152, I fail entirely to see where in the clause self-interest lies for Conservative Members. We wish funding of the Conservative party in Northern Ireland to be subject to exactly the same stringencies as those faced by the Conservative party anywhere else. Nevertheless, I should be grateful for the hon. Gentleman's views on the matter. It does not seem to me right in principle that—should we choose to do so, and if it is done legitimately and in accordance with the rules that the hon. Gentleman himself wants to be implemented—money should not pass between the Conservative party in Northern Ireland and the Conservative party in the rest of the United Kingdom.

Mr. Linton: I do not suggest that Conservative Members have a self-interest in amendment No. 152, but only that their interest as a party could be affected by the Bill's current provisions. Like Conservative Members, I am trying to ensure that, in creating special exemptions for citizens of the Republic of Ireland—whatever they may think of that—we do not inadvertently affect the efficacy of the rules against overseas funding and of the enforcement of those rules as provided for in the Bill. If a Northern Ireland party gives money to a person who subsequently gives it to a British political party, it might not be in breach of the legislation.

I hope that we shall eventually hear the outcome of the talks. My simple principle is that, in the Bill, a permissible source must be an investigatable source. Regrettably, therefore, all permissible donors would have to be residents of the United Kingdom, unless there is some way in which residents of the Republic also could be investigated.

The Neill committee applied that principle to Irish donors, and said that Irish donors should not only be registered to vote in Ireland, but resident in Ireland. The committee's intention, although it is not specifically reiterated in the Bill, was to limit the exemption to residents—not only citizens—of the Republic of Ireland.

Mr. Hogg: I am following the hon. Gentleman's argument, for which I have much sympathy. Does he accept—reverting to the Disqualifications Bill, which the House debated some time ago; I think that he may have spoken in that debate—that one cannot both argue the position that he is advancing now and support the Government's position on the Disqualifications Bill? I therefore hope that he will give consideration to his position on the latter matter.

Mr. Linton: I neither spoke—to the best of my recollection—in the debate on the Disqualifications Bill, nor understand where the alleged contradiction lies.

Mr. Hogg: The Bill proposes excluding—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. We cannot have the debate conducted from a sedentary position.

Mr. Hogg: I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I accept the right hon. and learned Gentleman's apology.

Mr. Linton: I am sure that the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) will enlighten me in due course.

The Neill committee's concern was to allow residents and citizens of the Republic of Ireland to contribute to Irish parties. I well understand the argument for that, as an integral part of the peace process is the principle that all people in Ireland should be able to participate in the political process in all parts of Ireland. It is an unfortunate truth that, to accomplish that, we may undermine the Bill's efficacy.

I appreciate the difficulties involved in the matter, and I do not have a solution. I tabled amendment No. 164 simply to ensure that the warning is heard loud and clear. For almost 50 years, we have had an election law that has been rendered ineffective by a very simple loophole. A finding by the courts, in 1952, in the so-called Tronoh Mines case, rendered totally ineffective limits on candidates' spending by allowing spending on national campaigns to escape the ban provided that they did not mention a candidate's name. Although it is a simple matter to put right, it has taken almost 50 years to plug that simple loophole. However good our motives, therefore, it is essential that we do not create another loophole.

Mr. William Ross (East Londonderry): I have tabled several amendments in this group and I have also added my name to the Conservative amendment No. 152.

[Mr. William Ross]

I listened to the hon. Member for North Dorset (Mr. Walter) with interest. Like most others who talk about Northern Ireland, he referred to the peace process. I concluded long ago that it was not a peace process, but simply an appeasement process, which has gone on apace for far too long. I was also interested that he was against special provisions being made for Northern Ireland.

The reason for such special provisions is evident: it is to make Northern Ireland different and then use that difference as an excuse for further separate provisions. It becomes a vicious circle. We do not want Northern Ireland to be different—we want it to be as much like the rest of the United Kingdom as possible. It has become clear over the years that only when the Province is fully integrated in every way into the United Kingdom can the violence and the horrors that we have seen be contained. Those who try to tell us that they can be contained in an all-Ireland ambit miss the point. There are 1 million people in Northern Ireland who do not want to be part of an all-Ireland republic. They have steadily voted against it and no doubt they will go on doing so. The proportions of those who are nationalist and Unionist in Northern Ireland have not changed much in the past 80 years, and I see no prospect of them changing. When differences are created, the Unionist population see them not as an attempt to address a real problem, but as an attempt by the Government to push them in a direction in which they do not want to go. Pushing majorities in a direction in which they do not want to go is dangerous and is not a course of action that should commend itself to anyone.

My first amendment is No. 169. The aim is to ensure that each of the parties covered by the clause has a point of authority within Northern Ireland that exercises oversight of the party there. It is essential to ring-fence expenditure on elections in Northern Ireland to those who stand within the boundaries of Northern Ireland. The Government should accept that principle and apply it as swiftly as possible.

The amendment could mean that a United Kingdom or Great Britain party would need such an office. Reference has already been made to the position of the Conservative party in Northern Ireland. However, in practice it would bear only on Sinn Fein, which, as we all know, is one of the public political faces of terrorism. No one seriously questions that proposition. It is a fact that the leading members of Sinn Fein are also members of the IRA and are known to be its leaders. It may not be possible to prove that in court, but if Ministers get a full-blown security briefing, they will find that the intelligence on the people concerned would convince even the most doubtful.

Clause 63(1)(a)(i) refers to "a Northern Ireland party". Government amendment No. 24 would change that to "each Northern Ireland party". That needs closer examination. By referring to Northern Ireland parties, the Government appear to have excluded Sinn Fein—which is an all-Ireland party—from the scope of the Bill. If the Minister's officials have not yet addressed that matter, no doubt they will before he replies. In any case, I am not certain that using "each" instead of "a" improves the Bill.

5 pm

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that his amendment No. 169 would not discriminate against the Women's Coalition or the Progressive Unionist party, but that amendment No. 168 would because of the numbers of Members that each party has in the now-suspended Northern Ireland Assembly? Also, would not amendment No. 172 discriminate against my hon. Friends who are members of the Social Democratic and Labour party?

Mr. Ross: The intention is to make it difficult for the terrorist parties. All the parties that the hon. Gentleman has named are not involved in terrorism, as far as I know. The Women's Coalition and the SDLP are perfectly legitimate parties. They would not be affected because they are not getting money from across the border. If they were, that would be interesting information.

Dr. Godman: Am I right that each of the two parties to which I referred has just two members in the legislative Assembly? I ask the hon. Gentleman again—would not his amendment No. 168 discriminate against the Women's Coalition and the Progressive Unionist party? What kind of message does that send to the smaller parties in the Northern Ireland Assembly?

Mr. Ross: I am not really concerned about those parties. The number of votes that those parties get is so small that it is doubtful whether they would gain election in a normal election. When everything settles down, those parties will almost certainly disappear. I am aiming at the one party that is the terrorist front.

Dr. Godman: The hon. Gentleman should try to answer the question.

Mr. Ross: I think that I have answered it. I am not all that concerned about the tiny parties, but I am concerned with the terrorist front and the IRA. The amendments are aimed at the IRA, and the hon. Gentleman is raising red herrings because he knows perfectly well what my amendments intend to do.

Mr. Hogg: I acknowledge the democratic credentials of my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross). As I understand the Bill, the definition of a Northern Ireland party includes the requirement for representation in this place or in the Northern Ireland Assembly. If a democratic party has not achieved representation in one or the other, it cannot benefit from the provisions of clause 63, as it now stands. That sounds to me to be extremely discriminatory.

Mr. Ross: I recognise what the right hon. and learned Gentleman says. If the Northern Ireland Assembly were to disappear, the parties about which the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman) is concerned would not be caught by the Bill's provisions in any case. If he wanted to protect them, he should have tabled his own amendments to prevent them from being swept away from the political scene in those circumstances.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I would appreciate clarification from the hon. Gentleman of amendments Nos. 168 and 172. It seems to me that the amendments would bite not on Sinn Fein, but on a number of other parties, such as the Northern Ireland Unionist party, the United Unionist Assembly party, the Progressive Unionist party and the

United Kingdom Unionist party which have four, three, two and one representatives respectively in the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Mr. Ross: The Minister knows that I have said that I am not all that concerned about those tiny parties. If an election were held tomorrow, they would have no representative in the Northern Ireland Assembly. I am trying to get at the terrorists' face, and I believe that my amendments would bear heavily upon that.

The plain truth is that the Minister has not explained to the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg), who is a well-known barrister, how a Northern Ireland party is defined by membership of the bodies named in the Bill. Suppose that the Northern Ireland Assembly disappears—we would then be left with a situation in which several parties could no longer be defined as Northern Ireland parties.

Can Sinn Fein be defined as a Northern Ireland party? In one sense it is, but in another it is not because it is an all-Ireland party, which is totally different. The courts might take a dim view of the definition, which will almost certainly be challenged as it stands. The Unionist party might find itself in some difficulty if it decided to fight elections in Great Britain. Could it then get away without declaring the source of its donations? The party might find support in some areas of Great Britain, and the SDLP or Sinn Fein might find support in other areas.

The provision is not so much a loophole as a gaping barn door. If it is left open, it could admit all sorts of as yet unforeseen evils. We never really know what will happen or what will be the consequences of leaving such a concession in the Bill with the clear intention of benefiting one party. If the Bill did hammer Sinn Fein, I would be happy to withdraw all my amendments, but I am presently inclined to press them to a Division.

Recent speculation in the press has suggested that parties in the Irish Republic would like to forge ties with the SDLP. Indeed, it would appear that advances have already been made to the SDLP by the Irish Republic's Labour party and by Fianna Fail. The SDLP is, no doubt, considering those offers in the light of the effect that they might have, both in total and in the border areas.

The aim of my amendments is to create a ring fence, inside which the Northern Ireland section of any party would have to conduct its financial affairs. The parties would be so tightly ring-fenced that their accounts would be public, the sources of their income would be public, with everyone knowing exactly what was going on, and their behaviour and activities would fall within the jurisdiction of the UK courts so that this legislation could be enforced.

It was well demonstrated by the hon. Member for North Dorset that currently there is much scope for the movement of money, which either could not be traced or would be legal. However, if the same activity were carried out in Great Britain, it would be totally illegal and the perpetrators could go to prison for it. As drafted, the Bill simply means that Northern Ireland parties would be able to do things that would bring prosecution and retribution in the courts in Great Britain. That must be wrong, because we all operate in the same nation and under the same rod of electoral law, not least to get elected as Members of Parliament.

The Government claim that they are trying to get rid of even the faintest trace of fraud and corruption from the electoral process. However, they are deliberately leaving this great barn door gaping open in Northern Ireland. I think that that barn door should be closed.

We need not ask why the Government have left the concession in the Bill. The Government know that Sinn Fein-IRA would simply break the law anyway, but they are running away from that confrontation and intend to allow in Northern Ireland what would be illegal in Great Britain. That should not be acceptable to any Member of Parliament, never mind only Opposition Members.

The Government are also refusing to take on the one organised and mass corruption of the electoral process anywhere in the United Kingdom. It is because that corruption, backed up with violence, has been so successful that the Government have failed to live up to their moral and political obligations. Evil can neither be beaten nor contained within reasonably narrow limits if we do not face up to it. We must divide it first, as a prelude to its elimination. The amendments are the first line of defence and should be accepted.

Amendments Nos. 171 and 170 would limit to one year the period of freedom to corrupt. Amendment No. 166, with amendment No. 174, would ensure that the maximum period of grace for Sinn Fein-IRA would be limited to three years. At present there is no limit to the free hand given to that murderous organisation in this matter, but a maximum limit should be set. All the amendments would close down the freedom of Sinn Fein-IRA to corrupt the electoral process.

Amendments Nos. 167 and 173 would require a registered party to abide by the rules accepted by the other parties. Amendment No. 167 would ring-fence a party's financial structure. Amendment No. 168 would mean that a party would have to boast six Assembly Members before it could benefit from the Government's concession to terrorist violence. The tiny parties will not be taking advantage of the concession, so in practice it will have no effect on them. They would escape the problems that I am trying to inflict on Sinn Fein-IRA.

Amendment No. 173 would ensure that only those who take the oath or make the affirmation after election to this House could benefit from the concession. All parties elected to this House or to the Northern Ireland Assembly should accept the standards of democracy accepted by the rest of us. If they are not required to do that, the signal to the terrorist organisations would be clear.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): I understand my hon. Friend's argument, but does he agree that recognition of a party as bona fide could depend on its having one elected member or receiving a specific number of votes?

Mr. Ross: I do not care particularly how we separate evil people from democrats, I just want it done. If my amendments do not accomplish that, the Government still have time, even so late in the Bill's process through the House, to table amendments to that end.

Amendment No. 152 is the best solution of all. However, hon. Members might care to study starred amendment No. 183, which would take care of the element in schedule 6 that bears on this section of the Bill. It would be a great advantage if the IRA and its political face had to abide by United Kingdom law.

[Mr. Ross]

It should have to keep within the law, rather than be allowed to do what it wants and bring in huge sums of money. I understand that as taxation is global, the money going to the violent Republican movement is also global in terms of how it is spent. We have a right to try and tie these people down as much as we can.

5.15 pm

There is no benefit to democrats in including these concessions to terror in the electoral law of this kingdom. Rather, they will only damage the democratic parties, and the SDLP more than most. They will be of great benefit to those who believe in the philosophy of the armalite in one hand and the ballot paper in the other.

The past behaviour of Sinn Fein-IRA makes it plain that fear of the bullet—fear of violence—can determine a ballot's outcome. I recall an incident of which I became aware after an election. A certain gentleman who had served very many years in prison discovered that the turnout from a local estate was not all that he wished. He and a few of his friends started to visit it. There was no threatening behaviour—their mere presence was sufficient. The rush in the last hour of voting was quite remarkable. Members of the House who have not seen such behaviour in action do not know the fear that these people can inspire in the community—the sheer terror that someone might some day find out exactly how a ballot was cast is sufficient to undermine and corrupt the electoral process. Giving them these concessions increases their capacity to do that. The House should not allow that to happen.

The provisions do not defend democracy, they betray them at the behest of those who occupy their current political positions by a policy of murder, mutilation and craven appeasement. I hope that the House will accept the amendments, or, if not, the Government will come up with something that accomplishes the same end.

Dr. Godman: I support the Government, and do not have much sympathy for the arguments expressed by the hon. Members for North Dorset (Mr. Walter) and for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross). I point out to the hon. Gentleman that I share his hatred of the terrorists on both sides of the divide and their political apologists, wherever they are found. Just yesterday, I visited a Royal Ulster Constabulary station in the Markets area and met the young RUC sergeant who recently won a community policeman award. I also had a meeting with General de Chastelain, so I have some knowledge of these matters.

I am concerned about the discrimination inherent in amendment No. 168. That is why I asked the hon. Member for East Londonderry whether it discriminated against the Women's Coalition, which has two Members in the legislative assembly, and the Progressive Unionist party, which also has two Members. The hon. Gentleman swept that to one side. He argued, as part of his case, that they are likely to disappear at the next election. That prediction weakens and dismantles his case. After all, some of his hon. Friends might disappear at the next election and so might some of mine. However, we cannot discriminate against the members of small parties who have secured their seats under what the hon. Gentleman called our broad electoral law. Those Members of the legislative Assembly won their seats fair and square, according to the electoral system. The same is true of the Scottish Parliament. Its electoral system may be different from ours, but it is utterly legal and its Members won fair and square.

As my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department pointed out from the Dispatch Box, the amendment would affect not only members of the Women's Coalition or the PUP, but fellow Unionists in the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Mr. Ross: May I turn the hon. Gentleman's argument around? If it is unfair to discriminate against small parties, is it fair to pass legislation that can only be described as discriminating in favour of a terrorist organisation?

Dr. Godman: The anomaly is that Sinn Fein—normally referred to by the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues as Sinn Fein-IRA—Members of the Assembly would not be discriminated against if the hon. Gentleman's amendment were to be accepted. However, small parties that represent the voices and views of segments of the Northern Ireland electorate would be harshly discriminated against. The hon. Gentleman shows no concern for them.

The week before last, I met representatives of the Women's Coalition and elected Members of the PUP. They are just as hard working as Members of other parties in the Assembly—which I hope will soon be reinstituted.

I asked the hon. Gentleman whether amendment No. 172 would discriminate against the three SDLP Members who sit on the Labour Benches of this House. It was interesting that his hon. Friend the Member for Belfast, South (Rev. Martin Smyth) asked a similar question. We cannot discriminate against small parties on the basis that they may disappear at the next election; they might increase their numbers.

Mr. Hogg: I follow the hon. Gentleman's argument. If he is right about that point, why does the Bill provide that political parties that have representation neither in this House nor the Assembly will not benefit under clause 63?

Dr. Godman: I need to be careful in my reply, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I understand that the Government will introduce an amendment to deal with the point made by the right hon. and learned Gentleman.

I am deeply concerned about the disregard shown to parties that have a small number of Members in the Northern Ireland Assembly. I am also concerned about my hon. Friends who are SDLP Members of this House. Incidentally, if they are to join with any parties south of the border, I hope that they sign up with the Labour party rather than—

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): Fianna Fail.

Dr. Godman: The Labour party would be my preference, although I know many members of both parties.

I am sorry if I have been harsh with the hon. Member for East Londonderry, but I cannot stand such discrimination against small parties. Members of small parties in the Scottish Parliament represent their

constituents reasonably. We should not discriminate against people such as Monica McWilliams and others who represent small parties in the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Mr. Ross: Does the hon. Gentleman allege that the SDLP, for instance, receives money from the Irish Republic? Does he allege that any of the other small parties that he named are receiving money from America, the Irish Republic or anywhere else? Surely, they all raise their money in Northern Ireland, so the provision would be no great hardship to them.

Dr. Godman: I shall ask Monica McWilliams about that the next time I speak to her. I do not know whether the Women's Coalition has received a bob or two—or a punt or two—from south of the border to help with election expenses. I do not imagine that David Ervine would have received much from south of the border. That is a question that needs to be asked of the small parties.

The hon. Gentleman knows as well as I do that Members representing those small parties share our abhorrence of the terrorists and their political apologists. However, I will vote against his amendments if he presses them to a Division because of the blatant discrimination that they show to the small parties and their representatives—albeit few in number—who grace an Assembly that is unfortunately suspended at the moment.

Mr. Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove): I support the amendment moved by the hon. Member for North Dorset (Mr. Walter), but with some diffidence, partly because of what I heard from the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross). I dissociate myself from several of the arguments that he advanced.

I refer back to the debate in Committee on the clause. At that time, the Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office was far from satisfied with its wording. He said:

> Clause 63 is unsatisfactory, but, as I said earlier, we are dealing with that.

The issue is whether any of the amendments deal with the problem. He added:

> the provisions in clause 63 are temporary . . . I hope and believe that the provisions in clause 63 will eventually become unnecessary.—[*Official Report, Standing Committee G*, 1 February 2000; c. 197.]

He was clearly not persuaded that the Government had got the form and shape of clause 63 in good order. However, I do not believe that this amendment has got to the heart of the difficulties.

I repeat a point that I made in Committee. The situation in Northern Ireland has long required special rules so that democracy can be maintained. Provisions in the Representation of the People Act 2000 are designed essentially to ensure that democratic elections can be held in Northern Ireland. They appear in the Act in such a form that they could be applied in the rest of the United Kingdom if one wished to do so, but their essential aim is to make the democratic system a functioning proposition in Northern Ireland. That is surely the way that we should approach the matter.

If we have a special difficulty, it is not the normal form for the United Kingdom legislature to run away from it and to say, "Let them get on with it". The normal form is for us to think of ways of regulating and controlling the problem. The Bill itself acknowledges that fact. For a long time, action on the funding of political parties was delayed on the grounds of, perhaps, self-interest and of the perceived difficulty of introducing a regime that could effectively regulate the matter.

The Government have finally bitten the bullet and, through this Bill, have introduced provisions that will control national expenditure on elections. It is perverse therefore that we should say that there is one part of the United Kingdom where we cannot find a way of getting on top of the problem and that we need clause 63 to run away from it. This clause is based on the wrong underlying philosophy and the wrong legislative theory.

As the hon. Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) said, the essence of the problem lies with the concept of permissible donors. One must study the Bill deeply to grasp entirely all the language in it, but, under these provisions, anyone in the world—never mind southern Ireland—can make a contribution to a United Kingdom political party with complete impunity. As has been hinted at, there does not appear to be an effective way of preventing that money from coming into mainstream, mainland political funding as well.

That process may not be very likely. If the working example is Sinn Fein, it is improbable that it will channel money to the Conservative party, the Labour party or the Liberal Democrats. However, we have to consider the consequences of the structure that is being put in place. One of the consequences is that money can come from anywhere in the world to a party in Northern Ireland without let or hindrance. It is only one short step, which is not prohibited by the Bill, to that money flowing from a Northern Ireland party into mainstream politics on the mainland.

5.30 pm

That is my main concern. I do not share the concerns of the hon. Member for East Londonderry. I do not want terrorist parties on either side of the argument in Northern Ireland to flourish, but I recognise that a significant amount of the funding of some of those parties, on both sides of the divide, comes not from foreign sources but from rampant protection rackets in the Province. There are other sources of money flowing into the political body of Northern Ireland, and they ought to be of concern to hon. Members on both sides of the House.

What concerns me and leads me to support the deletion of clause 63 is the fact that the clause may create a loophole that could lead to a complete bypassing of all the good work in the rest of the Bill.

In Committee, the hon. Member for Glasgow, Pollok (Mr. Davidson) expressed his concern about single interest parties, which might prosper in Northern Ireland and Glasgow. He could see no way in which special interest parties—he had in mind pro-life parties—could be prevented from using Northern Ireland as a stepping stone to funding their activities in the United Kingdom, using money from overseas sources, and the Minister could offer him no reassurance on that point.

I do not associate myself with the arguments of the hon. Member for East Londonderry.

Mr. William Ross: The hon. Gentleman seems to think that all the amendments in my name relate to the concerns expressed by the hon. Member for Greenock and

[Mr. William Ross]

Inverclyde (Dr. Godman), but most of them relate to restricting the time for which the legislation can be permitted to run to one year or to a maximum of three years.

Mr. Stunell: I accept that the wording of the hon. Gentleman's amendments would, as the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman) indicated, have apparently unintended effects, but my point is that I do not identify with the arguments that the hon. Member for East Londonderry used to support those amendments.

The Government should accept the point made in Committee that the clause is unsatisfactory. Their amendment does not correct that point.

Mr. Tipping: The hon. Gentleman took the time of the House last night to ask for a solution on federal parties. We discussed that, and he knows that the Government are minded to try to find a way forward. I also indicated in Committee and in the House last night that we could not introduce amendments to construct a fire wall between Northern Ireland and the mainland until the federal issue had been resolved. There is no lack of initiative or desire for progress on our part; there is a fundamental difficulty that prevents that progress.

Mr. Stunell: I appreciate the Minister's remarks, and I thank him for recalling what he said last night, which was appreciated and understood. However, the Government amendment leads my colleagues and I to support the amendment in the name of the hon. Member for North Dorset.

Mr. Hogg: In rising to support the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Mr. Walter) in speaking to his amendment, I shall address five matters, albeit fairly briefly.

The first point is one that I have made many times in the House, but I hope that hon. Members will forgive me if I repeat myself. It concerns the order-making powers. The powers that we are giving to the Secretary of State are substantial. They enable the Secretary of State to enlarge the category of permissible donors so as to extend it, for example, to foreign donors, if that is what is decided. That is a large power to give to the Secretary of Secretary.

We are also enabling the Secretary of State to disapply the information-supplying requirements in the Bill. That, too, is a wide power. The Bill provides for the powers to be exercisable not under the affirmative procedure, but under the negative procedure. In other words, no action will be taken on the orders unless they are prayed against and debated.

I regard the use of secondary legislation on a matter of such importance as being profoundly unsatisfactory. On any view of the matter, the powers that we are giving to the Secretary of State are extensive. They change the ordinary requirements of law. Although I am not arguing that the affirmative procedure is a perfect instrument—I think it is a very blunt instrument because, for example, it is not amendable—it is at least better than the negative procedure.

On a matter of such importance, I hope that those on the Treasury Bench will consider using the affirmative procedure, rather than the negative procedure.

Mr. Mike O'Brien *indicated assent.*

Mr. Hogg: The Parliamentary Under-Secretary is nodding. I take that as encouragement, and I hope that he will address the matter that I put to him.

I am glad to see the hon. Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) in his place. My second point goes to the Disqualifications Bill, which the House debated some time ago. I address the point now because I regretted that he was not aware of the significance of what he was saying, in the context of that Bill. He argued eloquently against foreign donations, but the Disqualifications Bill, which I am pretty sure he supported, although I spoke and voted against it, enables Members of the Dail to serve in this House. A Member of the Dail who happened to be serving in this House would be bound to be supported by foreign donations. That is absolutely certain.

If the hon. Gentleman is against foreign donations—a case that he argued extremely eloquently—he surely could not in all good conscience support the idea of Members of the Irish Dail sitting in this place. One proposition follows the other, inevitably.

The third point is, admittedly, somewhat technical, but this is the occasion for technical debates. It relates to the partisan point that I made. In clause 63(1)(a) at line 18, the reference is to "a Northern Ireland party". I am well aware that Government amendment No. 24 uses the word "each". That is a step forward, and I do not for a moment dissent from that proposition.

I am not accusing the Government of being partisan in this sense, but as the Bill is drafted, there is no doubt that the legislation would enable a partisan order to be made. I am glad that the word "each" is used.

I sympathised with my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross) when he queried whether the word "each" is sufficient to meet the intended purpose. I am not sure about that. I hope that further consideration will be given to the matter, although I welcome the step.

I am sorry to press the point a little further. Line 24 refers again to "a Northern Ireland party". That is in the context of the power given to the Secretary of State to lift the requirement with regard to the provision of information.

If it is right to substitute the word "each" for "a" in line 18, for the self-same reasons it must be right to substitute the word "each" for "a" in line 24. I know better than most people how difficult it is to read the amendment paper, and I may have missed an amendment making that substitution in line 24. However, the Under-Secretary will forgive me if I cannot find it. Clearly, I should be able to find it because, according to his logic, it ought to be there. If I am wrong, I apologise; if I am right, perhaps he will undertake to make the necessary substitution in another place.

My penultimate point is about discrimination. To mix metaphors, if I interpreted the Under-Secretary's body language correctly, I am pushing at an open door. I made the point earlier in an intervention on the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman), and to my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry.

The definition of a Northern Ireland party is critical to clause 63. The provision defines a Northern Ireland party as one that has representatives in this House or in the Northern Ireland Assembly. However, that discriminates against democratic organisations that have no elected representatives in this House or the Assembly but are represented in, for example, the European Parliament or in local government. Some even have the bad fortune not to be represented in an elected body, but are none the less democratic.

Why should clause 63 discriminate in principle between parties that have elected representatives and those that do not? I was not sure what the nods and winks across the Chamber from the Treasury Bench were telling me. Perhaps there is an amendment on the amendment paper—

Mr. Tipping: Perhaps I can clarify the matter. There is no amendment on the amendment paper, but we intend to table an amendment that will have the scope that the right hon. and learned Gentleman desires and that the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) advocated.

Mr. Hogg: It would be churlish not to welcome that intervention. However, I am sorry that the amendment has not been tabled already because the Bill has been before the House for some time. *[Interruption.]* Ministers should not shake their heads; the Bill has indeed been before the House for some time.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: As my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary pointed out in an intervention on the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell), we cannot table the amendment now because we need to resolve issues that relate to federal parties such as the Liberal Democrats. When we have done that, we hope to table an amendment in another place.

Mr. Hogg: The word "cannot" is inappropriate. The Under-Secretary means that he has not got his tackle in order. He has had months in which to go fishing and get his tackle in order. I am not in the least sympathetic; the amendment should have been tabled. I understand that the Parliamentary Secretary has given us an undertaking to table such an amendment in another place. Am I right?

Mr. Tipping *indicated assent.*

Mr. Hogg: I note the undertaking. Of course, we reserve the right to consider it further in another place and when the Bill returns to the House.

Dr. Godman: As someone who does a bit of fly fishing, I hope that my tackle is in order. The right hon. and learned Gentleman referred to parties that are democratic but fail to secure seats in the Northern Ireland Assembly. One such party is the Ulster Democratic party, which is led by Gary McMichael. It won a fair amount of votes, but no seats.

Mr. Hogg: I am not trying to distinguish between democratic parties. If parties are democratic, they should be able to benefit from clause 63, irrespective of whether they have elected representatives. To be fair to the Labour Front Bench, Ministers are now conceding that point, for which I am grateful.

My last point was also made from the Liberal Democrat Benches. We are legislating for the future. Over time, the mainstream parties of Great Britain may choose to become represented in Northern Ireland. Ministers will bear in mind that the Conservative party—unofficially, I think, but no matter for these purposes—has promoted itself in Northern Ireland from time to time.

5.45 pm

The hon. Member for Battersea is correct that clause 63 might enable foreign donations to go to a wing of a Great Britain party operating in Northern Ireland. In the absence of a firebreak, that money could, perfectly properly, be filtered into Great Britain. Once one has accepted as the working assumption the proposition that foreign donations are a bad thing—I am agnostic and prepared to argue the issue—one must address the question of the firebreak. On that point, I agree with the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell), who is no longer present, and the hon. Member for Battersea.

I do not like to be churlish and think that I have been given at least two undertakings. I pocket them both, although I regret that they were not in the Bill, and look forward to receiving lots more.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Clause 63 enables a temporary exemption from the normal restrictions on donations and the reporting requirements established by the Bill to be made for Northern Ireland parties. The amendment would remove that provision. The issues raised by the clause were discussed at considerable length in Committee, and the Government acknowledge that it would of course be preferable if it were not necessary to create any such exemptions, but the Neill committee reviewed the question carefully and concluded that there was no alternative. The Government reluctantly agree.

In yesterday's debate, the hon. Member for North Dorset (Mr. Walter) said that we cannot pick and choose from the Neill committee report and sought to put himself firmly on that ground. He suggested that we were not there with him, but if he wants to make that point perhaps he ought to consider whether he should stick to it himself.

Mr. Robathan: Of course the Government are picking and choosing all the way down the line, particularly with regard to various points about referendums. However, the amendment does not address exactly what the Neill committee said. It would give the Government much wider scope for making an order and, in respect of permissible sources, could allow to happen things other than what the Neill committee set out in recommendation 29.

Mr. O'Brien: I understand that Lord Neill has said that he is happy with the Bill's drafting and that it achieves what he feels is fair and practical in all the circumstances, particularly in relation to these measures at least. I hope that I can reassure the hon. Gentleman on that.

It remains the case that some donors in Northern Ireland could be subject to discrimination or retaliation if publicly identified. That is the nub of the problem. We know that those who donate to certain political parties—let us be specific; perhaps to the Social Democratic and Labour party—may fear assault or worse. We should be aware of that concern, which might face anyone who

[Mr. O'Brien]

considers donating to a parliamentary and constitutional party from the nationalist community in which there is some dissension.

The choice between risking such consequences and ceasing to make donations is not one that we would wish people in Northern Ireland to have to make. The nationalist community has clear links with the Irish Republic and there is no great secret about that, although the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross) seemed to suggest that perhaps there is. The SDLP may receive substantial financial support from the Irish Republic—I am not sure that it has ever denied that—and may receive donations from other reputable European sources. I do not know whether it receives money from the United States, but it would not surprise me if it does.

Mr. William Ross: If the SDLP is receiving substantial support from the Irish Republic, why should that not be public knowledge when it would have to be public knowledge in respect of the Labour party?

Mr. O'Brien: As the hon. Gentleman well knows, the concern of those who may have donated to the SDLP about their safety might still be present in the Irish Republic. Those who might wish them ill may not be excluded by a border. That is a concern of which we must be aware.

The hon. Member for North Dorset advanced some arguments with which I must deal. First, he argued that the clause might exacerbate the peace process. Our view is that it would not. Removal of the clause would disproportionately disadvantage nationalist parties as against other parties because nationalist parties tend to have links with the Republic, which will be precluded by the Conservative amendment. That does not sit easily with at least the spirit of the peace process, which aims to be inclusive rather than reinforcing the position of one community, perhaps to the disadvantage of political parties that seek to represent the other community.

Mr. Robathan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. O'Brien: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman for the last time. I have been generous to him.

Mr. Robathan: The Minister has been generous, but I have been generous to him in not hanging around and making another speech, which I could do.

We are dealing with an important clause and I have been listening carefully to the Minister. This is not a party political provision. The Minister's logic is completely flawed. He has said that decent law-abiding people in the Irish Republic who may wish to contribute to a Northern Ireland nationalist party, namely the SDLP, must not be identified. However, he has said that we must allow people to donate from whatever source to nationalist parties—republican parties—in the north of Ireland. The only people feared by those whom he wishes not to be identified in the Irish Republic are members of Sinn Fein, with its inextricable links with the IRA. That logic seems to have escaped the hon. Gentleman. Sinn Fein is being helped by the clause—as I have said, it is inextricably linked with the IRA—and that is the purpose of the second part of the clause.

Mr. O'Brien: If the hon. Gentleman had been present throughout the debate, he would perhaps realise that one of the concerns is about parties such as the SDLP, and not so much Sinn Fein, which might well be caused some difficulties if we did not at least have a provision such as the clause. I do not think that anyone on the Opposition Benches seeks to cause the SDLP effectively to be unable to function. I have had representations from the SDLP to the effect that there is a need to bear in mind the particular difficulties that it faces in finding funds in a very difficult situation within the nationalist community in Northern Ireland. We need at least to be aware of that, and that is the basis on which we put the clause before the House.

The hon. Member for North Dorset argued that it would be wrong to turn a blind eye to the way in which Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom. I believe that it would be wrong to turn a blind eye to the realities and to the differences that are self-evident in Northern Ireland. The histories of the communities and the politics of Northern Ireland are in many ways different from those in the rest of the United Kingdom because of recent and longer-term events, and to ignore that is unreasonable. It is not only Sinn Fein that is different, but the SDLP and the entire way in which Northern Ireland politics functions.

The peace process is going on in Northern Ireland—or not, depending on Members' points of view. However, we need to be aware of the differences in Northern Ireland. On that basis, I would disagree with the hon. Gentleman's arguments.

We should be aware that in Northern Ireland there is a party that is organised on an all-Ireland basis. If we were to insist that the normal provisions of the Bill be applied in full, we would in effect be saying that parties that organise on other than a merely northern Irish basis would need to change their entire party organisation. The SDLP has always been a constitutional party with a strong commitment to peace, but it has close links to the south. Some people would argue that such parties should change their organisation, including Sinn Fein and perhaps the SDLP, but I think that we are honouring the Good Friday agreement in principle and the peace process if we maintain the Bill's provisions as we have put them forward. We would not be doing that if we sought to erect certain barriers against nationalist parties.

Some amendments in the group are concerned with the definition of a Northern Ireland party. The Bill defines such parties in terms of whether they are represented in the Northern Ireland Assembly, or have one or more Members of the House elected for Northern Ireland constituencies. The Neill committee commented that the definition is too narrow and unfair, both to those parties which have yet to achieve electoral success and to those which have but may not continue to do so. Against that background, we cannot support a narrowing of the definition of a Northern Ireland party. The Government intend to bring forward amendments in another place that will extend the definition so that it covers all parties that contest elections in Northern Ireland and are included in a separate register of Northern Ireland parties.

Since we discussed these matters in Committee, my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland—

Mr. Ross: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. O'Brien: I will give way once more to the hon. Gentleman, but I am anxious to make progress.

Mr. Ross: The Minister is saying that it is possible to have regional legislation bearing on the registration of Northern Ireland parties. Will he withhold that benefit from parties that are regional in the sense that they contest elections only in Wales or Scotland?

Mr. O'Brien: There is a situation in Northern Ireland of which the hon. Gentleman, perhaps more than anyone else, is well aware. By seeking to muddy the water, he does himself no good. In his earlier intervention, he did not deal with my argument that the effect of his amendments would be to narrow the scope of the definition of Northern Ireland parties so as to include only those with six or more Members, rather than one, of the Northern Ireland Assembly, or four or more rather than one Member of this place who have been elected for Northern Ireland constituencies. It seems that his amendments would not bite on Sinn Fein, and he did not explain how they would. However, they would appear to bite on a few Unionist parties, including the Northern Ireland Unionist party, the United Unionist Assembly party, the Progressive Unionist party and the United Kingdom Unionist party, which have four, three, two and one Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly respectively.

The hon. Gentleman seemed to assert that his amendments would bite merely on Sinn Fein, and on our reading of them it seems that they cannot. He simply said that he did not believe that that mattered or that they would bite on the smaller Unionist parties, but he offered no explanation. It seems that there is no logic in his argument.

The Government's intention is to ensure that we create as much fairness as we can in a difficult situation. When we discussed these matters in Committee, my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland had an opportunity to meet the main Northern Ireland parties, and he did so. The balance of opinion among them was that exemptions from the disclosure requirements of part IV are essential. Given that view, it remains the Government's intention to exercise the order-making power in clause 63 so as to disapply the provisions of part IV in respect of northern Irish parties.

We are minded to apply such an order initially for four years, and review it thereafter. We believe that if we are able to remove the disclosure exemptions, we would wish to do so as soon as is practicable. If the peace process were to succeed, we would hope that circumstances would present themselves to enable us to remove the exemptions in four years or even less. That depends on the circumstances that apply.

6 pm

Amendments Nos. 166, 170 and 171 are an attempt by the hon. Member for East Londonderry to try to put a more reasonable face on his proposals. The amendments would provide for a more restricted application of such an order—that is, for one year in the first instance, with a possibility of no more than two annual renewals. It might be that the hon. Gentleman hopes that the conditions that the Neill committee regarded as giving rise to the need for the exemptions for Northern Ireland will have eased within one year, and that he is confident that they will have disappeared within three years. Time will tell, but, for now, the Government consider that an initial period of four years is appropriate. We are not being dogmatic: if circumstances improve, the Government hope to be able to be more helpful.

Amendment No. 174 would require that an order made under clause 63(1A), which amendment No. 166 would insert, should be subject to the affirmative resolution procedure. The Government do not propose to accept amendment No. 166 and therefore cannot accept amendment No. 174 as it stands. However, it is implicit in the amendment that an order under clause 63(1) as it stands should be subject to the affirmative resolution procedure. On reflection, the Government agree with that proposition and will table an amendment to that effect in another place. I hope that that reassures the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg).

My hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) spoke to amendment No. 164. The Government are well aware of the concern that any exemptions for Northern Ireland parties will undermine the effectiveness of the ban on foreign funding of political parties in the rest of the United Kingdom. One possible consequence of an order made under clause 63 is to enable a party that organises on a UK-wide basis to escape the prohibition on foreign funding by channelling funding through branches in Northern Ireland. Clearly, we want to avoid that. Unfortunately, the amendment takes a rather heavy-handed approach to the problem. Its effect could be to prevent any order being made under subsection (1)(b) at all, thereby nullifying the whole provision. None the less, the issue is one of genuine concern and I hope to be able to reassure the House.

The Government will table amendments in another place that will prevent Northern Ireland parties from acting as conduits for the transfer of foreign donations to parties, or branches of parties, operating in Great Britain. All parties entered on the Northern Ireland register will benefit from the terms of any order made under clause 63. However, the quid pro quo is that a party registered in Northern Ireland will be prevented from making a donation to a party registered in Great Britain. As the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) pointed out, that might have implications for the administration of parties that operate on a UK-wide basis, but it is only by establishing a fire wall between parties in Great Britain and parties in Northern Ireland that we can ensure that the ban on foreign funding is effectively enforced. I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea is reassured by what I have said and will not press his amendment.

Mr. Ross: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. O'Brien: I hope the hon. Gentleman will forgive me for not doing so. I am anxious to make progress.

Government amendment No. 24 responds to a drafting point picked up by the hon. Member for North Dorset in Committee. Clause 63(1) provides that an exemption made under that subsection may apply in relation to "a Northern Ireland party". The current wording is open to the unintended interpretation that the application of such an exemption order might be limited to only one Northern Ireland party, as opposed to the generality of Northern Ireland parties.

I shall reflect on the point made by the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham about the wording of the subsequent part of the clause.

[Mr. O'Brien]

However, Government amendment No. 24 would ensure that any order made under clause 63 will apply to all Northern Ireland parties. It is not possible to specify individual parties. The reference to "a Northern Ireland party" in clause 63(1)(b) occurs in a different context to the reference in clause 63(1)(a). In our view, any order made under clause 63(1)(b) would apply to all Northern Ireland parties. However, I shall consider the issue and write to the right hon. and learned Gentleman.

Mr. Walter: I shall confine my remarks to the amendment standing in the names of my right hon. and hon. Friends. It would strike out clause 63, which we consider unacceptable.

I was gratified that the hon. Member for Battersea (Mr Linton) alluded to the position of the Conservative party in Northern Ireland. I was more gratified by his stating the view, shared by the Conservatives, that a permissible source should be one that is investigable in the United Kingdom; a source must be within the United Kingdom, otherwise we shall not know whence the money comes.

The hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross) said that he did not want Northern Ireland to be different. That is exactly why we tabled the amendment to strike out the clause. The hon. Gentleman's amendments that would ring-fence Northern Ireland are not acceptable to us, nor do we believe that they would be workable, as they would still allow foreign donations to come to political parties in the United Kingdom. However, he is right to say that the Government are failing in their moral and political duty in this respect. Allowing the clause to remain part of the Bill would be an outrage to democracy.

We share the concerns of the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman) about small parties. If our amendment is accepted, Northern Ireland will be treated in the same way as the rest of the United Kingdom, thereby allaying those concerns.

I am grateful for the support of the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) and his colleagues. He reflected on the assurances given by the Minister in Committee, and I shall briefly quote the words of the Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office, who said:

> I hope that one day soon the situation will be normalised and the provisions of the Bill will apply to the whole of the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland.—[*Official Report, Standing Committee G*, 1 February 2000; c. 190.]

We see no reason why that should not happen right now.

The Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department spoke of a "temporary restriction". He went on to suggest that if we tried to remove it, we would be cherry-picking from the Neill report. As I said, the Northern Ireland situation has moved on; we are not cherry-picking from Neill, but dealing with a set of circumstances that has changed.

The Under-Secretary says that the reason for the provisions is to ensure anonymity of donors to Northern Ireland political parties. If he wants them to get anonymity, why does the Bill not deal specifically with anonymity for United Kingdom citizens who would otherwise be permissible donors under clause 48? Instead, clause 63 would allow foreign donations—such as those made from the United States of America to Sinn Fein in Northern Ireland. The clause drives a coach and horses through the Bill, which is designed to ensure financial propriety in the way in which we in this country conduct our affairs.

We believe that the basic tenets of the Neill report are abused by clause 63. The clause allows exemptions for foreign donations. It is therefore unacceptable and we urge the House to support our amendment and so to reject the clause.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 177, Noes 295.

Division No. 105] **[6.9 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Jackie
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Butterfill, John
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Forsythe, Clifford
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Harris, Dr Evan
Hawkins, Nick
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa

Moore, Michael
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ross, William *(E Lond'y)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Peter Luff and
Mr. Stephen Day.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barron, Kevin
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dobbin, Jim
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles

Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Shipley, Ms Debra
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tynan, Bill
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
White, Brian
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe and
Mr. David Clelland.

Question accordingly negatived.

Amendment made: No. 24, in page 40, line 18, leave out "a" and insert "each".—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Schedule 6

CONTROL OF DONATIONS TO INDIVIDUALS AND MEMBERS ASSOCIATIONS

Amendments made: No. 97, in page 111, line 29, leave out "sub-paragraph (3)" and insert "this Schedule".

No. 98, in page 114, line 7, leave out "falling within section 48(2)".

No. 99, in page 114, line 11, leave out sub-paragraph (2).

No. 100, in page 114, line 45, at end insert—

'Payments etc. which are (or are not) to be treated as donations by permissible donors

5A.—(1) The following provisions have effect for the purposes of this Schedule.

(2) Any payment out of public funds received by a regulated donee which is a members association, for its use and benefit in connection with any of its political activities, shall be regarded as a controlled donation received by the association from a permissible donor.

(3) Any donation received by a regulated donee shall (if it would not otherwise fall to be so regarded) be regarded as a controlled donation received by the donee from a permissible donor if and to the extent that—

(a) the purpose of the donation is to meet qualifying costs incurred or to be incurred in connection with any visit—

(i) by the donee in connection with any of the donee's political activities, or

(ii) in the case of a members association, by any member or officer of the association in connection with any of its political activities,

to a country or territory outside the United Kingdom, and

(b) the amount of the donation does not exceed a reasonable amount in respect of such costs.

(4) In sub-paragraph (3) "qualifying costs", in relation to the donee or (as the case may be) any member or officer of the donee, means costs relating to that person in respect of—

(a) travelling between the United Kingdom and the country or territory in question; or

(b) travelling, accommodation or subsistence while within that country or territory.

(5) Any controlled donation received by a regulated donee from a trustee of any property (in his capacity as such) which does not constitute a donation transmitted by the trustee to the donee—

(a) on behalf of a person who, at the time of its receipt by the donee, is a permissible donor, or

(b) in pursuance of a bequest made by such a person as is mentioned in section 48(3),

shall be regarded as a controlled donation received by the donee from a person who is not a permissible donor.'.

No. 101, in page 114, line 47, at end insert "regulated donee and any".

No. 102, in page 114, line 49, after first "a" insert "registered party and any".

No. 103, in page 115, line 46, after "paragraph;" insert—

'(aa) any reference to section (*Payments etc. which are (or are not) to be treated as donations by permissible donors*)(2) or to section (*Payments etc. which are (or are not) to be treated as donations by permissible donors*)(3) shall be construed as a reference to paragraph 5A(2) above or to paragraph 5A(3) above respectively;'

No. 104, in page 115, line 48, at end insert—

'(6) In the case of a donation to which paragraph 5A(2) applies, sub-paragraph (2)(b) above shall have effect as if for "by the same permissible donor" there were substituted "in circumstances falling within paragraph 5A(2)".

(7) In the case of a donation to which paragraph 5A(3) applies—

(a) sub-paragraph (2)(b) above shall have effect as if for "by the same permissible donor" there were substituted "in circumstances falling within paragraph 5A(3) by the same donor"; and

(b) any report prepared by virtue of sub-paragraph (1) above in respect of the donation must give—

(i) the date or dates on or between which the visit to which the donation relates took place, and

(ii) the destination and purpose of the visit.'.

No. 137, in page 118, line 28, leave out "or 9(3)" and insert ", 9(3) or 9(4)".—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Schedule 7

CAMPAIGN EXPENDITURE: QUALIFYING EXPENSES

Mr. Grieve: I beg to move amendment No. 147, in page 120, line 30, at end add—

'(f) any legal or other professional expenses incurred in respect of, or in connection with, any requirement in this Act.'.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following: Government amendments Nos. 25 and 35.

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Amendment No. 148, in schedule 12, page 146, line 18, at end add—

'(f) any legal or other professional expenses incurred in respect of, or in connection with, any requirement in this Act.'.

Government amendment No. 71.

Mr. Grieve: In Committee, we were interested in the lists of expenses that would constitute campaign expenditure, or referendum expenditure, for the purpose of "notching up" to the limits that would be allowable. Certain exclusions are provided, under which expenses do not count in respect of that ceiling. They include

expenses in respect of any property, services or facilities so far as those expenses fall to be met out of public funds . . . remuneration or allowances payable to any member of the permanent staff of the party . . . reasonable expenses incurred in respect of an individual by way of travelling expenses

—enabling the individual to travel around his constituency, or to conduct a referendum campaign. It is noticeable that we have not discussed the expenses that will be incurred by political parties to achieve compliance with the Bill. Amendments Nos. 147 and 148 would exempt

any legal or other professional expenses incurred in respect of, or in connection with, any requirement in this Act.

As I am sure the Minister will accept, there is no doubt that compliance with the Bill will place financial burdens on political parties. If, in the past, parties have relied on auditors—who may not have been qualified—to do the work on a benevolent basis, it is likely that in future they will have to pay for proper auditors and accountants. Election and referendum campaigns will involve administrative burdens, and in the case of the larger parties, that burden is likely to require the recruitment of staff to ensure complete compliance with the legislation. I hope that the Minister considers it reasonable to assume that it would be wrong to ask parties to deduct the amount involved from their campaign expenditure ceiling.

Let me issue a slight caveat in regard to my own proposals. I can envisage the possibility of the running up of legal expenses by a political party or individual defending a prosecution under the Bill, and if conviction were to follow, it might be argued that the exemption should not apply. If the Minister wishes to consider that further, I shall not stand in his way. It must be right, however, for basic, day-to-day administrative expenses that will impose an additional burden on all political parties, especially smaller parties, to be excluded, as we propose in amendments Nos. 147 and 148—which are identical, apart from the fact that amendment No. 148 applies to referendum expenses.

I know that the Minister has tabled amendments, and I welcome them. They take on board what was said in Committee about the need to raise some of the de minimis levels of expenditure to reduce the burden on political parties, and Opposition Members will support them.

Mr. Tipping: Government amendments Nos. 25, 35 and 71 are indeed concerned with increasing de minimis provision in the case of notional services. As the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) said, the issue was discussed in Committee; indeed, he and his hon. Friends pressed the Government to increase the provision, and I am delighted to have been able to respond. Given the consensus that appears to exist, perhaps I can let the matter rest there.

Amendments Nos. 147 and 148 would add to the list of items in schedules 7 and 12 that are not to be regarded as constituting election or referendum expenses in respect of legal or other professional services incurred in connection with compliance with the Bill. When I first looked at the amendments, I thought they were drawn very widely, but I believed that I knew what their purpose was. I must be fair to the hon. Member for Beaconsfield: he gave some examples, and rightly pointed out that the Bill would place extra burdens on all political parties. I think that he—also being fair, as ever—will acknowledge that, throughout the Bill's passage so far, the Government have provided a series of stepping stones, providing for a light touch in respect of smaller parties and more rigorous enforcement in respect of those with larger incomes and expenditure.

The hon. Gentleman will recall that, earlier in the Bill, the Government allow the Electoral Commission to establish a scheme to distribute money to help political parties to prepare for the legislation. He will also recall that the amount is £500,000 for all political parties.

The hon. Gentleman rightly said that there would be teething troubles, and that the Bill would produce extra burdens; but I am not convinced that the burdens on the larger parties—dare I call them the mainstream parties?—will be as great as he suggested. All the major parties already have the benefit of legal advice, and their accounts are already professionally audited.

6.30 pm

The hon. Gentleman pointed out that, because it is new legislation, there could be recourse to legal fees. I had thought that the amendments were aimed primarily at legal fees, but now that he has drawn attention to them, they include other professional services, too.

I have looked in particular at the legal fees issue. I am not entirely convinced—although I will look at the matter again now that we have had the opportunity to discuss it and to hear the concerns—that his amendments are necessary. The advice that I have received at this stage is that legal fees in connection with referendums and campaign expenditure in a general election or local election could well not count against campaign fees at all. That is a moot area.

I am certainly of the opinion that there is a strong argument that the provision of such professional fees will not be counted against campaign expenditure, but I will look at what the hon. Gentleman has said in outlining the matter. If he will give me leave, I will look at it again in the light of his comments and write to him. If necessary, and if there are the concerns that he spells out, we will make the appropriate adjustments.

Mr. Grieve: The Minister's words are partially reassuring, but not perhaps quite as reassuring as I had hoped. I appreciate that he may not have understood the full scope of the amendment. One of the reasons for Report stage is the opportunity to discuss these matters. May I take a separate example? If I submit a tax return, I am allowed to deduct a proportion of my accountancy fees from my total income. There is an analogy here. If parties have to spend money to operate the system correctly, as the Bill demands, it will be wrong for that money to count towards their campaign expenditure.

[Mr. Grieve]

I was thinking much more along those administrative lines than in terms of exceptional legal fees, which is precisely why I said that I could foresee a situation where, if a party got itself into difficulty and incurred legal fees because it was in trouble with the law, it might be regarded as wrong to give it such an exemption. However, that could easily be put into an amendment, if the Government applied their mind to it.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I have listened carefully to the hon. Gentleman's case. I am not sure that I agree with the exemption point. If a legal case arose from the Bill, it could not possibly be construed as campaign funds. It cannot genuinely fall within the scope of campaign expenditure.

Mr. Grieve: The hon. Gentleman makes a reasonable point. I dare say the Minister will take that on board, too. When introducing these measures, I try to look at different facets of an amendment. It seemed a point that could validly be made against us. His point is perfectly valid; I am grateful to him for having made it.

Mr. Tipping: I reinforce the point that the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) has made. The advice that I have received so far—as I say, I will look at it in the context of the debate—is that such expenditure would not count against electoral expenses—but I will write to the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) about the matter.

Mr. Grieve: Again, I am grateful to the Minister. I would not wish to press the amendments any further, but I hope that the matter will be looked at and addressed, so that by the time the Bill gets to the other place, there can be complete clarity as to whether such an amendment is needed. If not, I hope that the Government will provide a positive response, or that the matter may be revisited at a later stage. On that basis, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 66

NOTIONAL CAMPAIGN EXPENDITURE

Amendment made: No. 25, in page 42, line 17, leave out "£100" and insert "£200".—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Clause 67

OFFICERS OF REGISTERED PARTY WITH RESPONSIBILITY FOR CAMPAIGN EXPENDITURE

Mr. Tipping: I beg to move amendment No. 26, in page 43, line 27, leave out from "if" to "he" in line 31.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): With this it will be convenient to discuss Government amendments Nos. 27 to 31, 34, 41 to 44, 53, 65 to 69, 124, 80 and 81.

Mr. Tipping: This is a large group of amendments. I am delighted to say that, without exception, they all arise from the eagle eyes of the hon. Members for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve), who gave much helpful advice in Committee, and for North Dorset (Mr. Walter), who, when I look back at the record, first introduced the concept of criminal offences. All the amendments respond to the points made in Committee. We have worked hard to put the Bill in good shape. At this stage, it would be best for me to sit down, to respond to any concerns and complaints and to give a further undertaking that, if we are still not quite there—I think that we are and that we have done the job—we will revisit the matter.

Mr. Grieve: I am grateful to the Minister and to the Government for having taken on board the comments in Committee. Perhaps it is right that the House should be aware of what happened. By my calculation, 70 criminal offences arise out of the legislation. Although defences were offered on one or two, when the Bill went to Committee, the vast majority were absolute offences, so they could criminalise party treasurers, even association treasurers and all sorts of other people. There was no defence of reasonable excuse, or the other defences that one would normally expect in a—dare I say it?—a civilised society.

I am mindful of the fact that part of the Government's explanation was that they tried to copy other legislation, but we pointed out that, in doing that, the draftsmen—I suspect somewhat overwhelmed by the scope and detail of the legislation—had some difficulty and failed to note that defences of reasonable excuse were offered in similar legislation and should thus be incorporated in the Bill.

I am grateful to the Government. In looking through the Bill, I have tried to see that all the points have been covered. I shall continue to do that, as doubtless the Minister and draftsmen will, but I am obliged to the Government for having accepted that important point. It is wrong that people should be convicted of criminal offences when they have acted in what any layman would consider a completely innocent manner.

Amendment agreed to.

Amendment made: No. 27, in page 43, line 32, leave out "that subsection" and insert "subsection (3)".—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Clause 68

RESTRICTION ON INCURRING CAMPAIGN EXPENDITURE

Amendment made: No. 28, in page 44, line 10, after "if", insert ", without reasonable excuse,".—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Clause 69

RESTRICTION ON PAYMENTS IN RESPECT OF CAMPAIGN EXPENDITURE

Amendments made: No. 29, in page 44, line 29, after "if", insert "without reasonable excuse".

No. 30, in page 44, line 31, leave out ", without reasonable excuse,".—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Clause 70

RESTRICTION ON MAKING CLAIMS IN RESPECT OF CAMPAIGN EXPENDITURE

Amendments made: No. 31, in page 45, line 1, after "if", insert ", without reasonable excuse,".

No. 32, in page 45, line 34, leave out first "the" and insert "any".

No. 33, in page 45, line 35, at end insert—

'(za) in which is situated the office of the treasurer, deputy treasurer or (as the case may be) other authorised person to whom the claim is sent pursuant to subsection (1) or;'.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Clause 75

SUBMISSION OF RETURNS TO THE COMMISSION

Amendment made: No. 34, in page 48, line 38, after "if," insert ", without reasonable excuse,".—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Clause 79

NOTIONAL CONTROLLED EXPENDITURE

Amendment made: No. 35, in page 51, line 5, leave out "£100" and insert "£200".—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Clause 81

THIRD PARTIES RECOGNISED FOR THE PURPOSES OF THIS PART

Mr. Tipping: I beg to move amendment No. 36, in page 52, line 18, leave out from "which" to "complies" in line 24.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss Government amendments Nos. 135 and 37 to 40.

Mr. Tipping: Amendments Nos. 36 to 40 relate to the notification procedure in respect of third parties at elections. By making a notification to the Electoral Commission, a third party is able to incur controlled expenditure in excess of the limits set out in clause 87(5)—£10,000 in England and £5,000 in other parts of the UK—up to the limits set out in schedule 9.

There was some discussion in Standing Committee of the statement to be made by a third party under clause 81(1). In response to questions from the hon. Member for North Dorset (Mr. Walter), I said that the Government would table an amendment to clarify subsection (1)(b). On further reflection, we now believe that it would be preferable simply to omit paragraphs (a) and (b). That is the effect of Government amendment No. 36.

The purpose of clause 81 is to bring those third parties that intend to incur significant controlled expenditure within the Electoral Commission's regulatory jurisdiction. We want to make that as easy as possible, not least to prevent a third party from inadvertently committing an offence by exceeding the expenditure limits in clause 87(5).

There may be circumstances in which a third party will need to make a notification to the Electoral Commission under clause 81(1), to avoid committing an offence under clause 87, but in which they could not honestly make a statement that they intend to incur expenditure in excess of the relevant limit in the next 12 months. Removing the need to make a statement in the terms set out in clause 81(1)(a) and (b) will ensure that a third party is not forced into a catch-22 situation.

Amendments Nos. 39 and 40 are consequential on No. 36.

The purpose of amendments Nos. 37 and 38 is to ensure that a notification by a third party does not lapse during a regulated period for the purposes of the expenditure limits provided in schedule 9. The need for the amendments is perhaps best illustrated by the following example. A recognised third party may incur controlled expenditure up to a limit of £11,259, in Wales, in the four months before a European parliamentary election. As the Bill stands, were a third party's notification to lapse half way through that four-month campaign, it could spend £11,000 as a recognised third party in the first half of the campaign, and then up to another £5,000 in the second half of the campaign in its capacity as an unrecognised third party. That would clearly be contrary to the expenditure controls provided in part VI.

To guard against that possibility, new subsection (3A), inserted by amendment No. 38, provides that, when a notification would otherwise lapse during the currency of a regulated period, it shall be deemed to continue in force until the end of that period.

The amendments in this group deal with small but important parts of the Bill, and they provide extra clarification.

Mr. Walter: I do not want to delay the House for long, but an issue arises when one reads clause 81 and the amendments in this group. I am still somewhat disturbed about that issue, as I was in Committee when we were considering it. Although I acknowledge the points that the Minister has made, I am still concerned that the amendments in this group fail to address some of the issues that were raised in Committee.

6.45 pm

In clause 81, there is a fascinating turn of phrase about an "unincorporated association", and the need to state

the name of the association,

if it is a recognised third party, and

the address of an office of the association in the United Kingdom—

as if the association might have offices outside the United Kingdom.

Although we have gone to great lengths in the rest of the Bill to ensure that we prevent foreign influence over our electoral process, the Bill still provides that one could be a recognised third party without necessarily being a United Kingdom citizen or an association in the United Kingdom. In fact, one could be a foreign body.

When clause 81 was drafted, I was told that it could not be amended because it had to comply with the European convention on human rights. We have to be clear, therefore, that the clause will allow a group of foreign individuals to come to the United Kingdom, perhaps to take a suite of rooms at the Savoy hotel, and to register with the Electoral Commission. Subsequently, those individuals may each spend £500,000 across the United

[Mr. Walter]

Kingdom—on newspaper advertisements, posters and leaflets through the door—all in support of a particular political cause, and all paid for by foreigners.

The clause, as amended by the Government today, is still a glaring leak in the Bill's provisions seeking to ban foreign donations and foreign influence on our political process. The leak is still there, and the Government have done nothing to remove it.

Amendment agreed to.

Amendments made: No. 135, in page 52, line 25, at end insert—

'(1A) A third party may only give a notification under subsection (1) if—

(a) an individual,

(b) a company falling within section 48(2)(b), or

(c) an unincorporated association of such a description as is mentioned in section 48(2)(f).'.

No. 37, in page 53, line 4, after "shall" insert—

', subject to subsection (3A),'.

No. 38, in page 53, line 7, at end insert—

'(3A) Where—

(a) the original notification would apart from this subsection lapse under subsection (3)(b) at the end of any such period of three months as is mentioned in that provision, but

(b) the end of that period falls within any regulated period at the end of which a return will fall to be prepared under section 89 in respect of controlled expenditure incurred by or on behalf of the third party during the regulated period,

the original notification shall be treated, for all purposes connected with controlled expenditure so incurred during the regulated period, as lapsing at the end of that period instead.'.

No. 39, in page 53, line 13, leave out from "statement" to "subsection" in line 16 and insert "conforming with".

No. 40, in page 53, line 26, leave out—

'subsection (1)(a) or (b) or (as the case may be)'.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

Clause 83

RESTRICTION ON INCURRING CONTROLLED EXPENDITURE

Amendment made: No. 41, in page 54, line 9, after "if", insert ", without reasonable excuse,".—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

Clause 84

RESTRICTION ON PAYMENTS IN RESPECT OF CONTROLLED EXPENDITURE

Amendments made: No. 42, in page 54, line 27, after "if", insert ", without reasonable excuse,".

No. 43, in page 54, line 29, leave out ", without reasonable excuse,".—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

Clause 85

RESTRICTION ON MAKING CLAIMS IN RESPECT OF CONTROLLED EXPENDITURE

Amendment made: No. 44, in page 54, line 40, after "if", insert ", without reasonable excuse,".—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

Clause 87

LIMITS ON CONTROLLED EXPENDITURE BY THIRD PARTIES

Mr. Tipping: I beg to move amendment No. 45, in page 56, line 2, leave out—

', in connection with relevant elections falling within section 72(1),'.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following: Government amendments Nos. 45A to 48.

Amendment No. 138, in schedule 9, page 132, leave out lines 14 to 21 and insert—

'the period between the date on which Parliament is dissolved and the date of the poll for the election.'.

Government amendments Nos. 49 to 52, 54 and 55.

Mr. Tipping: Amendments Nos. 45 to 55 essentially make technical or drafting changes to chapter II of part VI. Amendment No. 45 removes an inconsistency between clause 87(1) and the general approach to controlling election expenditure taken in both parts V and VI—which proceed on the basis that it would be artificial and difficult in practice to attribute campaign expenditure between different elections occurring in close proximity to each other.

Last year's elections in Scotland are a case in point. Within a five-week period, there were local elections and elections to the Scottish and European Parliaments. Advertising by the political parties would have been devoted to achieving success at all three elections. Therefore, the approach taken in the Bill is to link expenditure controls not to specific elections, but to regulated periods ending with the date of an election.

As a consequence of that approach, a recognised third party will have to account for all controlled expenditure incurred during a regulated period, including any expenditure linked to local government elections. As drafted, clause 87(1) gives the contrary impression. The provision refers back to clause 72(1), which contains a list of elections that does not include local government elections. Amendment No. 54, therefore, tidies up the drafting in clause 87(1), so that the general approach that I have described is clearly reflected in that provision.

Mr. Grieve: The Minister gave the example of elections in close proximity. However, will he confirm that the impact of the approach is that third parties will be subject to the regulations at all times? Unless third parties happen to fall into one of the "hole" periods in which there are no such elections, with all those elections applying to them at no time could they assume that the rules would not bite upon them.

Mr. Tipping: That would depend entirely on the third parties' purposes and aims—third parties come and go. Some third parties will exist in perpetuity, and amendment No. 54 will affect them as I have just described, whereas I suspect that other third parties will be solely campaigning organisations that are established for a specific purpose or election, but subsequently dissolve.

Amendment No. 47 ensures that the expenditure limits for recognised third parties cannot be circumvented by incurring controlled expenditure during a regulated period

both as a third party and as a recognised third party. As a result of the amendment, any expenditure incurred by a third party before it became a recognised third party would count towards the relevant expenditure limit stated in schedule 9.

Amendment No. 49 flows naturally from amendment No. 47. The general restrictions relating to controlled expenditure in clauses 83 to 86 apply only to recognised third parties. It follows that a recognised third party could not comply with subsections (2) to (4) of clause 89 in respect of any controlled expenditure incurred before they became a recognised third party. The amendment disapplies those subsections in respect of any expenditure incurred during a regulated period as a third party.

Amendment No. 50 ensures that the requirement to submit a return under clause 89 in respect of controlled expenditure incurred during a regulated period continues to apply in circumstances in which a third party ceases to be a recognised third party at any time on or after the end of the regulated period. The other Government amendments in the group make minor or drafting changes.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) has tabled amendment No. 138, returning to an issue that he raised on Second Reading. His concern appears to be that pressure groups and other third parties may unwittingly be caught out by the provisions of part VI, as they cannot be expected to know when the 365-day relevant period before a general election will begin. The aim of the amendment is to introduce greater certainty by confining the period during which expenditure controls will apply to the three or four weeks following the dissolution of Parliament.

Since Second Reading, my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department has corresponded with my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead on the issue. In a letter of 8 February, my hon. Friend explained why he believed my right hon. Friend's concerns to be unfounded. For the convenience of the House, I shall try to set out briefly the positions of third parties that will follow the commencement of part VI.

Pressure groups, trade unions or other third parties that incur expenditure designed to enhance or prejudice the electoral prospects of a political party or its candidates at an election could be caught by one of two offences. First, a non-registered third party commits an offence under clause 87(3) if controlled expenditure is incurred in a regulated period in excess of one of the de minimis limits in clause 87(5), which are £10,000 in England and £5,000 in any other part of the UK. Many third parties that spend relatively small amounts will not need to become recognised, so there will be no restrictions on them. I suspect that a variety of small third party campaigns will emerge around single issues that affect neighbourhoods, groups of people or interest groups. They will want to pursue those matters vigorously. Provided that they stay below the de minimis provisions, their actions will be largely unaffected.

However, if such a group wants to spend more than those limits, they will need to become a recognised third party. To do so, they will need to submit notification to the Electoral Commission, in accordance with the provisions of clause 81. It is a simple procedure that involves no more than depositing with the commission the name and address of the organisation and the address of a person who will be responsible for complying with the financial controls set out in part VI. Many Members expressed concern about that in Committee. They were keen to ensure that the rigorous and onerous provisions of the Bill did not impact too heavily and discourage small third parties. We all want an explosion of political involvement and activity.

Any third party that expects to incur controlled expenditure could avoid the offence in clause 87(3) by making the required notification and renewing it annually. That would make it a recognised third party, able to benefit from the higher limits on controlled expenditure set out in schedule 9.

A recognised third party could avoid the second offence of exceeding the limits on controlled expenditure imposed in schedule 9 by operating to the expenditure limit for any 365-day period. I think that that is my right hon. Friend's principal concern. A recognised third party that intends to incur significant controlled expenditure is likely to incur a sizeable proportion of it only once an election has been called and can therefore limit its expenditure accordingly. We all know from our campaigning experience that the bulk of any campaign expenditure is best spent on the final lap.

Many third parties are sophisticated political organisations that can make as educated a guess as my right hon. Friend or I about when a general election is likely to be held. We all suspect that the next general election is only 12 to 18 months away. I am not giving away any great secrets. I have no insider knowledge; it is a matter of judgment. I suspect that third parties can make the same judgments. If I can make such a guess, so can the chief executives of third parties.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): The Minister has just said something more significant than he may want to admit. By my calculation, the Government have not yet been in power for three years. If I recall correctly, the maximum statutory term of office is five years. For the Minister to reveal to a startled House that the next general election will be between 12 and 18 months away appears to limit the flexibility available to the Prime Minister in choosing the date of the election, which, by my calculation, could be held at any time within the next 25 months or so. Will the Minister clarify that?

Mr. Tipping: The right hon. Gentleman has a reputation as a vigorous street fighter. I said that we could make educated guesses; I have no insider knowledge. I refer him to the record if he wants to look at it. My educated guess is that the next election will be within the next 12 to 18 months. He will make his own educated guess as a seasoned street fighter who is determined to win elections. He will decide when and how to apply his efforts and financial resources. I suspect that he may not wait until 24 months from now, because he may then be too late.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead takes a great deal of interest in voluntary organisations, pressure groups and people who want to influence the political system. Third parties will be helped in a number of ways. They can ensure that they stay below the de minimis provisions. They can also use their political knowledge and guile to work out when a general election might come and contain their expenditure during the 365 days before that.

[Mr. Tipping]

I hope that I have given my right hon. Friend some reassurance and put the issues on the record for the benefit of the many third parties which the Government are keen to involve in the political system. We need to do more to bring more freshness and vigour to the process.

7 pm

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead): I wish to comment on the reasons for the amendments and the arguments deployed by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary.

When I first looked at the Bill, I thought that the Government had tabled the schedule to see whether the House had the staying power to read the Bill to that point. It is difficult to understand why this part of the Bill has been drafted in this way. One reason may be that the Government are anxious that smaller groups should actively participate in any campaign—certainly big campaigns, such as a referendum on the euro—and that they should know their position and keep easily within the law. The proposal does not really deal with the big players who are interested in this debate and in the outcome of that referendum.

I wonder whether the Government are trying to get away with this part of the Bill because, above all else, they fear that the euro will spill over into the election campaign in a way that will be detrimental to the party colours that I have stood for proudly since 1966, when I fought Beaconsfield—as the Prime Minister did in his journey to the House of Commons—and in Birkenhead since 1979. I would not put much money on the Opposition winning the election on policy, but clearly if the euro becomes part of the campaign, the outcome is more open to doubt than it would otherwise be.

I tabled amendment No. 138 because I was anxious for the Government to act fairly and not find themselves before the European Court. I know that the Government want to be at the heart of Europe, but that has a different meaning if we are in the dock of the European Court to answer a case which we find difficult to answer.

My hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary has skills which lead him to be much admired in this House. He carries a lot of good will because of the way in which he conducts himself and the way in which he engages properly in argument. He does not get involved in slanging or in spin. However, even he finds it difficult to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. This part of the Bill will land the Government in difficulties.

The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) immediately spotted the difficulty that the Government are in, and the difficulty that all the big players will be in when they try to read the crystal ball as to whether the election timetable of 365 days has started. None of us knows when the clock will start until the Prime Minister announces the date of the election and tables the necessary resolutions to dissolve Parliament. It seems only proper that the clock should start ticking at that stage in terms of third-party expenditure. Otherwise, the Government will be charged with attempting deliberately to introduce legislation that will act retrospectively—not as this House has done previously, by overturning the established rights of people who thought that they were protected, but by saying that as nobody bar the Prime Minister knows the date of the next election, people will unwittingly find themselves breaking a law that they would not otherwise wish to break.

I appeal to Ministers because the Government will not get away with this. Retrospective legislation is a sign of the Government running scared of the euro tunnelling into the next election campaign. The Government can stop that in all sorts of ways, but one way in which they cannot stop it is to pass this schedule of this Bill in this form. People will not know whether they are breaking the law or not. They will be able to plead before the courts—and before the European Court, if necessary—that they acted in good faith, and that their expenditure was valid.

We all know that this part of the Bill will not continue to be part of the Bill when another place has had a chance to look at it. The debate will come back to us and the Government will be faced with trying to impose their will on the House, which will result in law-abiding citizens behaving unlawfully. It is unwise for Governments to push reform to the stage that people knowingly break the law; it is even worse if people unknowingly break the law and are retrospectively held to account for their actions.

No one in the country knows the date of the general election, and I plead with Ministers to think again on this matter. If they do not, the other place will think again for them. The matter will come back to this Chamber for a vote on a crazy proposal which does not command respect in this House and could not be carried on a free vote. It will not be carried in another place, so the Government put themselves at a disadvantage with voters by behaving in this fashion.

Mr. Grieve: The right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) made a compelling speech. Listening to the Parliamentary Secretary, my amazement grew by the minute. He confidently told us about being able to predict general elections and the normal span of Parliaments. Casting my mind back, I remember that the Government of Mr. Callaghan came to an end which was not dictated by his own decision as to when to go to the country, and that Government extended for nearly five years. Closer to home, my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) would not have wished his Government to go the full five years, but circumstances compelled him into that. That is another example of the impossibility of making such a prognosis.

The amendments, albeit technical, are revealing in terms of the difficulties that the Government are having in plugging the loopholes and the differences between the different schedules. Also—the Minister half-answered this point—the amendments establish an even tighter regime by introducing new categories of election to be covered, which makes it even more difficult to make any sort of guess by an organisation as to when they may fall foul of the legislation.

The essential feature of the provision is that it has nothing to do with the Neill committee, which recommended spending limits for third parties in relation to elections to prevent political parties evading the limits—as happens in the United States of America—by having parallel campaigning organisations. The Neill committee's report talks of the prevention of large-scale propaganda that was clearly intended either to promote the election of one party or to discourage the election of another. In the immediate period of an election, that is

sensible and enjoys the support of the Opposition, and—from what he said—the support of the right hon. Member for Birkenhead.

However, the Neill committee contained nothing about a specified time for which spending limits would apply. Indeed, the report stated:

> There would be considerable practical difficulties in imposing annual spending limits.

Indeed there would. One could not imagine a greater fetter on the freedom of people or organisations to spend their money as they wished or to communicate with others. That right is enshrined in the European convention on human rights, which we have just taken into our law. I hope that the Minister will give me credit for supporting that, despite the difficulties when it came before the House.

The Government have gone well beyond what Neill recommended. With the 365-day principle, they have introduced a level of control that would apply not only to political parties but to groups of

> candidates who hold . . . particular opinions.

The provision would affect a campaign that was run six months before an election advising people to vote Labour or Conservative, and it would also affect a campaign being run to persuade people to vote, for example, for candidates who were pro-life, or pro-abortion. That would fall foul of the 365-day period. As the right hon. Member for Birkenhead pointed out, that is the entire year before the election.

We have co-operated a lot on this Bill, but this provision is either barmy or malevolent. I am still prepared to give the Government the benefit of the doubt that it has been inserted barmily, in a belief that the time limit needs to extend beyond the immediate election period, and then taken too far.

The schedule would introduce spending limits at all times on campaigning organisations. In those circumstances, what would be the practical consequences? Well, unless campaigning organisations will lie down, terrorised, and give up campaigning, they will go ahead and campaign. Many of them will hit an election having grossly exceeded the limits prescribed. However, the Government cannot stop the organisations spending in that time, so—as the right hon. Member for Birkenhead pointed out—when the election arrives, the organisations will have committed a criminal offence. I am not sure what a jury, still less the Court of Appeal, the House of Lords or the European Court of Human Rights, will make of that offence. The Government will end up with egg on their face, and so will the House, for having passed legislation that is manifestly absurd and unfair.

The Government should consider the matter sensibly. They should impose restrictions for the period of a general election, but they should simply live with the fact that they cannot prevent people, outside local or general election periods, from promoting a political viewpoint that may include support for a political party or for groups of MPs who may hold particular views.

The Bill was meant to tackle party spending. It was meant to prevent corruption. It was not, as I am sure the Minister would agree, supposed to impose draconian restrictions on campaigning organisations. Amendment No. 138 would not remove controls on third-party spending altogether, but it would go a long way towards remedying what is wrong with the Bill. It is greatly to the credit of the right hon. Gentleman that he has brought the matter before the House on Report.

7.15 pm

Mr. Field: The hon. Gentleman said that the amendment goes only part of the way. What sort of amendment would he have preferred? Only when we have the dissolution order before Parliament do we know the date of the general election.

Mr. Grieve: I expressed myself badly. The Opposition felt disquiet initially when we considered whether restrictions on third-party expenditure were justifiable. In a spirit of supportiveness, and an understanding of what the Bill is trying to achieve and what Lord Neill recommended, we have put that disquiet to one side. That is one of the reasons why the Bill has progressed with enormous cross-party co-operation. We have made it clear several times that we are prepared to implement Lord Neill's recommendations, even when we can see that there will be practical difficulties. I simply wished to make the point that the right hon. Gentleman's amendment will not get rid of control over third parties, but he has undoubtedly identified the best way of bringing it back within the bounds of reasonableness.

I hope that the Government will give amendment No. 138 some serious thought, coming as it does from a distinguished Labour Back Bencher. We do not wish to depart from the spirit of sensible inquiry that has dominated proceedings on the Bill, and that is greatly to the credit of the Minister. However, the problem will not go away. I would be staggered if the other place failed to point out that the provision fails to comply with basic human rights. If it comes back to this House and has not been properly dealt with, or the Government have not agreed to think again, I foresee that it will not pass without argument. I would prefer to see the consensus that we have achieved hitherto being maintained and I hope that the Government will think again.

I considered whether it was possible to define a period other than the election period itself. However, as I am sure the Minister will agree, another period cannot work. The only sensible limit is the election period.

Mr. Tipping: I am grateful to the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) and to my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) for their comments. We have listened to all the comments made during the Bill's progress. On Second Reading, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary made it clear that, if the Bill could be improved, it would be improved and, if consensus could be found, we would try to find a way forward. That has so far happened.

At times during the speech by the hon. Gentleman, I wondered whether he had moved away from a commitment to spending controls on third parties but, as he developed his theme, he made it clear that he was not against the principle. However, he thought that there would be practical difficulties. I remind him that a central tenet of the Bill is to put financial controls on political parties, which Neill advocated.

Neill also advocated that third parties should be allowed to spend 5 per cent., say, of what political parties spend. That can be judged only against a timetable. My right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead advocates a much shorter timetable, but that is a matter of judgment.

[Mr. Tipping]

We must remember that organisations such as pro-life or environmental groups undertake normal and legitimate campaigning activities. Society benefits from such activities and I hope that we see more of them. They would contravene the Bill only when it became clear that they were trying to influence the outcome of an election. We are not trying to stymie campaign groups—heaven forbid. We want them to do a lot more, and there is a lot of energy to be harnessed. However, when it comes to influencing election outcomes, spending controls should apply to such groups.

I think that the hon. Member for Beaconsfield agrees with that, and I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead does. The important question is how such controls are set against the timetable.

Mr. Grieve: The Minister seems to miss the point. I accept that many organisations will campaign in so general a way that their activities could not be considered relevant to an election. However, as the right hon. Member for Birkenhead said, one can envisage campaigns on a subject such as the euro that might suggest that belief in the euro was incompatible with belonging to the Conservative party or voting Conservative, and that non-belief in the euro was incompatible with belonging to, or voting, Labour. Such campaigns must fall foul of the Bill if an election were to be called unexpectedly after expenditure had been incurred.

Mr. Tipping: I did not miss the point. I was trying to explain it, and the fact that the hon. Gentleman grasped what I was saying so quickly shows that I was going in the right direction.

A range of campaign groups' activities will not be covered by the Bill, but it is right to say that those activities that attempt to influence an election will be restricted by the proposals. I know that my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead is keen to ensure that the regulations are not too onerous and that they do not put people off political campaigns.

I am grateful for the generous, but I think unwarranted, comments from my right hon. Friend, and I feared that the word "but" was on its way. However, I emphasise that I do not want the regulations to be onerous or off-putting. The Bill contains a series of measures that affect larger organisations more than smaller ones. It is framework legislation that covers all sorts of elections—to the European Parliament, for example, or for seats in Scotland and Wales. It is not confined to referendums, nor is it designed around an election in connection with the euro. It contains a series of steps to regulate third-party campaign spending.

Those of us who are involved in political activity, in the mainstream or around the fringes, can make educated guesses about when general elections will be held. My right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead made the point that the Prime Minister of the day has an advantage.

Mr. Grieve: That is a major concession.

Mr. Tipping: It is not a major concession. It is a matter of fact. I can see the hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) laughing, but tables turn and electoral cycles change. What is one party's interest now may not be so in the future.

We believe that the Bill can be improved, and it has been improved already. I heard what my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead said about attitudes in the House of Lords. We will look at tonight's debate and take account of the comments made down the road. However, we must have a system that recognises the principle of restricting third-party spending. We must also try to ensure that it is not too onerous—an objective that I am sure unites the House.

The 365-day provision in the Bill is workable, and the Government are on the right track. We have listened to what my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead said, as we will listen to what is said in another place. I understand that my right hon. Friend is warning me, but I hope that he will accept what I have said and withdraw his amendment.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): I also have a Beaconsfield connection, like the Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) and the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve), although one of us was a more successful candidate than the others.

I have a specific question for the Minister. I understand that the regulation to which he referred does not apply to publishers of newspapers. Will he say what would happen if a major campaign organisation—with a platform in favour of the euro, for example, or against abortion—decided to publish a newspaper during the regulated period? Would that expenditure be controlled by the Bill?

Mr. Tipping: I am interested in the history of success and failure in Beaconsfield. Clearly, a lot of unsuccessful campaigning has gone on there. If the newspaper described by the hon. Gentleman were published by a third-party organisation, it would be counted as campaign expenditure, in the true sense of the phrase.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): Does the Minister really mean what he just said? If Mr. Paul Sykes decided to buy a newspaper, which he filled with news about matters other than just the euro, would that be considered to be an election expense under the Bill?

Mr. Tipping: If Mr. Paul Sykes or anyone else purchased a regular newspaper, in which he ran articles and features designed to influence the process and outcome of an election, that would clearly be campaign expenditure. However, if he bought *The Daily Telegraph*, for example, and that newspaper carried on promoting a variety of causes with a focus that went beyond the election—even if most of those promotions were against the Labour party—that would not be counted as an election expense. A balance has to be struck, and at some point a judgment has to be made.

I can tell the hon. Member for South Staffordshire that it is hard to speak about hypothetical examples. These matters deserve careful judgment, but I repeat: material designed to influence elections will be considered to be campaign material, whereas traditional newspapers will not.

7.30 pm

Sir Patrick Cormack: There is a saying, "If you're in a hole, stop digging." The hon. Gentleman seems to be giving a great many hostages to fortune. Does he really mean to move his Government towards press censorship? The hon. Gentleman may shake his head. He is an immensely amiable character, and we all love him dearly, but he has said some extraordinary things, and this must be sorted out.

Mr. Tipping: Let me be absolutely clear about this. If Mr. Paul Sykes buys *The Daily Telegraph* or any other newspaper and campaigns on the euro or whatever, that is clearly not an election expense. If the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) has in mind a group producing a regular newspaper, locally focused, over a regular period of time, which is designed entirely and primarily to influence the election, clearly it is an election expense. I read the Liberal Democrats' *Focus*, although I do not rate it very highly. It is a regular newspaper that campaigns and tries to influence the election. It is clearly an election expense and if the hon. Gentleman has not been declaring it, I will have to take a close look round North Cornwall.

Now that I have cleared up this issue, let me say, for the third time, that I have heard what my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead has said. He has heard the Government's position, and we will of course follow the debate.

Mr. Grieve: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Tipping: No.

Mr. Field: My comments about my hon. Friend were made without any reservation, without any ifs or buts. My views are, I think, widely shared in all parts of the House, and we are grateful that my hon. Friend treats us in a serious manner in all our debates. I wish that others would follow that role model.

The point of tabling the amendment was in the hope that the Government would accept it. My hon. Friend has, to put it politely, been drowning as he has tried to reply to it. As he is not accepting it, this part of the Bill—this piece of nonsense—staggers on stilts to the other place. I look forward to seeing what the other place will do with it. I am sure that we will then return to the debate in this place. Therefore, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. There is no need for the right hon. Gentleman to withdraw the amendment. It just means that he does not have to move it when we come to that part of the amendment paper.

Amendment agreed to.

Amendments made: No. 45A, in page 56, line 21, leave out 'relevant'.

No. 46, in page 56, line 38, leave out—

'section and sections 89 and 90'

and insert "Chapter".

No. 47, in page 56, line 40, after "9;", insert—

'(aa) any reference to controlled expenditure incurred by or on behalf of a recognised third party during a regulated period includes any controlled expenditure so incurred during that period at any time before the third party became a recognised third party;'.

No. 48, in page 56, leave out line 43 and insert—

'is incurred in that part; and

(c) any reference to controlled expenditure being incurred in a part of the United Kingdom shall be construed in accordance with paragraph 2 of that Schedule.'.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

Schedule 10

CONTROL OF DONATIONS TO RECOGNISED THIRD PARTIES

Amendments made: No. 105, in page 140, line 5, leave out—

', in his capacity as such, shall be regarded as a'

and insert—

'of any property (in his capacity as such) which does not constitute a donation transmitted by the trustee to the recognised third party—

(a) on behalf of a person who, at the time of its receipt by the recognised third party, is a permissible donor falling within section 48(2), or

(b) in pursuance of a bequest made by such a person as is mentioned in section 48(3),

shall be regarded as a relevant'.

No. 106, in page 140, line 6, leave out—

'a permissible donor falling with section 48(2)'

and insert "such a permissible donor".

No. 107, in page 140, line 37, at end insert—

'recognised third party and any'.

No. 108, in page 140, line 38, at end insert "registered party and any".—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

Clause 89

RETURNS AS TO CONTROLLED EXPENDITURE

Amendments made: No. 49, in page 57, line 42, at end insert—

'(4A) Subsections (2) to (4) do not apply to any controlled expenditure incurred at any time during the regulated period before the third party became a recognised third party, but the return must be accompanied by a declaration made by the responsible person of the total amount of such expenditure incurred at any such time.'.

No. 50, in page 57, line 44, at end insert—

'(5A) Where subsection (1)(a) applies in relation to a recognised third party and any regulated period—

(a) the requirements as to the preparation of a return under this section in respect of controlled expenditure falling within subsection (1)(a) shall have effect in relation to the third party despite the third party ceasing to be a recognised third party at or after the end of the regulated period by virtue of the lapse of the third party's notification under section 81(1); and

(b) for the purposes of, or in connection with, the discharge of obligations of the responsible person under this section and sections 91 and 92 in relation to any such return, references to the responsible person shall be read as references to the person who was the responsible person in relation to the third party immediately before that notification lapsed.'.

No. 51, in page 58, line 2, leave out—

'; and section 87(6) applies for the purposes of this section'.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

Clause 90

AUDITOR'S REPORT ON RETURN

Amendment made: No. 52, in page 58, leave out line 15.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

Clause 91

SUBMISSION OF RETURNS TO THE COMMISSION

Amendment made: No. 53, in page 58, line 34, after "if", insert ", without reasonable excuse,".—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

Clause 92

DECLARATION BY RESPONSIBLE PERSON AS TO RETURN UNDER SECTION 89

Amendments made: No. 54, in page 58, line 42, after "party", insert "during a regulated period".

No. 55, in page 59, line 8, leave out "relevant campaign" and insert "regulated".—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

Clause 93

PUBLIC INSPECTION OF RETURNS UNDER SECTION 89

Amendment made: No. 56, in page 59, line 31, at end insert—

'(1A) If the return contains a statement of relevant donations in accordance with section 89(2)(d), the Commission shall secure that the copy of the statement made available for public inspection does not include, in the case of any donation by an individual, the donor's address.'.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

Clause 97

DATE OF POLL

Amendment made: No. 57, in page 61, line 33, after "referendum", insert—

'to which this Part applies'.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

Clause 98

PERMITTED PARTICIPANTS

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I beg to move amendment No. 58, in page 62, leave out lines 1 to 7 and insert—

'(b) any of the following by whom a notification has been given under section 99 in relation to the referendum, namely—

(i) any individual,

(ii) any company falling within section 48(2)(b), and

(iii) any unincorporated association of such a description as is mentioned in section 48(2)(f).'.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss Government amendments Nos. 59 to 63.

Mr. O'Brien: Amendment No. 58 responds to concerns that were raised in Committee about the existing definition of a permitted participant. It was noted that the current definition in clause 98 did not appear to prevent foreign companies and associations from participating in a referendum campaign. It was argued that that seemed to be at odds with the proposed ban on foreign donations.

Concerns were also voiced about the broad nature of the regulation-making power in clause 98(1). The intended purpose of the power had been to enable the Secretary of State to restrict the ability of foreign companies and unincorporated associations to campaign in referendums to which part VII applies. We accept, however, that as drafted, the regulation-making power is very widely drawn, and it would be preferable to set out in the Bill the restrictions that we have in mind.

The effect of the amendment is that a permitted participant in a referendum campaign must be either an individual, a European Union-incorporated company that is carrying on business in the United Kingdom, or an unincorporated association that carries on its business or activities wholly or mainly in the United Kingdom and has its main office here. Such unincorporated associations may include trade unions.

The amended definition does not prevent an individual who is not a United Kingdom-registered voter from being a permitted participant. It is the Government's view that to restrict the ability of individuals, whether or not they are entitled to vote, to express and promote their own opinions, as opposed to financially supporting a campaign would be an undue restriction on their freedom of speech.

The purpose of amendments Nos. 59 to 63 is to ensure that the register of permitted participants, which is maintained by the Electoral Commission for the duration of a referendum campaign, is kept up to date. Under clause 96, a referendum period can last for up to six months. It is quite conceivable that in that time a permitted participant may move offices or appoint a new "responsible person". Clearly, where that happens, there should be a duty on the permitted participant to notify the Electoral Commission of any relevant changes. Amendment No. 59 is directed to that end. On receipt of a notification of a change to a permitted participant's registration details, amendment No. 62 requires the Electoral Commission merely to update the register of permitted participants. The other three amendments make consequential drafting changes to clause 100.

Again, I hope that this is an indication that throughout the Committee stage of the Bill, we have listened carefully to the arguments and are prepared to move when we are convinced that they have relevance.

Mr. Walter: I am grateful to the Government for responding to some of the points that we made in Committee on this issue, and for tightening up the provisions that relate to companies and unincorporated associations. Of course, as the Minister pointed out, it is still possible for a company registered in this country but incorporated elsewhere in the European Union to be a permitted participant in a referendum campaign.

The amendments do nothing to remove the provision for a permitted participant to be a foreign national, to visit this country—as I mentioned when we were discussing third parties—and to spend £500,000 on furthering his political views in a referendum campaign. If a group of individuals did that, they could have a significant impact on the referendum campaign. We are still very unhappy with the way in which the clause is drafted, as we are with the way in which the clause on third parties is drafted.

Amendment agreed to.

Clause 99

DECLARATIONS AND NOTIFICATIONS FOR PURPOSES OF SECTION 98

Amendment made: No. 59, in page 63, line 5, at end insert—

'(4A) If at any time before the end of the compliance period any of the statements which, in accordance with any provision of subsection (4), are contained in a notification under this section (as it has effect for the time being) ceases to be accurate, the permitted participant by whom the notification was given shall give the Commission a notification ("a notification of alteration") indicating that that statement is replaced by some other statement—

(a) contained in the notification of alteration, and

(b) conforming with that provision of subsection (4).

(4B) For the purposes of subsection (4A) "the compliance period" is the period during which any provisions of Chapter II remain to be complied with on the part of the permitted participant.'.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

Clause 100

REGISTER OF DECLARATIONS AND NOTIFICATIONS FOR PURPOSES OF SECTION 98

Amendments made: No. 60, in page 63, line 16, leave out subsection (3).

No. 61, in page 63, line 19, after "cause", insert—

'(a)''.

No. 62, in page 63, line 20, after "register", insert ", or

(b) in the case of a notification under section 99(4A), any change required as a consequence of the notification to be made in the register,'.

No. 63, in page 63, line 21, at end insert—

'(5) The information to be entered in the register in respect of a permitted participant who is an individual shall, however, not include his home address.'.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

Schedule 11

ASSISTANCE AVAILABLE TO DESIGNATED ORGANISATIONS

Amendment made: No. 109, in page 144, line 19, leave out from "organisations," to end of line 21.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

Clause 104

REFERENDUM EXPENSES

Amendment made: No. 64, in page 65, line 13, after "referendum", insert—

'to which this Part applies'.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

Schedule 12

REFERENDUM EXPENSES: QUALIFYING EXPENSES

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I beg to move amendment No. 110, in page 146, leave out lines 5 to 11.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following: Amendment No. 182, in page 69, line 11, leave out Clause 111.

Amendment No. 151, in page 148, line 25, leave out Schedule 13.

Amendment No. 146, in page 75, line 17, leave out Clause 122.

Government amendment No. 82.

Mr. O'Brien: I shall deal first with the Government amendments and then turn to those tabled by the Opposition.

When we considered schedule 12 as a Committee of the whole House, the hon. Member for North Dorset (Mr. Walter) suggested that sub-paragraphs (a) and (b) in paragraph 2 looked out of place. We considered that matter and we agree: schedule 12 is almost the mirror image of schedule 7. Although the exclusions to which the sub-paragraphs relate are appropriate in the context of election campaign expenditure—for example in a general election—they do not fit the circumstances of referendum campaigns. He pointed that out, and we were happy to table amendment No. 110, which would remove those two sub-paragraphs. I hope that it will command the broad support of the House.

I will take the remaining amendments in the group in reverse order. Government amendment No. 82 amends clause 144 so as to add to the list of delegated powers that are subject to the affirmative resolution procedure the order-making power in clause 122. Amendment No. 182, tabled by the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) and his colleagues, takes a more drastic approach: it would delete the whole clause and with it the order-making power.

The House will recall that clause 122 was added to the Bill in Committee. It is fair to say that the new clause generated some heat at the end of proceedings on 16 February. It may be as well, therefore, for me to take this opportunity to say a little more about the order-making power set out in the clause.

The purpose of the clause is to enable the Secretary of State to make provision for the conduct of a referendum to which part VII applies. Although, in accordance with precedent, the clause uses the word "conduct", it is in fact concerned with the administration of a referendum—the nuts and bolts of the polling arrangements. An order made under clause 122 may be expected to do no more than apply to a referendum the relevant provisions of the Representation of the People Acts and regulations. An order would thus be concerned with such matters as postal voting, the provision of polling stations, the issue of polling cards and the hours of polling. Those are important but none the less administrative matters, which can sensibly be left to subordinate legislation.

As was pointed out in Committee, there are several precedents for this order-making power, including legislation passed by previous Conservative Administrations—namely the Northern Ireland (Border Poll) Act 1972. Other precedents include the Referendum Act 1975, the Scotland Act 1978, the Wales Act 1978 and, more recently, the Greater London Authority (Referendum) Act 1998. The arrangements for the conduct of the elections to the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales also derive from subordinate legislation made under the Scotland Act 1998 and the Government of Wales Act 1998.

I hope that the House will be reassured that we are creating nothing sinister—nothing that may give the Secretary of State power mendaciously to influence the outcome of a referendum campaign. The provision is simply concerned with the mere mechanics of a referendum poll. I point out to the right hon. Member for

[Mr. O'Brien]

North-West Hampshire that, if any legal dispute should arise, Pepper *v.* Hart will apply. No doubt he has had a chance to look it up overnight.

It is appropriate that such an order should be subject to the affirmative resolution procedure. I therefore commend amendment No. 82 to the House.

7.45 pm

I turn now to amendments Nos. 182 and 151. It is true that, in its original report, the Neill committee recommended against spending limits in referendum campaigns. Both in the report and in their comments on the draft Bill, members of the committee made it clear that its difficulty with spending limits was based not so much on principle, but on practical grounds. We have rehearsed that argument, so I shall not go into it at great length. The committee had particularly in mind the transient nature of some referendum campaign organisations.

The Government are not persuaded that the practical difficulties are too great. The Neill committee had already recommended that referendum campaign organisations—not merely those in receipt of public funds, but any that intended to spend more than the de minimis limit—should register with the Electoral Commission. That requirement provides in itself much of the control machinery needed for the imposition of expenditure limits. There is no reason why it should be more difficult, practically and technically, to impose spending limits in referendum campaigns than it is to impose them in constituency election contests or—perhaps I dare say it—campaigns to be mayor of London.

As to the principle, the Government take the view that it is every bit as desirable to prevent a referendum campaign from being skewed by the amount of money at the disposal of particular participants as it would be in a general election campaign.

The official Opposition have not really answered that point. There has been much huffing and puffing, but no clear statement as to why they oppose expenditure controls. One of their arguments is that Neill did not recommend them; another is that they would be difficult to organise. However, that does not go to the nub of the issue: why—if it were possible to do so—do the Opposition believe that we should get involved in some form of arms race over who can spend the most in a referendum campaign? That is undesirable. The point is to allow people to choose; it is not about who can spend the most on putting out propaganda. As the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) remarked in Committee, the Conservatives seem to confuse expenditure controls with the amounts available to parties and other organisations.

The serious point, which cannot be gainsaid, is that expenditure controls on parties and organisations cannot be relied on to ensure that the same amount is spent by both sides in a referendum campaign. We have been over that ground on previous occasions. As no scheme has been suggested to achieve that result, it is common ground in the House that it would not be practicable. However, that does not dispose of the case for expenditure controls with more limited objectives and, possibly, more modest results.

We have consistently kept an open mind on the detail of the scheme—especially the figures in schedule 13. We adjusted the limits for political parties, and the basis for such limits, in response to the comments of the Neill committee on the draft Bill. We have continued to invite Opposition Members to tell us if they think that the figures should be further varied.

The official Opposition have consistently declined to make any suggestions; they simply say that they want no limits at all. They are not prepared to enter serious discussions on how we can ensure that people have a choice that is not skewed by an arms race for who can spend the most. Their only reply to our request to enter that debate is that it is all too difficult. Obviously, we shall vote on whether there should be expenditure controls. However, if there is to be a scheme—as we say there should be—the detail is as right as we could fairly and reasonably make it.

We continue to think that it is only realistic to regard the larger political parties as likely to want to participate in a referendum campaign, and that the spending limits should reflect the electoral support they enjoy. However, the Bill does not require a party to participate in a campaign; for example, a party may not do so because it is split or for other reasons.

We have tried to take a principled view; it is right to have expenditure controls, but we do not want an arms race during a referendum campaign. We invited the Conservatives to join us in supporting that view and to discuss how it might be applied. However, they seem to reject the principle altogether. I regret that. If we really care about democracy and the way in which a referendum campaign is conducted, we should try to ensure that there is a reasonably fair playing field. We want to ensure a rough balance—it could never be perfect—so that the people who decide the outcome of the referendum can make up their minds, exercise their judgment and come to a conclusion based on a fair and reasonably balanced presentation of the evidence.

That is how we intend to progress. I hope that, even at this late stage, the Conservatives will join us.

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): Before I move to the more substantive issues, I wish to press the Minister about Government amendment No. 110. It applies to the exclusion on direct expenses in schedule 12. He pointed out that paragraph 2 of schedule 12 bears a remarkable similarity to paragraph 2 of schedule 7, which is about exclusions on direct expenses in an election. He pointed out that that was not entirely appropriate, particularly because paragraph 2 of schedule 7 refers to expenses in respect of giving electors information about

their elected representatives or existing or prospective candidates.

He made the point that, although that provision was appropriate for a general election, it was obviously not appropriate for a referendum.

Government amendment No. 110. goes slightly further. It will delete paragraph 2(b) of schedule 12. That means that any expenses incurred in sending unsolicited material to supporters of a referendum campaign will no longer be excluded. However, it seems to me that, under the provisions of paragraph 2(b) of schedule 7, identical expenditure seems to be excluded, because it refers to

any expenses incurred in respect of unsolicited material addressed to party members.

It is not immediately clear why it is right to exclude the expenses when one sends unsolicited material to party members, but include them when one sends unsolicited material to supporters of a referendum campaign.

The Minister may be able to tell us why he wants to delete paragraph 2(b) of schedule 12, and I have no argument about knocking out sub-paragraph (a). However, the reasons for the Government's approach are not immediately clear.

The debate revisits familiar territory, but it would be wrong to let Report stage pass without reference to the most fundamental divergence from the recommendations of the Neill committee. At an appropriate time, the Opposition hope to move formally amendments Nos. 182 and 146 and take the temperature of the House on these constitutional issues. I shall talk to amendments Nos. 182 and 151 and my hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) wishes to talk to amendment No. 146.

The Minister and the House know our views, which I set out in Committee on 16 February when I was ably assisted by my right hon. and hon. Friends, and in particular by my right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor). I do not want to repeat that case, but I want to advance the argument by considering the two principal reasons given by the Minister when he resisted our amendment. First, he argued that

> if, as we have agreed, it is right and practical to control spending at major general elections, it is right and practical to control spending in referendum campaigns.

I leave unanswered the question about what might be a minor general election.

I want to address the key argument that the Minister has used time and again, and which he has repeated this evening. He argues that if one can cap spending at a general election, one can cap spending in a referendum. That argument was demolished by Lord Neill, and nothing that the Minister has said in the two months since Second Reading has addressed the fundamental point that Lord Neill made. He considered the Government's case and rejected it in paragraphs 12.20 to 12.22 of his report.

Referendum campaigns are not, as the Minister tells us time and again, the same as general election campaigns. Everyone in the House knows that they are different. In a referendum, we are not choosing a Government, the parties may be split and other organisations are involved. In paragraph 12.30 of his report, Lord Neill concluded:

> To represent referendum campaigns as merely another manifestation of the usual party political battle seems to us both misconceived in principle and false to the history of referendums since 1975.

We have heard that case repeated this evening, without Lord Neill's objection being addressed. The Government's case for limits is based on that false premise.

At no time have the Government begun to answer a related question. Why should one base what might be spent in a referendum campaign on, for example, proportional representation for Westminster on how many votes the Labour party received at a general election in which it was neutral on the issue of proportional representation? Trying to base referendum spending limits on votes at the previous general election has no argument of principle whatever to sustain it, and nor has the Minister advanced any.

As we have heard in many debates today and in Committee, the limits are shot to shreds by loopholes. Foreign residents can take space in newspaper advertisements without restrictions thanks to the European convention on human rights. The 24 trade unions that are affiliated to the Labour party can each spend £500,000, lifting the Labour party limit from £5 million to £17 million at a stroke. As we have just heard, one can buy a newspaper—as long as it is the right newspaper—without the limits applying. The argument that one can cap spending in a referendum campaign in the same way that one can cap spending in a general election campaign simply does not stand up to scrutiny.

The Minister's second argument was that our amendments were a Conservative ploy—a devious attempt by my party somehow to secure advantage. We propose what the Neill committee proposed unanimously. The rules that we want are those that the Government have already applied themselves. The Minister said:

> We believe that it is simply undesirable to have referendums bought by those who are able to pay the largest sums.—[*Official Report*, 16 February 2000; Vol. 344, c. 1038-39.]

However, all that he is doing is substituting that undesirability with another one. Referendums will be bought by those who are allowed to pay the largest sum. We have explained time and again how, in a referendum on the euro, the scales might be tipped in favour of one side.

The Home Secretary defended those limits by saying that the Liberal Democrats would not be able to spend up to that limit. That is not a powerful argument, not least because, under the Bill, the Labour party could, if it wanted to, give the Liberal Democrats the money to support a campaign for the euro.

Mr. Stunell: The right hon. Gentleman's scenario is improbable. Should he be successful in deleting clause 111, the Labour party could send us an even bigger cheque.

Sir George Young: I am not sure of the logic of that suggestion. However, I am disappointed that the Conservative party does not feature in any way in that important financial transaction. Perhaps we could receive a commission for facilitating such a transaction between the two main parties.

Mr. Stunell: The right hon. Gentleman is at least right about the two main parties. The point that I did not make more explicit—I apologise for that—is that all the things that he has described could happen several times over in a regime with no limits. The restrictions provide some limitation.

Sir George Young: The hon. Gentleman has to address at some point the recommendations of the Neill committee and why it unanimously came to the conclusion that it was impractical to impose limits on referendum campaigns. Although I noticed on the previous occasion we debated this issue that the Liberal Democrats supported the Government, I hope that they will consider the arguments that Neill advanced and the criticisms of the Government's proposal. Perhaps, in another place, they will have second thoughts.

I regret that the Government will not see reason on our suggestion. The scheme that they are persisting with is based on a flawed policy. It has no basis in principle and

[Sir George Young]

it will be impossible to implement in practice. At the appropriate time, I shall invite my hon. Friends to express that view in the Lobby.

Mr. Stunell: Three separate issues have come to the fore, and I shall comment briefly on each of them.

I, too, would like to hear from the Minister about the detail of the practical effect of Government amendment No. 110. As I understand it, in the first formulation, leaflets distributed during a campaign are exempt because they will be included elsewhere in the election expenses of individual campaigns. Perhaps the Minister could confirm that. In a referendum, where there is not an individual campaign as such, those leaflets will be included in the global figure.

8 pm

If that is the basis on which we are proceeding, that is fine, but there is potentially a category that is exempted in the first case and now will not be exempted in the second case. I refer to wider campaign literature that does not specifically advocate the case of particular candidates. I seek clarification on that point.

We debated expenditure limits in a Committee of the whole House, and I thought that the intellectual case made by several Conservative spokesmen did not stand the test of the debate, and the hon. Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) as good as conceded the case. The argument is straightforward: the rules and procedures set out in the Bill mean that each political party has a ceiling on the contribution that it can make to a referendum campaign. That ceiling is effectively £5 million each for the Conservative and Labour parties, a lesser amount for the Liberal Democrats, and £500,000 for any other party with representation in this House.

If one took the gloomiest view from the Conservatives' perspective, which is that every other party in the House was opposed to the Conservatives' case in a referendum on proportional representation or the euro—they are on the losing side of those arguments, in their perception at least—and spent up to its limit, the total ceiling would be under £20 million. If there were no financial limits and every party in the House other than the Conservatives chose to invest in a referendum campaign the amount that the Conservatives invested in the general election, they would spend some £260 million.

The Conservatives' choice is between no limits, which may mean that some £300 million or even £400 million is spent, or spending that is regulated, however inadequately in their view, which would mean that the disadvantage suffered by them or by minority parties in a referendum campaign—I do not necessarily mean political parties—would not be so great.

The right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) suggested that perhaps I had not addressed the intellectual case set out in the Neill report. I put it to him that he has not addressed the intellectual case of the sheer mathematics of the Bill's provisions, as opposed to the alternative of having no limits at all.

Having no spending limits would mean no constraints on the spending of the parties, and therefore on the side of the argument with the biggest and deepest pockets. Sometimes that will suit cases that the right hon. Gentleman wishes to advocate, sometimes it will suit those that I want to advocate, and there may be occasions when we are on the same side, but that is not the best way to reach decisions in a democracy. While we are introducing a formal process for the general regulation of referendums, we should introduce financial controls as well.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that in a referendum the party with the deepest pockets will always be the Government? We saw in the Welsh referendum the extent to which the Government were able to use all their agencies of publicity to put across their case.

Mr. Stunell: That might be generally true, but there is every indication that in a referendum on the euro, both sides of the argument would have supporters in the UK with very deep pockets, and I would not like to match my personal bank account against that of Mr. Sykes. Time will tell which side of the argument has the money. If we have no financial regulation, and if the hon. Gentleman's point is correct, the Government of the day will be in a position to win every referendum simply because they have the deepest pockets, so I should have thought that his point was an argument in favour of spending limits to level the playing field for the small guys putting a minority view.

We shall support the retention of clause 111. We believe that there should be spending limits. The reasoning used by the Conservatives in Committee was flawed, and they are making a mistake in using it now.

I deal now with clause 122 and the powers of the Secretary of State. We were concerned about those powers when they were imported into the Bill. We had some reassurance from the Minister about their limited nature and the fact that they will be tempered with mercy, so we do not need to worry about them. That is fine, but I want to hear a good deal more from the Minister about precisely how those powers are being circumscribed.

I repeat that we are making legislation that history suggests will last for a long time. The last thorough overhaul of such legislation was in 1883—117 years ago. We are putting in place the foundations of legislation, particularly on referendums, which may not be revisited for a long time. Certainly the legislation will outlast the ministerial lifetime of the present Secretary of State and probably of several Secretaries of State after that. *[Interruption.]* Well, the Home Secretary may remain in post for 117 years, but that would be an unusual record.

We have to understand that the rules and regulations that we are introducing may have to be effective in more adverse circumstances than the present ones. When we give the Secretary of State powers relating to elections and referendums, we have to be absolutely sure that the possibility of undue influence or decision making by him is minimised, and although we have had some reassurance today, we remain to be convinced that that is the case.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): I was inspired to contribute to the debate principally by the speech of the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell). I imagine that he does not often inspire contributions of any sort, so I say that with generosity.

There was a lot of talk about intellectualism in the hon. Gentleman's speech, but little evidence of it. He misunderstands the fundamental difference between limits on expenditure per se and limits on the expenditure of those who are permitted to contribute to or to fund campaigns. That lies at the heart of the amendments and of the arguments put forward by my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young). To argue that any restriction or practice is better than none is not a satisfactory way to address our concerns.

I want to make only two substantial points. The first is that it is not good enough simply to disregard the work that the Neill committee did on this matter. The committee was strong and unanimous in its view and it contradicted the position that has been adopted by the Government. The Minister will remember that Neill was particularly critical of the conduct of the Northern Ireland referendum. I make no judgment on the subject that was being debated in Northern Ireland, but Neill made specific and rather critical comment about that, about expenditure in that referendum campaign, and about the Government's whip hand in the conduct of that campaign.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Northern Ireland referendum was somewhat different. We are discussing whether there should be expenditure restraints on the various campaign organisations and political parties in a national referendum, where the Government, at least for a time, are excluded.

The Neill committee did not think that that was doable. We say that it is, and we will do it. We paid attention to the Neill argument. Now, perhaps, the hon. Gentleman should pay attention. Let him address the doability argument. That is the only objection that Neill had. There was no objection in principle, as I understand it.

Mr. Hayes: The Minister is right—the Neill committee criticised the practicality of the measure. My right hon. Friend drew attention to that in his remarks. I was making a different point.

My second substantial point is that referendums are fundamentally different from general elections. The public expectations and perceptions of referendum campaigns and the spending in referendum campaigns is, to some extent, prejudiced. In other words, there is a widespread view that Governments do not lose referendums. That does not apply to general elections.

People assume that general elections are likely to be run and financed on a fair and free basis. I suspect that that is not the public expectation and perception of referendums in general. I mentioned Northern Ireland because it illustrates the fact that there is already—I will not say "a presumption of guilt", as that would be going too far—some misapprehension on the part of the public about the conduct and funding of referendum campaigns.

Mr. George Stevenson (Stoke-on-Trent, South): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I have listened to the debate for many hours, and I am interested in his argument. Does he accept that referendums can fundamentally alter a Government's policy and in some circumstances bring a Government down? Why does he persist in arguing that there is no comparison between referendums and general elections in that sense?

Mr. Hayes: I would not say that there was no comparison. They are comparable in that sense, as they may affect the political direction of a Government or a country. Referendums are different from a general election not just in scale, which is clearly a factor, as the scale of a referendum campaign is considerably greater, but in the public expectation and perception of their conduct and nature.

I was being rather complimentary about our democracy. Most people think that the way in which we conduct our general elections and the way the principal political parties conduct themselves in the context of general elections is, for the most part, fair, free and honourable. There is the odd exception, but in essence that would be a tenable position to adopt.

I do not take the same view of referendums. As we already see in press comment and surveys of opinion, people expect referendums not to be conducted in the same free and fair way. We therefore have an extra duty to counteract that and to anticipate those objections by ensuring that the legislation is—to paraphrase the hon. Member for Hazel Grove—fit for the long-term future, if referendums are to play an increasing role in the way we govern our country. That is why I strongly support the remarks of my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire.

8.15 pm

Mr. Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury): I join the debate on this group of amendments because I spoke on the clause when we discussed it in the early hours of the evening of 16 February in Committee on the Floor of the House. I shall highlight those points again, with good reason—not for the sake of duplication, but because, as is acknowledged throughout the House, clause 111 goes to the heart of fairness in referendums. We all recognise that if the Bill is to be effective, it must increase, not diminish, the democratic legitimacy of referendums.

At the time, I queried how one would manage the suspension of expenditure in local political parties so that that was not computed within the overall limits on expenditure under the rules imposed by the Bill. That was not apparent from the Bill. It is also not clear from the Bill what would happen if a referendum were held on the same day as a general election. In the absence of provision in the Bill, confusion seems to abound.

That was not a facile point. I had been led to that expectation by no less a person than the Prime Minister, who, early in the course of this Administration, perhaps in order to duck the prevailing lack of enthusiasm for the single currency in the country, suggested that it might be better to have a referendum on the same day as a general election to disguise the issue.

The debate proceeded, and the Minister was exceptionally generous in his reply. Not sparing my blushes, referring to my speech the Minister said:

> He made a very good speech and raised some forensic points, which deserve much consideration. I should like to consider at greater length some of the finer aspects of the issues that he raised and perhaps write to him on some of them.

After dealing with a further point, the Minister continued:

> I should like to consider further some of the hon. Gentleman's points, which may deserve some closer thought. . . They suggest that he is right: if that happens, perhaps we will need further legislation to clarify some of the issues."—[*Official Report*, 16 February 2000; Vol. 344, c. 1037-38.]

The Minister then went on in characteristically generous vein.

[Mr. Stephen O'Brien]

I have received no letter from the Minister on any of those points, which I think are valid and important and go to the heart of the clause. I ask the Minister to reflect carefully whether our amendments are right, and whether the clause should be removed from the Bill until the issues that are fundamental to the fairness of referendums and democratic legitimacy have been addressed.

Mr. Paterson: Following my intervention in the speech of the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell), I shall make a brief contribution and clarify my point.

If there are artificial limits as set out in schedule 13, the whip hand is the Government's. A recent example, which affected people near my constituency, was the Welsh referendum, in which there was a staggering increase in expenditure by the Welsh Office on what is called "extra publicity".

The figures are simple. Total publicity spending by the Welsh Office since May 1997 was £5,285,750. Of that, the amount spent on extra publicity was an incredible £2,724,812.5. The rest of that sum, which is slightly less than half, went on opinion poll research, media advertising, direct mail publicity, press releases and websites.

That shows that if an artificial limit is imposed through schedule 13, those who do not support the Government's cause will be capped. The Government will have access to all the tricks that we witnessed in the Welsh referendum. They will be able to dip into the public purse. Effectively, unlimited spending will be available to finance the Government's cause. That is wrong, which is why I strongly support amendment No. 151.

Sir Patrick Cormack: My hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes)—what a wonderful constituency name that is—and my hon. Friends the Members for North Shropshire (Mr. Paterson) and for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien) made short but pithy speeches which were extremely convincing. It would be remiss of the Under-Secretary not to take account of the point that my hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire made. The result of the Welsh referendum was desperately close. Those of us who watched with increasing amazement the extraordinary development of the Welsh Assembly and its dramatis personae, and who remember that the flimsiest majority landed us with that Assembly, stress to the Government that my hon. Friend has made a powerful point.

My right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young), who introduced this brief debate, spoke with his customary eloquence and impeccable logic. I hope that the Under-Secretary will respond properly to my right hon. Friend's trenchant observations.

I want to concentrate briefly on clause 122. The Under-Secretary was all sweetness, reasonableness and light. He claimed that it was simply an administrative matter, which did not count, that we should not worry about it and that we could trust him. I can probably trust the Under-Secretary and we can probably trust several—not all—Ministers not to get up to truly appalling tricks. However, the clause is open ended. It flies in the face of the Under-Secretary's comments earlier in our proceedings.

At the beginning of our proceedings, the Minister promised that the measure would be

> a truly generic referendums Bill—[*Official Report*, 10 January 2000; Vol. 342, c. 113.]

I do not know what that means. On Second Reading, he promised that the Government would table amendments on the nuts and bolts of organising the poll and the count. We therefore expected some nuts and bolts. However, the nuts have produced no bolts. We are considering a Henry VIII clause, whereby the Home Secretary is able to take absolute power to decide all the rules and regulations for referendums, and to create criminal offences in connection with the rules that he sets. That is inimical to true democratic Government. Such a provision should not be in the Bill.

For all the Minister's personable plausibility and good intentions, he is trying to introduce a wholly unacceptable provision. I was glad that the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) said that he would again support our argument.

Clause 122 is not good enough. I am sure that those in another place will not believe that it is good enough. We intend to press the amendment to a Division. If the Under-Secretary does not listen to us tonight, I hope that he will listen to the other place. I have no doubt that it will find the provision as unacceptable as we do. Unless the Under-Secretary gives a categorical assurance that the clause will be withdrawn, we shall do our best to delete it this evening.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: First, I shall deal with the issue that the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) raised on paragraph 2(b) of schedule 7. The provision is intended to exclude from the ambit of election expenditure unsolicited newsletters and other communications that are sent from, for example, Millbank to Labour party members. Such material is not used to influence the unaffiliated; it is, in a sense, an internal party matter.

However, referendum campaign bodies are likely to be more ad hoc, with no formal individual membership. It would therefore be almost impossible to decide who constituted a supporter. The equivalent provision in schedule 12 does not fit the circumstances, and is best deleted, as the hon. Member for North Dorset (Mr. Walter) proposed in Committee.

Paragraph 2(b) of schedule 12 refers to supporters. That term is potentially far wider than "members", which is used in schedule 7. However, I shall reconsider the point, and ascertain whether we need to do anything about it. I do not currently believe that I need to make any amendment.

The hon. Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien) rightly pointed out that I owed him a letter. We have not forgotten that. He will receive a letter; I shall endeavour to send him it in a week. I ask him to chase me if that does not happen; I am sure that he will.

The hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) asked about nuts and bolts. Clause 122 contains the order-making power, which will apply to the Representation of the People Act 2000 and the attendant regulations. We are including some of the apparatus for proper control of referendum campaigns in the Bill. Provisions under the Representation of the People Act 2000 will also apply because of the way in which the measure

affects the organisation of polling stations and the whole paraphernalia of referendums. Many of the nuts and bolts are already in place because of recent legislation. For example, the Representation of the People Act 2000 authorises different ways of providing postal ballots. The nuts and bolts will therefore be introduced to a referendum campaign in different ways.

Sir Patrick Cormack: Again, I do not doubt the Under-Secretary's sincerity, but why cannot those nuts and bolts be included in a detailed schedule to the Bill?

Mr. O'Brien: The operation of the order-making powers is clear. We have said what we intend to do. I do not need to take that further, although I am happy to do so if the hon. Gentleman has another specific point to make. I have made the position as clear I can. There is normally no great problem with the administration of referendums. The contentious matters are those that involve political issues and whether we should cap expenditure.

Let us consider capping expenditure and the arguments made by the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire. He repeated the points that he has made on previous occasions. He claims that the Neill committee said that capping was not practical and that our proposals are not perfect. The Neill committee did not object in principle; there was no great intellectual case against it. We are discussing the practicalities of whether that can be done. We take the view that it can, hence we are doing it. I cannot take the matter much further than that.

8.30 pm

The right hon. Gentleman says that the proposal is not perfectly fair. It is not perfect perhaps, but in our view it represents a broad fairness—a balance between the umbrella groups, with some restrictions on the political parties—that is about as fair as possible in terms of the votes received at the general election. If anything, it gives a little more credit to the Conservative party. It would be very regrettable if any millionaire or multi-billionaire—a Paul Sykes, or anyone richer who opposes him on those issues—sought to buy the outcome of a referendum. We say: let the people decide in any referendum after hearing the arguments presented in a fair and balanced way. The issue should be voter choice, not who has the deepest pocket.

Amendment agreed to.

Clause 106

RESTRICTION ON INCURRING REFERENDUM EXPENSES

Amendment made: No. 65, in page 67, line 1, after "if", insert ", without reasonable excuse,".—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

Clause 107

RESTRICTION ON PAYMENTS IN RESPECT OF REFERENDUM EXPENSES

Amendments made: No. 66, in page 67, line 19, after "if", insert ", without reasonable excuse,".

No. 67, in page 67, line 21, leave out "without reasonable excuse,".—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

Clause 108

RESTRICTION ON MAKING CLAIMS IN RESPECT OF REFERENDUM EXPENSES

Amendment made: No. 68, in page 67, line 31, after "if", insert ", without reasonable excuse,".—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

Clause 111

SPECIAL RESTRICTIONS ON REFERENDUM EXPENSES BY PERMITTED PARTICIPANTS

Amendment proposed: No. 182, in page 69, line 11, leave out clause 111.—*[Sir G. Young.]*

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 139, Noes 315.

Division No. 106] **[8.31 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Baldry, Tony
Beggs, Roy
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Forsythe, Clifford
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*

Ross, William *(E Lond'y)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, Rt Hon John D *(Strangford)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Townend, John
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Peter Atkinson and
Mr. Stephen Day.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Ballard, Jackie
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Berrningham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Doran, Frank
Drew, David
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Etherington, Bill
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Harris, Dr Evan
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'd Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moore, Michael
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Rendel, David
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan

Sheerman, Barry
Shipley, Ms Debra
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tyler, Paul
Tynan, Bill
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Willis, Phil
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. David Jamieson and Mr. Jim Dowd.

Question accordingly negatived.

Schedule 14

CONTROL OF DONATIONS TO PERMITTED PARTICIPANTS

Amendments made: No. 111, in page 151, leave out lines 34 to 37 and insert—

'(b) any relevant donation received by a permitted participant from a trustee of any property (in his capacity as such) which does not constitute a donation transmitted by the trustee to the permitted participant—

(i) on behalf of a person who, at the time of its receipt by the permitted participant, is a permissible donor falling within section 48(2), or

(ii) in pursuance of a bequest made by such a person as is mentioned in section 48(3),

shall be regarded as a relevant donation received by the permitted participant from a person who is not such a permissible donor.'.

No. 112, in page 152, line 17, at end insert "permitted participant and any".

No. 113, in page 152, line 18, at end insert "registered party and any".—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

Clause 115

SUBMISSION OF RETURNS TO COMMISSION

Amendment made: No. 69, in page 71, line 24, after "if", insert ", without reasonable excuse,".—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

Clause 117

PUBLIC INSPECTION OF RETURNS UNDER SECTION 113

Amendment made: No. 70, in page 72, line 21, at end insert—

'(1A) If the return contains a statement of relevant donations in accordance with section 113(2)(d), the Commission shall secure that the copy of the statement made available for public inspection does not include, in the case of any donation by an individual, the donor's address.'.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

Clause 118

RESTRICTION ON PUBLICATION ETC. OF PROMOTIONAL MATERIAL BY CENTRAL AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT ETC.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): I beg to move amendment No. 154, in page 72, line 41, leave out "relevant" and insert "referendum".

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 150, in page 73, line 10, leave out from "poll" to end of line 11.

No. 155, in page 73, leave out lines 19 and 20.

No. 149, in page 73, line 20, at end insert—

'(5) (a) No civil servant shall advocate any argument for or against any particular answer to any question in a referendum, notwithstanding the fact that this would be incidental to the issue of a press notice under subsection 3(d).

(b) In this subsection the term "civil servant" includes any person employed as a special adviser'.

Mr. Evans: The amendments relate to the conduct of the Government during referendums. Under the Labour Government, referendums are a growing industry: we have had referendums in Scotland, Wales, London and Northern Ireland, and we are promised three more on Europe, proportional representation and the establishment of English regional assemblies. As we know, there was concern about the conduct of the referendum in Wales, which was held on 18 September 1997. Some of the changes proposed under the Bill, such as those relating to core funding, are welcome, but we remain concerned—in particular about the ludicrous and unworkable limits set on expenditure in referendum campaigns.

8.45 pm

Page 163 of the Neill committee report states:

We were disturbed, in particular, by the evidence we heard in Cardiff to the effect that the referendum campaign in Wales in 1997 was very one-sided, with the last-minute No organisation seriously under-funded and having to rely for financial support essentially on a single wealthy donor. The outcome of the Welsh referendum was extremely close, and a fairer campaign might well have resulted in a different outcome.

A Labour member of the no campaign, Carys Pugh, stated:

Without Robert Hodge, I do not know what we would have done. We could not have carried on and that would have been gravely unjust."

Robert Hodge himself said:

I do not know what the other side spent . . . but you can rest assured that we spent just short of £100,000. I am led to believe that the other side, with the booklets and everything else, possibly spent a seven figure sum. That puts it in proportion.

[Mr. Evans]

Recommendation 83 in the Neill report says:

> In any referendum campaign there must be a fair opportunity for each side of the argument to be properly put to the voters.

Neill observed the disquiet about the publications issued and distributed to every household during the 1975 European referendum, the 1997 Assembly election in Wales, the parliamentary referendum in Scotland and the 1998 Greater London Authority referendum. In Wales, a small booklet that was distributed to every household had a big tick on the front, which sent a positive message as the devolution process was explained.

On page 169 of the report, Neill puts the case for the defence very clearly. He says:

> We believe that it is extraordinarily difficult, if not impossible, for the government of the day to offer purely objective and factual information in the course of a referendum campaign, especially when, as will usually be the case, it itself is a party to the campaign. We believe governments should not participate in referendum campaigns in this manner, just as it would be thought to be wholly inappropriate during a general election campaign for the government to print and distribute, at the taxpayers' expense, literature setting out government policy.

Recommendation 89 states that no literature, "even purportedly 'factual'" should be sent.

As Wales has learned to its cost, once the decision is made, even with 50.3 per cent. voting yes and 49.7 per cent. voting no, a determined Government will say "Right, that's it", and they will press ahead. I am unclear about exactly what powers the Electoral Commission will have during the period of a referendum. If the Government want to send out a publication, will the Electoral Commission be able to say that they cannot do so? Will it have the power to examine the literature before it goes out, and be able to edit it? Judging by the Bill, the answer is no.

The Government have responded to the Neill committee report. Let us say that a Bill is introduced to have a referendum on the euro. As soon as the Government introduce that Bill in Parliament, all the other rules, regulations and restrictions would kick in and apply to every other organisation taking part in the referendum, except for the Government. They could issue a document promoting their policy, funded by the taxpayer and delivered to every household. Page 48 of the Government's response to Neill states:

> In most of the cases in which referendums have been held so far, the purpose of the referendum has been to obtain the endorsement of the electorate for a policy which the government of the day has developed and adopted, and the view has traditionally been that a government has not only a right but a duty to explain and promote its policies.

The Government have resorted to a 28-day breather when the campaign is not too skewed by the expenditure of large sums of taxpayers' money, as Neill states. So it is all right to spend millions of pounds before D-day—before the 28 days—but then it stops. Before that 28-day breather, the Government can spend millions of pounds on promotions. We know that the Government are good at that.

The Government are now officially the second biggest spender on advertisements. They spend more than BT, McDonald's or Coca Cola. Only Procter & Gamble spends more than the Government on advertisements. Procter & Gamble, of course, spends the money on items associated with spin tumblers, whereas the Government spend it purely on spin. Half a million pounds are currently being spent on the Government's London mayoral election publications.

We are concerned about the role that the Government will play up to and during the 28-day period. I believe Lord Neill to be correct in asserting that no Government money should be spent on promoting, or otherwise, the issue of the referendum. For goodness' sake, the umbrella groups and the political parties will be doing that. I do not think that any additional money need be spent by a Government during the period of the referendum—and I am not talking about the 28-day period.

The question of what the Government and civil servants do during and before "D-day 28" is vital. For instance, the number of special advisers has exploded. In 1997, £1.8 million was spent on them; now it is £4 million. In 1997, there were 38 special advisers; now there are 77. What will all those special advisers be doing at the time of the referendum? What role will, for example, the Treasury advisers play during a referendum on the euro? What role will Home Office advisers play in a referendum on proportional representation? What role will advisers from the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions play in a referendum on regional assemblies? The Government are even allowing press notices to continue to be issued by them during the 28-day period—with, no doubt, the usual spin put on them by the special advisers. No doubt the Government will consider it legitimate to continue to use such advisers to brief on their policies.

The integrity of civil servants must be beyond doubt, and one way in which they can be protected is through the Government agreeing that their advisers will not issue press notices relating to the issue of a referendum, and the briefing that goes with them. I understand from earlier debates that no statutory definition has been given of a press notice: what the Government can do is open ended.

Alastair Campbell must learn the discipline that it would be wholly wrong for him to be paid by the taxpayer to pump out propaganda at the time of a referendum, while briefing journalists accordingly. That would be a rotten practice: it would be against the spirit of the Neill report and against the whole ethos of the Bill.

There is the additional problem of the internet. I spent some time this evening looking at the No. 10 pages.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Get a life.

Mr. Evans: The Minister has a point.

Some of the pages deal with national health service waiting lists. On a day on which we learned that the number of heart bypass operations actually fell last year, is there any mention of that? Of course not; we are merely told that extra patients have been treated, and told of the desire for waiting lists to be reduced. That, arguably, is propaganda from the Government.

Student maintenance grants are also dealt with. We are told:

> The old system left universities short of funds and students short of money. Our reforms which were based on the Dearing review of higher education will provide more money for higher education.

There is no mention of the fact that Dearing did not say that tuition fees should not be introduced at the time when grants disappeared. That is another example of propaganda from the Government.

The manifesto commitments state:

> Education is the Government's number one priority

and speak of,

> Delivering economic prosperity for the many not the few.

They speak of being

> Tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime.

We are used to all these inane soundbites from the mouth of the Prime Minister, but I think we have every cause for concern when taxpayers' money is being spent on a Government website that is spewing out Government propaganda.

I wonder what the website would be doing during the period of a referendum. It even includes the Prime Minister's speeches—for instance, one that he delivered at Ghent city hall in Belgium, which I am sure will interest many of us.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): Read it out.

Mr. Evans: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman knows it by heart, but one section says:

> A few miles from here, in Bruges, another British Prime Minister made a speech. From it stemmed the isolationist and hostile view of the European Union.

The Prime Minister was referring to Margaret Thatcher. Arguably, that is more propaganda on a website.

If the Government are to start to promote a referendum on the euro during the referendum period, we are talking about millions of pounds of taxpayers' money being spent on propaganda using the internet, which, as we know, is a growing medium for dissemination of information; it is growing at a tremendous rate. I should like the Minister to consider carefully the sort of approach that the Government will take on the use of special advisers and websites during referendum periods.

There is another alarming point. In a written question, the shadow Home Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe), asked how many press officers there were in the Home Office. The Home Secretary said that there are 14 press officers, but that the press office was being restructured, which could involve the appointment of up to 10 further press officers. Fourteen are already there, yet the Home Office will take on an extra 10. We wonder what they will all do. Will they play a proactive role? Perhaps the Minister can tell us. I know that there have been several shambles in the Home Department in the past three years. No doubt it needs some extra press officers to help to protect it from media inspection and scrutiny, but will those press officers relieve some of the special advisers during the period of referendum, so that they can carry on spinning?

Our amendments will clean up the stench that surrounds the Government's motives behind the legislative changes. Amendment No. 154 will stop the publication of material during the referendum period by the Government.

Mr. O'Brien: I think that the hon. Gentleman should be a little careful about using words such as "stench", given the history of the previous Government and the reason why the Neill committee was set up. Does he not think so?

Mr. Evans: We have accepted the Neill committee proposals. It is a great shame that the Government did not. We want the Government to accept the fact that the committee said that it did not wish any publication of material during the period of a referendum. We are talking not about the 28 days, but about any time during that referendum. If the Minister gives us that commitment we will be extremely supportive.

Amendment No. 155 is consequential on amendment No. 154. Amendment No. 150 will stop press releases from being churned out about the referendum during the period of the referendum, including the 28 days.

Mr. O'Brien: I have a letter from Lord Neill dated 15 October. The hon. Gentleman may be interested to know that it says:

> We welcome your proposals on the part which should be played by the government in referendum campaigns, and your recognition of the importance of ensuring that there is a period immediately prior to a referendum in which, as you say, "the government of the day . . . stands aside and the campaigning is left to the political parties and other organisations."

Indeed, the right hon. Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor), a Conservative Member who was on the committee, welcomed the 28-day period when he spoke in a recent debate in the House.

Mr. Evans: I know that; I have the letter and have read the Committee proceedings on the Bill. Although the Neill committee welcomed the proposals on the part to be played by the Government in a referendum and believed that the Government would stand aside, I have explained our grave cause for concern about what the Government are able to do during that 28-day period. The expenditure of vast sums of money before the 28-day period begins is something that we take seriously, too.

Amendment No. 149 will remove the ever-burgeoning army of spin doctors under the chief commander of spin—Alastair Campbell. If Ministers want to get involved in referendums—we would expect them to do so—that is fine, but let them play by the same rules that they are creating for everyone else. Let them stop saying one thing to others, but doing something different themselves. Let them throw away the loaded dice and the marked deck of cards, and let the people decide the issues in a referendum that is free and fair for all.

Mr. Stunell: The issue of press notices, which is the subject of amendment No. 150, was brought to the fore and debated in Committee. The Government owe some duty to the House to say precisely how they intend to define press releases and press notices, and what action they will take to lower Conservative Members' adrenaline levels on the issue. In the previous debate, the Minister more or less conceded that the drafting of the relevant provisions is sloppy and meaningless and requires some attention.

9 pm

The 28-day non-aggression period is desirable. The issue is not whether there should be such a period, but whether the period should be longer. Unfortunately, the impact of this group of amendments would be to remove it, leaving the situation somewhat worse than it was to begin with. In Committee, I made the point that although the 28-day period may not be perfect, it is the best one on offer. I suggested that an alternative approach might be

[Mr. Stunell]

for the Government's period of peace to commence on registration of the first body supporting one side or other of the argument. Although that argument did not find favour in Committee, there are other alternatives to the 28-day period. Deleting that period from the Bill is not the right option.

Amendment No. 149 deals with civil servants, including special advisers. We also debated that issue in Committee. From the way in which the debate developed, I had rather thought that Conservative Members had accepted that it was very unreasonable to introduce such a restriction only on referendums, but not on other United Kingdom elections. A referendum is a pretty rare event in the United Kingdom. In this Parliament, we shall not have even one countrywide referendum.

Conversely, we often have local government elections and a variety of other considerably significant elections—for example, to the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and the European Parliament. There is no suggestion—I do not think that there has ever been a suggestion—that special advisers should be struck dumb for a part of those elections. The turnout of electors and the issues are certainly as important in those elections as they are in a referendum.

The chances of the Government having a partisan view in those elections are also higher. In this Parliament, Labour candidates have stood, or will stand, in each of those elections. However, the opportunities for special advisers to be spinning and doing all the other evils that have been so eloquently described by the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) are not, and have never been, restricted in those elections.

There may be a case to restrict special advisers' capacity to spin. However, I tell Conservative Members that they are getting the issue out of proportion if they think that the time to stop special advisers must be on the comparatively rare occasion of a national referendum. In referendums, Governments are likely to be less partisan than they are in local government, European, Scottish, Welsh and London mayoral elections, when Labour candidates—in the case of the London elections, one and a bit Labour candidates—will be standing, and the Government will be very anxious for a particular candidate to win. If we are considering establishing restrictions on special advisers, we should strike them dumb in those elections.

I share Conservative Members' views on the press notices issue. I believe that the 28-day period is the best offer available, as I have not seen a better one. I disagree with them on the issue of striking dumb the special advisers—although I certainly would not object if a general provision on the matter should be proposed. Additionally, an electronic red herring was dragged through the debate, which I believe is the subject of subsequent amendments.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Conservatives get so hypertensive about any references to Europe and a referendum on the single currency that it amazes me that their policy is to oppose having a referendum for two Parliaments. I am worried about their health, because they may not be able to sustain for so long the adrenaline rush that they get every time that Europe is mentioned.

This is not the first time that we have returned to ground that was travelled over in Committee and other debates—so much so that it is almost as if we are going in circles.

Clause 118 is our discharge of the Neill recommendation that, at a certain point before a referendum is held, the Government of the day should stand back and leave campaigning to the political parties and the other campaign organisations. The committee was particularly sceptical about material that, in previous cases, has been circulated to the electorate close to the date of the poll and questioned the distinction between factual and persuasive material.

The clause implements the committee's recommendation by providing for a 28-day embargo on the issuing to the public of Government publications. The charge against the Government is that the clause fails to address the Neill committee's recommendation 89. That will not wash. The clause has been welcomed by the Neill committee. Its comments on the draft Bill were published last summer. More recently, we have had the benefit of the views of the Conservative member of the Neill committee. On Second Reading, the right hon. Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor) said:

> I am glad that the Bill includes the 28-day moratorium, which meets our point—[*Official Report*, 10 January 2000; Vol. 342, c. 67.]

Mr. Evans: The Minister is saying that the Government would not publish anything within the 28-day period. Is he giving a commitment that, during a referendum campaign, the Government would not publish any documentation and get it delivered to every household?

Mr. O'Brien: In relation to the referendum campaigns there may well be all sorts of campaigns going on about bonfire night and various other issues. The hon. Gentleman seems to be unclear about the distinction between a general election and a referendum campaign. He has misunderstood what the issue is about.

We have clear endorsements for clause 118 from the Neill committee, so we want it to remain as it stands. Amendments Nos. 154 and 155 would apply the restrictions in clause 118 not just to the 28-day period before the poll, but to the full referendum period, which could be up to six months. That proposition is fundamentally misconceived and fails to recognise that the 28-day period provided for in clause 118 and the longer referendum period perform two different roles.

The referendum period will usually begin on the date on which a Bill providing for a referendum is introduced. That is essentially an accounting period. It is the period during which campaigning organisations will be subject to the limits on expenditure and controls on donations. Subject to the expenditure limits, campaigning organisations will be free to espouse their cause throughout the referendum period.

Clause 118 imposes an absolute prohibition on the publication of material of the kind mentioned in subsection (1). Extending the moratorium to cover the whole referendum period would be equivalent to applying the usual Cabinet Office guidance for the three or four weeks of a general election campaign to the 365-day accounting period provided for in part V. That is daft. The idea that a Government could be run on that basis is absurd. Unlike during a general election campaign, when

government is placed on a care and maintenance footing, the Government of the day would continue to function during a referendum campaign. There will be foreign Prime Ministers and dignitaries to see and lots of other issues to be properly undertaken. In presenting a Bill to Parliament for a referendum to be held, the Government must be able to explain and present their policies as a Government.

However, we accept that there comes a time when the Government will step back and leave it to the political parties and others to make the running on the referendum issue. A period of 28 days fits in well with the average length of general election campaigns over the past 50 years. The Neill committee made the analogy with general election campaigns, and that is a standard against which it is entirely appropriate to benchmark clause 118.

Amendments Nos. 149 and 150 are directed at press notices, press officers and special advisers. The Neill committee's concern was principally that the Government of the day might, at public expense, distribute material—even purportedly factual documents—which put forward the Government's case, or at least would have the effect of influencing the vote. Clause 118 is intended to prohibit that sort of distribution of unsolicited material addressed directly to the public at large.

The exceptions in clause 3, including press notices, are entirely consistent with the basic proposition that the Government of the day should not be able unfairly to influence the conduct of a referendum campaign. The exemption for press notices is not an attempt to circumvent the basic principle contained in the clause. The point of the restrictions is to prevent the Government from distributing unsolicited mail.

It was suggested in Committee that the Government of the day might be tempted to stick the words "press notice" on the top of a publicity leaflet and post it through the letter box of everyone in the country. Frankly, this is fanciful and completely ridiculous. A press notice is a notice to the press, and not to the general public, and I cannot see any civil servants getting involved in that sort of scam. If a Government stooped to such tactics, I am confident that the courts would quickly put a stop to it.

On the role of civil servants, I wish to refer to the press officers at the Home Office. I suspect that the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) will find few members of the Gallery—particularly Home Office correspondents—complaining, although getting the phone answered at the press office, despite the number of staff we have, is sometimes difficult. We are doing so much on fighting crime that the press are finding it difficult to get all the information that they need to report it. We want to make sure that the phones are answered. That is perfectly reasonable, and was the result of an independent recommendation. Press officers must be free to direct inquiries made to a Government Department. That they should be able to do so in the run-up to a referendum is wholly in keeping with the approach proposed by the clause.

To reply to a letter from a member of the public—or indeed from an Opposition Member—or to respond to a question posed by a journalist does not amount to publishing, displaying or distributing material to the public at large or to a sector of the public. Such action in response to individual requests for information amounts to no more than good administration, and it would be wrong to deny the public the service that they have the right to expect from a civil service of the state.

The basis of all the amendments is misconceived. They rely on the charge that the Bill fails to implement the Neill committee's recommendation 89. The Neill committee's own response to the White Paper exposes that charge as completely false and bogus. The hon. Member for Ribble Valley should withdraw the amendments and acknowledge that clause 118, to paraphrase the right hon. Member for South Norfolk, fully meets the point.

Mr. Evans: I rather wish that the Parliamentary Secretary—the Minister who normally doles out the cigarettes, as he was described in previous debates—had answered the debate, as we might have got somewhere. That was a characteristically unpleasant response from the Minister.

All our fears have been fulfilled. I understand now that Alastair Campbell will be able to carry on with his spinning, and ensuring that his army of 77 other spin doctors will be able to carry on spinning during a referendum campaign. I understand also that, prior to the 28-day period, the Government are absolutely free to do whatever they like. The restrictions come in on everybody else, apart from the Government. With the restrictions on expenditure, the dice are loaded completely in favour of the Government.

We have had no concessions from the Government, and we are extremely concerned that all the loopholes are still there. Call me a cynic, but it is as if the Bill has been written to ensure that the Government are able to have their way. We still remember the way in which the referendum campaign in Wales was run, and that is why I believe the amendments will be visited again in another place. Although we are not pressing these amendments to a vote tonight, it does not mean that we have stopped the fight.

I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 122

ORDERS REGULATING CONDUCT OF REFERENDUMS

Amendment proposed: No. 146, in page 75, line 17, leave out Clause 122.—*[Sir P. Cormack.]*

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 164, Noes 290.

Division No. 107] **[9.15 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Arness, David
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Jackie
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Butterfill, John
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*

Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton–Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Forsythe, Clifford
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Harris, Dr Evan
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, Rt Hon John D *(Strangford)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Townend, John
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Stephen Day and
Mr. Peter Atkinson.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Browne, Desmond
Burgon, Colin
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Doran, Frank
Drew, David
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Flint, Caroline
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David

Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheffld Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Shipley, Ms Debra
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tynan, Bill
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
White, Brian
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Jim Dowd and
Mr. David Jamieson.

Question accordingly negatived.

Schedule 15

CONTROL OF DONATIONS TO CANDIDATES: NEW SCHEDULE 2A TO THE REPRESENTATION OF THE PEOPLE ACT 1983

Amendments made: No. 114, in page 155, line 47, leave out from "agent" to end of line 50 and insert—

'("the donee") from a trustee of any property (in his capacity as such) which does not constitute a donation transmitted by the trustee to the donee—

(a) on behalf of a person who, at the time of its receipt by the donee, is a permissible donor falling within section 48(2) of the 2000 Act, or

(b) in pursuance of a bequest made by such a person as is mentioned in section 48(3) of that Act,

shall be regarded as a relevant donation received by the donee from a person who is not such a permissible donor.'.

No. 115, in page 156, line 35, leave out—

'a relevant donation received by'.

No. 116, in page 156, line 36, after "agent" insert—

'and any relevant donation received by him'.

No. 117, in page 156, line 36, after first "a" insert "registered party and any".—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

Clause 125

MEANING OF "ELECTION EXPENSES"

Amendment made: No. 71, in page 78, line 24, leave out "£20" and insert "£50".—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

Schedule 16

AMENDMENTS RELATING TO ELECTION PETITIONS

Mr. Tipping: I beg to move amendment No. 118, in page 158, leave out lines 7 to 13.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to discuss Government amendments Nos. 119 to 122, 132 and 133.

Mr. Tipping: The amendments deal with the rather arcane practice of election petitions, and I shall deal with them quickly. Paragraphs 2 to 6 of schedule 16, to which amendments Nos. 118 to 120 relate, remove the requirement that parliamentary and local election petitions are tried locally. I understand that a parliamentary election petition has not been heard since 1929. However, new information suggests that some local petitions have been heard fairly recently. Accordingly, amendments Nos. 118, 119 and 120 delete or amend paragraphs 2 to 6 of schedule 16, so as to preserve the status quo. Amendment No. 132 makes consequential changes.

Amendment No. 119 also repeals section 130(2)(a)(ii) of the Representation of the People Act 1983, which prevents a judge from serving on an election court in the area where he practises—a procedure that appears to be out of date.

Amendments Nos. 121, 122 and 133 relate to paragraph 8 of schedule 16. This paragraph removes the provision in section 153 of the 1983 Act in which an elector may stand in the place of the respondent. That provision dates back to the time when electors and candidates had difficulty travelling. I hope that the House will therefore agree to modernise election practices.

Sir Patrick Cormack: When the Minister talks about maintaining the status quo, he has our sympathy;

[Sir Patrick Cormack]

when he talks about modernisation, he has our deep distrust. Nevertheless, there is nothing too violently appalling in his suggestions, although we shall certainly ensure that they are considered with great assiduity in the other place. It is not beyond the bounds of possibility that we may want to return to them. However, with that point, I commend the hon. Gentleman.

Amendment agreed to.

Amendments made: No. 119, in page 158, line 16, leave out from "trial)" to end of line 17 and insert—

', in subsection (2)(b) (disqualification of persons to constitute election court) for the words from "area" onwards substitute "area in which he resides.".'.

No. 120, in page 158, leave out lines 18 and 19.

No. 121, in page 158, line 21, leave out "152" and insert "153".

No. 122, in page 158, leave out lines 22 to 27.— *[Mr. Touhig.]*

Schedule 17

ELECTION CAMPAIGNS AND PROCEEDINGS: MISCELLANEOUS AMENDMENTS

Amendment made: No. 123, in page 160, line 26, at end insert—

'(1A) If any such return contains a statement of donations in accordance with section 81(3)(e) above, the appropriate officer shall secure that the copy of the statement made available for public inspection under subsection (1)(a) above or (as the case may be) supplied under subsection (1)(b) above does not include, in the case of any donation by an individual, the donor's address.'.— *[Mr. Touhig.]*

9.30 pm

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): I beg to move amendment No. 1, in page 160, line 30, at end insert—

'7A.—(1) Section 106 (false statements as to candidates) shall be amended as follows.

(2) In subsection (1) after the words "character or conduct" there shall be inserted the words "or fails to take reasonable steps to withdraw from circulation and public availability a false statement previously made or published".

(3) After subsection (1) there shall be inserted—

"(1A) 'For the avoidance of doubt, a person who makes or publishes a statement on the Internet or by other electronic means, or who causes a statement to be so made or published, makes or publishes a statement for the purposes of this subsection; and a person who fails to remove or cause the removal of a statement from the Internet shall be regarded as having failed, for the purposes of this subsection, to take reasonable steps to withdraw that statement from circulation and public availability".'.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss amendment No. 2, in page 160, line 30, at end insert—

'7B.—(1) Section 106 (false statements as to candidates) shall be amended as follows.

(2) In subsection (1), the words "(b) for the purpose of affecting the return of any candidate at the election" shall be omitted.'.

Dr. Lewis: The amendments deal with the telling of deliberate lies during an election campaign about a candidate in that campaign, with the intention of damaging his vote. Amendment No. 2 is a probing amendment.

Amendment No. 1 is more substantive; it is aimed at closing a specific loophole. I declare an interest because the loophole was exposed in a case that affected me. Deliberate lies were told about me during the previous general election campaign. I was able to secure the sevenfold conviction of the person responsible, but the conviction was overturned on appeal on a legal technicality. The purpose of the amendments is to try to close the loophole illustrated by my case.

I mentioned the matter briefly on Second Reading and in much greater detail in Committee on 10 February. I shall not take up the time of the House by rehearsing those points. I was gratified by the interest and by the support in dealing with the problem that were shown by Conservative Front-Bench Members and by the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) on behalf of the Liberal Democrats. I was especially touched by the sympathy and concern shown by Labour Members—most notably the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller), who has probably forgotten more about the internet than I shall ever manage to learn. I have also received sympathy and encouragement—although, as yet, no guarantee of action—from no fewer than three Home Office Ministers. I am sure that they want to close the loophole and I shall be happy to co-operate with them in negotiating the minefield of the knock-on problems that might affect other legislation if my proposal were accepted.

Section 106(1) of the Representation of the People Act 1983 is short and clear. It states:

A person who, or any director of any body or association corporate which—

(a) before or during an election,

(b) for the purpose of affecting the return of any candidate at the election,

makes or publishes any false statement of fact in relation to the candidate's personal character or conduct shall be guilty of an illegal practice, unless he can show that he had reasonable grounds for believing, and did believe, the statement to be true.

In order to secure a conviction under that provision, one has to show that what was told was a deliberate lie. It is not enough to show that it was false—one must show that the person who made the allegation against the candidate knew that he was lying when he made it. One also has to show that the person's motive was to affect the result by damaging the candidate's vote. Furthermore, as the section makes clear, it applies only to the period of the election campaign and to polling day itself.

In the case of the allegations on the internet made against me, it was held by the Crown Prosecution Service that the continued broadcasting of those allegations on the internet throughout the period of the election campaign amounted to a continuous process of re-publication. That view was not upheld on appeal. If deliberately false allegations are placed on the internet even before an election campaign begins, if they are made with the intention of affecting a candidate's vote and if they are not stopped during the campaign, amendment No. 1 would make it clear that that would amount to publication during the election campaign.

I shall not go through the points that were put to me in an extremely helpful letter that the Minister sent to me yesterday. It outlined the difficulties that might arise if we closed the loophole in the way that I suggest. I assure him that I will take up his offer of commenting on those points, and I am convinced that there are answers to every

one of the possible objections to closing the loophole that have been made and that he has helpfully gathered together in his letter.

The normal way to deal with deliberate defamation is through the civil courts, but that breaks down in certain circumstances. The first is when the defamation's damage cannot be undone by the subsequent payment of financial damages. For example, if an election result is decisively affected, no payment of money after the event can compensate for that. It also breaks down if the defamer cannot repay the victim's costs even if the victim succeeds in obtaining an injunction and subsequently wins a civil case.

What are the ways forward? I have three possible suggestions. First, we could adopt something similar to amendment No. 1 with the added proviso that the deliberate liar should have been challenged to remove the deliberate lie for the entirety of the election campaign, and have failed to do so. Secondly, there is the possibility of adopting the civil route, but indemnifying the candidate who is the victim of the defamation against legal costs if his case against the defamer is proved and the deliberate liar declares his inability to pay his victim's costs after the event. Finally, we could consider adopting the methods used by the Internet Watch Foundation but lay a statutory duty on internet service providers to block access to the sites throughout the campaign.

I will not take the argument any further at this point, but I look forward to hearing what progress the Government have made in finding their way through the labyrinth that confronts us in this new technological age.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): I shall be brief. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind remarks. There is universal agreement that the principle that he has outlined is correct.

I suggest to my hon. Friend the Minister that perhaps the solution that he should consider is not to think of the internet service provider as the publisher, but more as the post office. He should concentrate on the authors of such libels, because these problems will face many Members in the future. The matter must be resolved.

Sir Patrick Cormack: Although truth is frequently a fugitive and a casualty in general election campaigns, impugning the character of individuals is a very serious matter. We are all grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) for the way in which he has approached what has been a distressing matter for him. We are also grateful to the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller) and to all the others who have given support.

We on the Opposition Front Bench wish to associate ourselves wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend's remarks. I have seen the Minister's letter, and we are grateful for his expression of sympathy. However, it is important that these so-called loopholes are plugged and it is crucial that we reach a proper solution. We shall not press the issue tonight, but we want a solution that provides the answer that my hon. Friend seeks.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Government note the broad support on both sides of the House for dealing with this issue, and the strong sympathy that exists for the proposition made, on this occasion, by the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis). I have already indicated to him my personal sympathy for his view. There are, however, practical difficulties to overcome. I have set those out in a letter to him, and I offer him another meeting if he wants to discuss the matter further. I am happy to discuss the issues with him. I make it clear that at this stage I can give him no assurance that we will be able to support him, but the door to dialogue is open and I hope that, on that basis, he will feel able to withdraw his amendment.

Dr. Julian Lewis: In view of that expectedly helpful response from the Under-Secretary, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 130

REDUCTION OF QUALIFYING PERIOD FOR OVERSEAS ELECTORS

Mr. Walter: I beg to move amendment No. 145, in page 82, line 5, at end insert—

'and in the Companies (Northern Ireland) Order 1986'.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss amendment No. 175, in schedule 18, page 162, leave out lines 1 and 2.

Mr. Walter: Amendment No. 145 highlights an important inconsistency. The provisions set out in schedule 18 will be inserted in the Companies Act 1985. That would appear to be consistent with clause 48, which says:

For the purposes of this Part the following are permissible donors . . . a company . . . registered under the Companies Act 1985—

consistent so far—

or the Companies (Northern Ireland) Order 1986.

That order appears to be missing from part IX, and is certainly missing from clause 130 and schedule 18.

I remind the Minister of the White Paper published by the Home Office, which said:

The Bill as introduced will amend the Companies Act 1985 to give effect to these conclusions.

It continued:

Parallel amendments will be made to the Companies (Northern Ireland) Order 1986.

There was temporary devolution to a Northern Ireland Assembly, which has now been suspended. The order to which I referred was passed by the House, and the House has the power to amend it to bring it into line with the Bill. I expect the Government to accept our amendment to expand the provision to bring Northern Ireland companies into line with those in the rest of the UK.

Amendment No. 175 deals with a concern raised with hon. Members by the Confederation of British Industry, which is the definition of an EU political organisation. Schedule 18 makes it clear that such an organisation can be a political party, but goes on to say that it can also be

any other organisation which carries on, or proposes to carry on, activities of any political nature in the United Kingdom or any other member State.

[Mr. Walter]

That is a catch-all phrase. What does "any political nature" mean? Does it refer to the Institute for Public Policy Research or the Centre for Policy Studies? Companies are genuinely concerned that contributions that they might make to quasi-academic organisations that produce political papers will be deemed political donations.

I remind the Minister that in Committee his colleague, the Minister of State, Home Office, the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Mrs. Roche), said:

We will need to take the issue away and reflect on it.—[*Official Report, Standing Committee G*, 10 February 2000; c. 390.]

We have not heard that the Government have discussed the matter.

Mr. Tipping: We talked about this issue at some length in Committee, and the hon. Gentleman has reinforced his points today. Suffice it to say that I recognise, as does the House, that Northern Ireland has its own companies legislation. That is a devolved issue, which the Government believe requires separate and parallel legislation. I know that my answer will be unsatisfactory to him. In view of our lengthy discussion of Northern Ireland issues earlier this evening, I suspect that we will return to this matter at a later date.

Amendment No. 175 is interesting. The hon. Gentleman says that it has been influenced by the CBI. The Government accept that the current definition of an EU political organisation is very broad and have therefore agreed to consider it further. There is to be a meeting with the CBI this coming Thursday and we shall listen to the views of the CBI. Following the meeting, I shall write to the hon. Gentleman. Again, we may need to return to the issue at a later stage.

Mr. Walter: I expect that we shall revisit the issue in another place. In view of the assurances given by the Minister, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

9.45 pm

Clause 134

SUPERVISORY POWERS OF COMMISSION

Amendments made: No. 72, in page 85, line 16, after "or", insert "other".

No. 73, in page 85, line 26, leave out from "records" to end of line 31 and insert—

'(3A) Where any such records as are mentioned in subsection (1) or (3) are kept in electronic form, then—

(a) the power of the Commission under subsection (1) to require any such records to be produced for inspection includes power to require a copy of the records to be made available for inspection in legible form (and subsection (2)(a) shall accordingly apply in relation to any copy so made available); and

(b) the power of any person ("the inspector") under subsection (3) to inspect any such records includes power to require any person on the premises in question to give the inspector such assistance as he may reasonably require to enable him—

(i) to inspect and make copies of the records in legible form or to make records of information contained in them, or

(ii) to inspect and check the operation of any computer, and any associated apparatus or material, that is or has been in use in connection with the keeping of the records.'.

No. 74, in page 85, line 37, after second "to", insert—

'(a)'.

No. 75, in page 85, line 38, after "donee)", insert "or

(b) a person who is (or has been) a candidate at an election (other than a local government election in Scotland) or the election agent for such a candidate,".

No. 76, in page 85, line 40, after "(2)", insert "(3A),".

No. 77, in page 85, line 43, after "obtaining", insert—

'(a)'.

No. 78, in page 85, line 47, at end insert—

'or

(b) such information or explanations relating to expenses incurred by or on behalf of candidates within paragraph (b) of that subsection as the Commission reasonably require for the purpose of monitoring compliance on the part of such candidates and their agents with the restrictions imposed by or by virtue of any enactment on the incurring of such expenses,

as the case may be.'.

No. 79, in page 86, leave out line 11 and insert—

'or (in the case of such a party with accounting units) the central organisation of the party or any of its accounting units,'.—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

Schedule 19

PENALTIES

Amendment made: No. 124, in page 169, leave out lines 11 to 13.—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

Clause 141

OFFENCES COMMITTED BY UNINCORPORATED ASSOCIATIONS

Amendments made: No. 80, in page 91, line 14, leave out from "Act" to "be" in line 16 and insert—

', and the offence is proved to have been committed with the consent or connivance of, or to be attributable to any neglect on the part of, any partner, he as well as the partnership shall'.

No. 81, in page 91, line 20, leave out from "Act" to first "be" in line 27 and insert—

'and the offence is proved to have been committed with the consent or connivance of, or to be attributable to any neglect on the part of—

(a) any officer of the association, or

(b) any member of the committee or other similar governing body of the association,

he, as well as the association, shall'.—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

Clause 144

ORDERS AND REGULATIONS

Amendment made: No. 82, in page 92, line 16, at end insert—

'(dd) section 122;'.—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

Clause 148

GENERAL INTERPRETATION

Amendment made: No. 83, in page 93, line 27, at end insert—

' "functions" includes powers and duties;'.—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

Schedule 20

MINOR AND CONSEQUENTIAL AMENDMENTS

Mr. Tipping: I beg to move amendment No. 125, in page 173, line 22, leave out—

'In section 3(8)(a) of the European Parliamentary Elections Act 1978'

and insert—

'(1) The European Parliamentary Elections Act 1978 (as amended by the European Parliamentary Elections Act 1999) is amended as follows.

(2) In section 3(8)(a)'.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to discuss Government amendments Nos. 126, 128 to 130 and 134.

Mr. Tipping: This group of six amendments makes consequential changes to the European Parliamentary Elections Act 1978, the Government of Wales Act 1998 and the Scotland Act 1998, arising from part V. Each of those three statutes makes arrangements for the control of election expenditure by registered parties. The detailed arrangements for that, which are set out in subordinate legislation, were intended as stop-gap measures pending the enactment of the Bill.

Henceforth, campaign expenditure by registered parties at elections to the European and Scottish Parliaments and the Welsh Assembly will be controlled by part V. Accordingly, the powers to regulate such expenditure in those three statutes are no longer necessary and will be repealed by the amendments.

Amendment agreed to.

Amendments made: No. 126, in page 173, line 25, at end insert—

'(3) In paragraph 2(3A)(a) of Schedule 1 (European Parliamentary elections), for "(including expenses incurred in relation to a general election as a whole)" substitute "of candidates".'.

No. 127, in page 173, line 36, at end insert—

'(5) In Schedule 1 (parliamentary elections rules), at the end of rule 14 (publication of statement of persons nominated) insert—

"(5) The returning officer shall send to the Electoral Commission—

(a) a copy of the statement; and

(b) in the case of each candidate standing nominated in respect of whom a certificate has been received by the returning officer in accordance with rule 6A above, a copy of that certificate as well." '.

No. 128, in page 174, line 37, at end insert—

'(2A) In section 11(2)(c) (power to make provision about elections) omit "and registered political parties".'.

No. 129, in page 175, line 18, leave out—

'In section 5(9) of the Scotland Act 1998'

and insert—

'(1) The Scotland Act 1998 is amended as follows.

(2) In section 5(9)'.

No. 130, in page 175, line 20, at end insert—

'(3) In section 12(2)(c) (power to make provision about elections) omit "and registered political parties".'.

No. 131, in page 175, line 34, at end insert—

'Representation of the People Act 2000 (c.00)

14.—(1) Section 10 of the Representation of the People Act 2000 (pilot schemes) is amended as follows.

(2) After subsection (1) insert—

"(1A) Subsection (1) applies to proposals falling within that subsection which are submitted by a relevant local authority jointly with the Electoral Commission as if in that subsection—

(a) the first reference to any such authority in paragraph (a), and

(b) the reference to the authority in paragraph (b)(ii),

were each a reference to the authority and the Commission; and, in a case where any such proposals are not jointly so submitted, the Secretary of State must consult the Commission before making an order under that subsection."

(3) In subsection (5)(a), after "the authority concerned" insert "and to the Electoral Commission".

(4) In subsection (6), for "the authority concerned" substitute "the Electoral Commission".

(5) After subsection (6) insert—

"(6A) The report shall be prepared by the Electoral Commission in consultation with the authority concerned; and that authority shall provide the Commission with such assistance as they may reasonably require in connection with the preparation of the report (which may, in particular, include the making by the authority of arrangements for ascertaining the views of voters about the operation of the scheme)."

(6) In subsection (7), after "The report shall" insert ", in particular,".

(7) For subsection (10) substitute—

"(10) Once the Electoral Commission have prepared the report, they shall send a copy of the report—

(a) to the Secretary of State, and

(b) to the authority concerned,

and that authority shall publish the report in their area, in such manner as they think fit, by the end of the period of three months beginning with the date of the declaration of the result of the elections in question."

15. In section 11 of that Act (revision of procedures in the light of pilot schemes), at the end of subsection (1) insert—

"The power of the Secretary of State to make such an order shall, however, be exercisable only on a recommendation of the Electoral Commission." '. —*[Mr. Touhig.]*

Schedule 21

REPEALS

Amendments made: No. 132, in page 176, column 3, leave out lines 27 to 30.

No. 133, in page 176, line 31, column 3, leave out "152" and insert "153".

No. 134, in page 177, line 8, at end insert—

'1998 c.38.	Government of Wales Act 1998.	In section 11(2)(c), the words "and registered political parties".
1998. c. 46.	Scotland Act 1998.	In section 12(2)(c), the words "and registered political parties".'.

—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

Order for Third Reading read.

9.47 pm

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

The Bill is important. It implements commitments that the Government made when we came into office. We said that we would ban the foreign funding of political parties and require the disclosure of large donations. The Bill does that. We said that we would refer the matter of party funding to the Committee on Standards in Public Life, and the Bill follows from that. It will improve confidence in our political institutions.

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary made it clear that we wanted to listen during the Bill's passage through the House. The large number of amendments that we tabled in Committee, many of which were first suggested by the Opposition, show that the Government were prepared to listen and to move forward, as far as possible, by consensus. Perhaps we have not always achieved consensus, but we can claim to have achieved it in large measure.

The Government can claim credit for accepting virtually the whole of the Neill report and introducing reasonable proposals. We can also claim credit for having listened, as we amply demonstrated in Committee and on Report.

The opposition parties can also claim credit for accepting and subscribing to the thrust of the Neill report and for the constructive way in which, throughout most of the proceedings on the Bill, they have probed and sought to introduce new concepts and ideas. As a result, the Bill is a much better piece of legislation.

Some issues still divide us, and there are some on which further improvements to the Bill have yet to be made. I am sorry that the official Opposition have not felt able to rally fully to all the provisions on referendums. I wonder whether they would have supported those provisions had they refrained from considering the matter solely from the perspective of the one issue that so preoccupies them. Doubtless the issues will be reconsidered in another place.

We have had some good debates. The House has debated some contentious issues in rumbustious style, but it has also been in good form when considering matters that can engender consensus. Every hon. Member has an obligation to ensure that we tackle some of the public anxiety that existed in the mid-1990s about the way in which political life was moving. We must ensure that the public's confidence in their political institutions is improved.

The Government will want to consider some issues further when the Bill reaches another place. We want to settle the matter that the Liberal Democrats raised about how the provisions can best be applied to parties that have a federal structure. We are trying to progress through consensus and to accommodate genuine anxieties about the structure of the Bill.

It is fair to say that the Bill's structure does not easily accommodate the Liberal Democrats. We hope to integrate the structure of that party into the Bill, through a few appropriate amendments, so that it can continue to function reasonably while complying with the law. I appreciate that Liberal Democrats want to ensure that they are able to comply with the law.

The provisions on donations and sponsorship require clarification. That applies especially to commercial arrangements, including hiring stands at party conferences. That matter has caused anxiety among all parties. Those who work for Members of Parliament or for political parties and have to make decisions and arrangements—commercial or otherwise—need clear law and guidance about the way in which the Bill will affect them.

Those matters are not likely to be contentious. We agree that work needs to be done in establishing the provisions' operation in detail. However, there is a shared acknowledgement that the issues are complex and require detailed understanding—if only the complexities of political parties' rules on commercial and other funding arrangements, which have developed over many decades and have perhaps become far more complex recently, could be satisfactorily resolved through a spirit of consensus.

I want to revert to the timing of the implementation of the Bill. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary raised that matter on Second Reading.

Mr. Tipping: Sit down.

Mr. O'Brien: I have received a message in a suitably off-stage voice from the powers that be. It is contrary to the message that I received earlier.

The Bill is a good measure, which is based on a good report from the Committee on Standards in Public Life. It deserves to make good progress. I hope that it is in good shape for the travails ahead.

9.54 pm

Sir George Young: My party will not obstruct Third Reading for the reasons that it did not obstruct Second Reading. The Bill has a key role to play in cleaning up British politics by setting out a framework with clear rules and an independent umpire and greater transparency. Throughout our discussions there has been a commendable restraint from scoring party points on past transgressions. No party is above criticism and we have a common interest in elevating public esteem for our profession.

The Bill has been much improved since 10 January. We raised points on the penal regime for volunteers, which has been softened, and the role of the Electoral Commission has been changed. We have made progress on the regime for overseas voters and on the Speaker's Committee. The Bill is in better shape, though not yet of the Savile row quality that Conservative Members like to see. The upper House has adjustments to make on sponsorship, overseas voters, the federal party structure and Northern Ireland, and we shall need a lot of time to consider the raft of Lords amendments when the Bill returns to this House.

We could not reach agreement on a number of issues on which we backed the Neill committee and the Government opposed it. The Bill faces a tough timetable, as the Minister reminded us yesterday.

I am grateful to my hon. Friends the Members for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) and for North Dorset (Mr. Walter). They bore the burden of the Bill—which was subcontracted to them by my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe), the shadow Home Secretary, who is fully stretched by keeping an eye on what the Home Office is getting up to—but were ably assisted by two jobbing builders, my hon. Friends the Members for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) and for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack).

It would be churlish not to compliment the two Ministers on their conciliatory approach, which assisted consideration of the Bill. I referred to one as the tough copper who shines the bright light in our eyes and to the other as the chap with the cigarettes. They extracted no confessions from the Opposition, but their co-operative approach made it easier to deal with a long and complicated Bill. Although we differed from the hon. Members for Battersea (Mr. Linton) and for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) at times, we very much welcomed their thoughtful and constructive approach.

I am pleased that it has been possible to complete consideration of the Bill without the savage guillotines that the Government have applied on other occasions to get their legislation through the House. We have not seen the last of the Bill. It is not perfect, although we have improved it. The Opposition wish it well.

9.57 pm

Mr. Stunell: I shall be brief.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): Two minutes.

Mr. Stunell: Indeed. I understand the pressures of time. I welcome the fact that we have reached Third Reading as this significant Bill will have far-reaching consequences. The controls on general election expenditure at national level are long overdue and most welcome, and the introduction of a formal framework for referendums is also welcome.

I thank the ministerial team, who have been courteous and, on the whole, helpful to Opposition parties. I particularly welcome the Minister's somewhat abbreviated comments on the Liberal Democrats' difficulties with a particular aspect of the Bill. I reassert that we fully favour total compliance with the Bill and its guidelines. We have no wish to seek any way around it. Although we believe that there are implementation difficulties, the general thrust of the Bill is right and has been from the beginning. We have been happy to support it at each stage and do so tonight.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time, and passed.

It being Ten o'clock, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *proceeded to put forthwith the Questions relating to Estimates which he was directed to put at that hour, pursuant to Standing Order No. 55 (Questions on voting of estimates, &c.).*

ESTIMATES, 2000–01 (NAVY) VOTE A

Resolved,

That during the year ending on 31st March 2001 a number not exceeding 47,345 all ranks be maintained for Naval Service, a number not exceeding 17,148 for Service in the Reserve Naval and Marine Forces, and a number not exceeding 200 for Service as Special Members of the Reserve Naval Forces under Part V of the Reserve Forces Act 1996.

ESTIMATES, 2000–01 (ARMY) VOTE A

Resolved,

That during the year ending on 31st March 2001 a number not exceeding 128,235 all ranks be maintained for Army Service, a number not exceeding 84,295 for Service in the Reserve Land Forces, and a number not exceeding 6,000 for Service as Special Members of the Reserve Land Forces under Part V of the Reserve Forces Act 1996.

ESTIMATES, 2000–01 (AIR) VOTE A

Resolved,

That during the year ending on 31st March 2001 a number not exceeding 57,450 all ranks be maintained for the Air Force Service, a number not exceeding 26,000 for Service in the Reserve Air Forces, and a number not exceeding 430 for Service as Special Members of the Reserve Air Forces under Part V of the Reserve Forces Act 1996.

ESTIMATES, EXCESSES, 1998–1999

Resolved,

That a sum not exceeding £37,847,584.45 be granted to Her Majesty out of the Consolidated Fund to make good excesses of certain grants for Defence and Civil Services for the year ended on 31st March 1999, as set out in HC 276.

SUPPLEMENTARY ESTIMATES, 1999–2000

Resolved,

That a further supplementary sum not exceeding £2,510,712,000 be granted to Her Majesty out of the Consolidated Fund to complete or defray the charges for Defence and Civil Services for the year ending on 31st March 2000, as set out in HC 242, 243 and 275.

ESTIMATES, 2000–01 (VOTE ON ACCOUNT)

Resolved,

That a further sum, not exceeding £1,000 be granted to Her Majesty out of the Consolidated Fund, on account, for or towards defraying the charges for Civil and Defence Services for the year ending on 31st March 2001, as set out in HC 244.

Ordered,

That a Bill be brought in upon the foregoing resolutions: And that the Chairman of Ways and Means, Mr. Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Andrew Smith, Dawn Primarolo, Mr. Stephen Timms and Miss Melanie Johnson do prepare and bring it in.

CONSOLIDATED FUND (No. 2) BILL

Mr. Stephen Timms accordingly presented a Bill to apply certain sums out of the Consolidated Fund to the service of the years ending on 31st March 1999, 2000 and 2001: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed. Explanatory notes to be printed [Bill 86.].

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With permission, I shall put together the motions relating to delegated legislation.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

LONDON GOVERNMENT

That the draft Greater London Authority Elections (Expenses) Order 2000, which was laid before this House on 28th February, be approved.

CONSTITUTIONAL LAW

That the draft Scotland Act 1998 (Cross-Border Public Authorities) (Forestry Commissioners) Order 2000, which was laid before this House on 22nd February, be approved.—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

Question agreed to.

PETITION

Rural Banks

10.1 pm

Mr. Paul Marsden (Shrewsbury and Atcham): On behalf of 1,850 people living in the rural areas of Shrewsbury and Atcham and Shropshire, I wish to present a petition which I wholeheartedly support.

The petition states:

To the House of Commons

The Petition of Shropshire Residents

Declares that

The threat to close the rural Lloyds TSB bank in Pontesbury should be condemned in the strongest possible terms. It would affect 400 customers, two staff and is another indication of the decline in the provision of rural services by a major bank.

The Petitioners Therefore Request that the House of Commons

Urge the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry to review the practice of major banks closing rural branches.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

To lie upon the Table.

Lung Cancer (Women)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

10.2 pm

Dr. Ian Gibson (Norwich, North): I raise this subject in some anger because of the disdain manifested by tobacco chiefs and their friends, among whom is a former Chancellor of the Exchequer. They have displayed total irresponsibility in respect of women and lung cancer. The Government have shown a degree of nonchalance about an issue that affects the health of many women in this country and throughout the developed world.

Since 1987, more women in the United States of America have died of lung cancer than of breast cancer. It is four times more common than cancer of the cervix. Lung cancer is the most common cancer in the world and the third most common cause of death in the UK, with about 30,000 people a year dying of it. Among men, deaths from lung cancer increased by 20 per cent. between 1976 and 1994, but among women the increase was 150 per cent. in the same period. Nearly one half of all new lung cancer cases are women. The problem must be addressed.

I believe that the problem has arisen because of the increasing propensity of young women to smoke cigarettes. Women in the United States are twice as likely as men to develop lung cancer, despite the fact that women smoke less than men and women smokers inhale less deeply than men smokers.

That shows that there may be genetic differences between men and women which result in cigarette smoke and the chemicals it contains having different effects on their biochemistry. As the human genome project unfolds, the problem will be that people will think that they do not have the gene in question, and can smoke as much as they like because they are not predisposed to these cancers and the development of illnesses associated with cancers and chemicals in the smoke.

At the recent world summit on cancer in Paris, the potential epidemic of lung cancer was underlined and equated with the increasing prevalence of smoking among women in the developing world. Ninety per cent. of lung cancers are smoking related. It is disturbing to realise that cigarette smoke is the greatest serial killer in the western world, and smoking is most common among young people in the 20 to 24 age group. Each day, 450 teenagers and children start smoking, and it is estimated that a quarter of all 15-year-olds in the United Kingdom smoke.

Lung cancer sufferers may be treated by surgery, chemotherapy, radiotherapy or a combination of those treatments. Five-year survival rates remain poor, and according to the Cancer Research Campaign and BACUP, the British Association of Cancer United Patients, five-year survival rates are half as good in the UK as in France. In this country, 7 per cent. of lung cancer patients are still alive five years after diagnosis, whereas in France 14 per cent. survive that long. There is plenty of evidence to show that outcomes are better if treatment is managed by specialist, multi-disciplinary teams, and more patients should have access to that type of care. There is also an urgent need for extended radiotherapy and for more lung cancer specialists.

As regards screening for lung cancer, long-term recovery depends more on early detection than on any other factor. A recent conference at the Royal Society of Medicine focused on improved methods of detecting lung cancer, which could lead to the development of a screening system similar to that used for cervical cancer. The United Kingdom Co-ordinating Committee on Cancer Research into lung cancer, chaired by Professor Ian Smith of the Royal Marsden, is currently designing a proposal for a lung cancer screening trial—so-called spiral CT scanning. Data from the United States of America and Japan suggest that such screening has a higher pick-up rate than even screening for breast cancer, and that most of the tumours it identifies are small and surgically curable. I hope that funding will be provided for the NHS research and development budget for that trial.

The Government have some significant initiatives to tackle lung cancer, especially as it affects women. In the past year, the Department of Health has issued guidance on treating lung cancer as part of its series of guidelines on different types of cancer and their treatments. Last spring, the previous Health Minister, the noble Baroness Hayman, announced £10 million for new initiatives to improve lung cancer services, primarily by speeding up access to diagnosis and treatment.

Department of Health figures show that treating smoking-related diseases costs the national health service £1.7 billion per year. The previous Minister for Public Health, my right hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Ms Jowell), said that reducing smoking was the Government's top public health priority. Ministers have made available £100 million over three years for anti-smoking initiatives. In the pre-Budget statement in November 1999, the Chancellor announced that future real term increases in tobacco duties would be spent on health care. That is an amazing step forward. Tobacco duty will rise by 5 per cent. in real terms next month, yielding an additional £300 million a year for the health service. There is a case for using that money to target lung cancer, given its links to tobacco.

Ranged against the Government is a powerful tobacco industry. Documents recently released under the US freedom of information legislation show that the industry plans to use a variety of techniques to target women, particularly young women, women in the third and developing world, women who are unemployed and those on low incomes. In this country 90 per cent. of lone parents, mostly women, smoke. We would do well to remember that 41,000 people in the country die each year because of smoking-related illnesses—not just lung cancers, but heart disease, strokes and other illnesses associated with tobacco.

It would, however, be less than honest to forget that there is a shadowy third party in the equation. Successive Governments have found tobacco to be an apparently endless source of revenue, and it would seem that they are now as addicted to the tobacco revenues as the tobacco consumers are to tobacco. There is therefore a dilemma, or rather a series of dilemmas. Smokers are numerous, and although their addiction is recognised, they are encouraged by groups such as FOREST—the Freedom Organisation for the Right to Enjoy Smoking Tobacco—and the tobacco industry to regard smoking as a human right.

Legislation to prohibit tobacco does not seem to be an option. Health education programmes make the Government feel rather good, and the tobacco industry loves that, because it knows that they are completely ineffective among the population whom it is most anxious to target: young women. Leaving it to individuals is not enough, in my opinion and that of others. We need collective activity against the whole tobacco industry.

The Exchequer, of course, finds it difficult to forgo such an important source of revenue. So what are the options? Is it really an option for us, knowing the facts as we do, to stand by and let succeeding generations become addicted to tobacco and suffer the consequences? Much could be done through the engineering of a social change that could phase out tobacco use over a generation. Gradual change would be easier to implement, and would make it easier to compensate for effects such as loss of revenue. Gradual change, however, should not be interpreted as a willingness to let tobacco companies off the hook; quite the contrary. Surely it is time we decided that the injury they cause our society is unacceptable.

A system of progressively punitive taxation on the commercial activity of tobacco manufacture—not just a tax on the product, but a special tax on the profitability of the industry—would allow a screw to be tightened progressively, which would eventually cause companies to diversify into non-harmful products, or to wither and eventually become much less attractive to investors. In the end, they would simply disappear. There are recent precedents for that, in the form of windfall taxes.

There cannot be an inalienable right to trade in products that cause misery, premature morbidity and death. We need to increase awareness of tobacco consumption as the single most important women's health issue—which I believe it is—rather than as a personal freedom. Women must be made aware of their special susceptibility to lung cancer and other problems, and must be given more practical help and support to overcome the problems of addiction and social pressures to smoke. The industry must also have its wings clipped in terms of the marketing of its existing products, and must be given notice of the determination that its products will not be tolerated in the future and that effective steps will be taken to phase out production altogether.

It is vital that research into the treatment of tobacco-related disease should continue. Excellent work is going on at, for instance, the Roy Castle centre in Liverpool, but I believe that a national cancer institute should co-ordinate a major clinical research effort focused on women's lung cancer, while applying continued pressure on succeeding Governments to ensure that an effective solution is found to the social problem of tobacco production and marketing.

I plead with the Minister to "make my Parliament" and to make her career. I plead with her to take up the cudgels and save all the thousands of lives that might otherwise be ended because of smoking, particularly among young women. That is the action that would make the best headlines and engender confidence in our cancer programme.

10.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Yvette Cooper): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson) for raising

[Yvette Cooper]

what is an important matter. As he pointed out, the scale of the problem is considerable. Lung cancer is the most common cancer in England and Wales. There are about 35,000 new cases every year and 30,000 deaths, of which some 11,000 are women.

Although the number of men diagnosed with lung cancer has been steadily falling for almost two decades, we are seeing a rise in the number of women diagnosed with the disease. That is of great concern. The latest figures suggest that, between 1993 and 1996, there was a rise of about 5 per cent. in the number of women diagnosed with lung cancer, at a time when the number of men diagnosed fell by an equal amount.

We have to do better. The United Kingdom has one of the worst records in Europe on deaths from lung cancer among women, with death rates more than double those of many European Union countries. The Government have set clear and demanding targets for improvement. In the White Paper entitled "Saving Lives: Our Healthier Nation", which was published in July last year, we committed ourselves to achieving a reduction in the death rate from cancer among people aged under 75 by one fifth by 2010. That translates into saving 100,000 lives. The Secretary of State for Health has made clear his personal commitment to tackling the big killers: cancer and coronary heart disease.

If we are to meet those targets on cancer, that will mean not only tackling lung cancer, including among women, but taking the right approach to cancer across the board. It will mean not simply improving treatment services, vital though that is, and reducing waiting times, essential though that is, but having a full multi-pronged strategy to bring together prevention, early detection, screening, access to services, treatment and research—action across the board.

We have already taken several important steps towards an integrated approach towards cancers in general and lung cancer in particular. Professor Mike Richards, our national cancer director, is responsible for improving cancer care across the board. In particular, with lung cancer prevention is extremely important. Given the technology and treatments that are available, we can make the greatest difference through prevention of lung cancer. That is the way to save the lives of both women and men.

My hon. Friend is right to say that lung cancer is highly preventable. Smoking is the primary cause of 90 per cent. of lung cancers. We know, too, that 70 per cent. of smokers say that they want to give up. Put simply, if we can support more smokers and help them to quit, we will make a big impact on lung cancer.

Today's epidemic of lung cancer among women largely reflects the fact that women took up smoking from the second world war onwards. The current alarmingly high rates of smoking among young girls will, if we do nothing, lead in due course to many more lung cancer deaths among women in the first few decades of the new millennium.

Recent research suggests that women smokers may be more genetically susceptible to tobacco carcinogens than men and therefore more likely to contract the main types of lung cancer at every level of exposure to cigarette smoke. That is all the more reason to take seriously the smoking epidemic among women.

The Government's programme to tackle smoking was outlined in "Smoking Kills", which was published in December 1998. In "Smoking Kills", we committed ourselves to achieving three clear and strong targets: a reduction in smoking throughout all social groups, so that the overall prevalence of smoking in the adult population falls from 28 per cent. to 24 per cent. by 2010; a reduction in the number of 11 to 15-year-olds smoking regularly from 13 per cent. to 9 per cent. over the same period; and a reduction in the number of pregnant smokers from 23 per cent. to 15 per cent..

Clearly, to achieve the pregnant smokers target, we must ensure that our campaign reaches women. To achieve the reduction in the number of 11 to 15-year-olds who smoke regularly, we need specifically to ensure that we target young women smokers.

As my hon. Friend said, we backed up that commitment with more than £100 million, over three years, for smoking cessation and tobacco education. There will therefore be additional support for smoking cessation in the 26 health action zones. Those services are now all up and running. Free nicotine replacement therapy for smokers on low incomes will be available, first, in health action zones, and, from April, across the country. Moreover, from April, additional money will be invested to help all health authorities across England to provide specialist smoking cessation services. From next financial year, all smokers who require specialist help should be able to get support. That is a huge step forward. Never before have a Government introduced an overarching campaign to stop smoking.

The United Kingdom is a world leader in providing smoking cessation services to its population. More smokers, particularly more heavily dependent smokers who have been unable to quit without specialist help, should be helped to quit. Providing them with such help will cut the toll of death and disease from smoking, particularly lung cancer deaths. So far, the results show that 55 per cent. of those who are accessing the new smoking cessation services are women. We therefore expect to have a particular impact on women smokers.

Smoking cessation support is only part of the programme. The tobacco education campaign was launched successfully—in December 1999, under the slogan, "Don't give up giving up"—to encourage smokers to persevere until they succeed in quitting. The helpline has received almost 80,000 calls since the campaign started. We are developing ideas for more targeted campaigns, building on the general campaign that we have already launched. As I said, as smoking rates for young girls are alarming, the campaign aimed at young people must aim to have a real impact on that group.

We shall also fulfil our manifesto commitment to ban tobacco advertising. The high court has supported our case to introduce the ban. If the tobacco companies were to drop their opposition to the ban, we would be able to implement it straight away. We estimate that the ban could, in the short term, save 1,500 to 1,600 lives a year.

I take issue with my hon. Friend that the Government might be reluctant to act on smoking because of the impact on tobacco revenue. That is plain wrong. The Government's case on tackling smoking is completely independent of the impact that that might have on tobacco revenue. We have made that case extremely strongly.

It is a public health measure. The Chancellor has made it very clear in his actions on tackling smoking that he supports the public health aspects of the policy.

There is a case for a stronger regulatory framework on tobacco products, and for actions such as tackling tobacco additives. That is one of the issues that we are pursuing in the European framework. I agree with my hon. Friend that there is further action that we have to take—we are taking it—on those issues.

Prevention is the best way of tackling lung cancer. However, as my hon. Friend has rightly pointed out, we also need to work on early detection and screening. Survival rates for cancer are poor, partly because of the difficulty of detecting the condition at an early stage.

Recommendations on national screening programmes are considered by the United Kingdom national screening committee, which advises Ministers on all aspects of screening policy. The NSC assesses proposed new screening programmes against a set of internationally recognised criteria, and draws upon the latest research evidence and the skills of specially convened multi-disciplinary expert groups.

Currently, screening for lung cancer would not meet the NSC's criteria for a screening programme, because there is no evidence of the effectiveness of screening. More research is needed on that matter. We are aware of recent reports from the United States suggesting that it is possible to detect lung cancer at a stage when it is still susceptible to treatment. We are also aware of the work being done in this country—to which my hon. Friend referred—to examine some of the issues raised in the United States. The NSC will review its position on screening for lung cancer in the light of any robust new evidence.

High quality diagnosis and treatment are at the centre of our commitment to cancer care. Patients and clinicians alike want faster and better care. Patients need to have confidence in the health service and to know that if they have symptoms that could be cancer, they will be able to discuss them with their GP and be referred quickly and appropriately if necessary.

Although more than 220,000 cases of cancer are diagnosed each year, an individual GP is unlikely to see more than a few cases. That is why we are working with primary and secondary care providers, the voluntary sector and patient groups to develop cancer guidelines for primary health care teams, to help them identify those patients most likely to have cancer and to require urgent specialist investigation.

Patients who have suspected cancer want to be seen by a specialist quickly to take away the uncertainty and anxiety. That is why it is so important that we move ahead in implementing the two-week standard for all cases of suspected cancer. That standard of care will apply to all lung cancer patients needing an urgent referral from April this year. That is supported by additional resources to speed access to diagnosis and care.

We must also ensure that all cancer patients, wherever they live, have access to the same high-quality services. My hon. Friend mentioned the importance of having access to multi-disciplinary teams. I agree that that is vital. The work being done by the cancer collaboratives, putting patients at the centre of care, following the process through from primary care in multidisciplinary teams and encouraging working together to cut waiting times and improve the quality of care has a huge potential to make a big difference for patients with lung cancer and other cancers as we roll the programme out. We have invested an extra £70 million in cancer services since 1997 and will be investing a further £80 million over the next two years specifically in cancer treatment and diagnosis.

Whatever improvements we manage to make in the prevention and treatment of cancer, we still need to know more and to continue to support research. The Government fund research into cancer in many ways—through the national health service research and development levy and through specific projects, including the development and evaluation of clinical nurse specialist follow-up in the management of patients with lung cancer and a large-scale trial of chemotherapy for all stages of non-small cell lung cancer.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this important issue. He is right that lung cancer is an increasingly serious issue for women. I hope that I have made clear to him the seriousness with which the Government treat cancer in general and lung cancer in particular among women. We are determined to make a difference on the big killers—cancer and coronary heart disease. The best way to do that is by tackling cancer across the board, through action on prevention, screening, fast access to treatment and high-quality treatment, as well as palliative care. We need to improve the lot of cancer sufferers and prevent far more people—women as well as men—from contracting cancer in the first place.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-eight minutes past Ten o'clock.

House of Commons

Wednesday 15 March 2000

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

CITY OF LONDON (WARD ELECTIONS) BILL *(BY ORDER)*

Order for further consideration, as amended, read.

To be further considered on Wednesday 22 March.

Oral Answers to Questions

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Peace Process

1. **Mr. John McFall** (Dumbarton): If he will make a statement on the peace process in Northern Ireland. [113215]

5. **Mr. Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield): If he will make a statement on the current situation regarding the peace process. [113219]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. Peter Mandelson): Following the Government's decision on 11 February to suspend the operation of the institutions so as to preserve them for restoration, I had useful discussions last week with the political parties in Northern Ireland and with the Irish Government. Those will continue in the United States over the next few days. I remain convinced that there is the will and the desire to see the Good Friday agreement implemented in full. We shall continue to do all that we can to achieve that in close co-operation with the Irish Government and the political parties in Northern Ireland.

Mr. McFall: Does the Secretary of State agree that the transformation that has occurred in Northern Ireland over the past few years is solely down to the Good Friday agreement? In many instances, the people have been ahead of the politicians in realising that. Does he accept that no politician or political party has any copyright on the agreement, and that if there is to be any revision of it, that must be done through agreement, discussion and consensus between all the people and parties involved?

Mr. Mandelson: The Good Friday agreement represents a potential sea-change in the fortunes of Northern Ireland. Despite all that has happened, we certainly cannot stand still. Indeed, no one can afford to opt out. We are working to implement the agreement in all its aspects; large swathes of it—human rights, equality, policing, criminal justice and other matters—will continue to be implemented. We want to see the institutions resume their operation as quickly as possible, but that must be on the basis of cross-community participation.

As I said, talks started last week and they will continue. We shall certainly not give up. We are deciding the future not of politicians in Northern Ireland, but of every family in Northern Ireland. That is why the process is so important and we shall spare no effort.

Mr. Fabricant: The Secretary of State will know that Real IRA have acquired updated RPG7 rocket launchers from the Balkans, with other weapons. Is he also aware that some of the terrorists now being released have joined Real IRA? Will he not say that enough is enough? Until we see some decommissioning, no more political or terrorist prisoners should be released.

Mr. Mandelson: I cannot confirm any of the information that the hon. Gentleman has given the House. Under the agreement, the continuation of early releases is linked to the maintenance of each paramilitary ceasefire. I will, of course, keep each ceasefire under regular and constant review.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): Given the serious problems with the process, and given my question to the Secretary of State last month in which I urged the leader of the Ulster Unionist party to relax his 12 February deadline, will my right hon. Friend begin negotiations from the standpoint of having 22 May as the beginning of the decommissioning process rather than its end?

Mr. Mandelson: I can certainly say firmly that no single party can unilaterally change what is in the agreement. Realistically, the prospects for achieving complete decommissioning by 22 May are poor. However, there are two extreme views as to the consequences if it is not achieved. Mr. Adams seems to be suggesting that we just forget about decommissioning. Others say that it must mean the end of the agreement altogether. Both views are wrong. Decommissioning will not go away; it remains an essential part of the peace process and of the Good Friday agreement. However, the only way to achieve decommissioning is through the full implementation of the agreement; that is what we shall continue to work on.

Mr. John D. Taylor (Strangford): Has the Secretary of State seen this morning's press reports that Mr. Gerry Adams has said that there will be no political progress whatever in Washington this week, and that there will be no decommissioning of illegal armaments by 22 May this year, as required in the Belfast agreement? Accordingly, if that is correct, will the Assembly remain in suspension after 22 May? What will happen?

Mr. Mandelson: No; I hope very much that the Assembly, the Executive and all the institutions will be reactivated long in advance of 22 May. It is imperative that that be achieved, so that the issue of decommissioning, in conjunction with that reactivation, can be settled one way or another to everyone's

satisfaction. Only in that way shall we be able to accommodate the deadline of 22 May—in the context of functioning institutions. Politics that works in Northern Ireland is the essential condition for progress.

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): What is the Secretary of State's view of the Alliance party's six-point plan to break the deadlock in the peace process? It seems to me that some of the ideas are original and could be helpful.

Mr. Mandelson: There is a lot of interest in those ideas. I had the opportunity to discuss the six-point plan with an Alliance party delegation who came to see me last week. The plan is positive and constructive, and it makes a good contribution to the current consultation of all parties. I have not heard what the other pro-agreement parties' view of the Alliance proposals is, but I shall look closely at any such measures that are able to generate cross-party confidence and support.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): All over the world Irish people and their friends are preparing to celebrate St. Patrick's day. Some will return from overseas to the island of Ireland to do so, apart from those who have been sent into exile by paramilitary groups. Is it not the case that the peace agreement will have delivered fully only when exiles can return to Ireland to join in the celebrations?

Mr. Mandelson: I strongly echo my hon. Friend's remarks. Such exile is unacceptable, it must be reversed and we must create the conditions in which it is. Apart from the people to whom my hon. Friend referred, there are many young people who have left Northern Ireland because they have despaired of the inability to create lasting peace and prosperity and a half-decent future in which to bring up their families. I want all those young people to be exiles from Northern Ireland no longer; I want them to return, and I want them to be leaders in Northern Ireland. I do not want any more young people having to find their fortune and to bring up their families elsewhere. They should remain where they belong—with their families and friends in Northern Ireland.

Mr. Andrew MacKay (Bracknell): As the Secretary of State examines ways of taking the process forward at this difficult time, will he give the House a guarantee that any change in forces' levels in Northern Ireland will be a decision that he takes alone, and that it will be taken purely on security, and not political, grounds—and after consultation with the General Officer Commanding the Army and the Chief Constable of the Royal Ulster Constabulary?

Mr. Mandelson: We all want to normalise security arrangements in Northern Ireland as soon as possible, and I know that the right hon. Gentleman shares that objective. Normalisation is not about making concessions and it is not about wishful thinking. It reflects precisely what is happening on the ground, the progress that we have made and the progress that we have yet to make. I pay tribute to the Garda and the Irish Army for their successes against dissidents. However, we have responsibility for security in Northern Ireland, and I shall listen to the Chief Constable's advice. He and the GOC will decide the troop numbers that they need and where and how they want to deploy them. If they want to make changes, they will announce those changes, which will be made for good reasons, in their own time.

Mr. MacKay: Is the Secretary of State aware that his answer will be gratefully received in Northern Ireland and among the armed forces, and with some surprise, not least because of the disgraceful remarks that he made on Irish television last week, when he described the Army as chinless wonders? I am sure that he now deeply regrets those remarks, so will he take this opportunity to apologise publicly to the Army, and more particularly to the families of soldiers who have lost their lives in Northern Ireland during the recent troubles?

Mr. Mandelson: I have absolutely no hesitation in expressing again my regret for the remark that I made. I think that the right hon. Gentleman is, for his own political purposes, slightly egging the pudding, and he is being a little harsh. He will accept that all politicians are allowed the occasional gaffe, if only to remind the public that they are still human.

Kali Mountford (Colne Valley): Is not the Good Friday agreement not only the best agreement on offer but the only one? I would hope that it has the support of all Members of this place, and certainly that of the British people. Is not the best thing now for everybody to come together to support the agreement so that we can realise the hope that is offered by the agreement? Does my right hon. Friend agree that republicans and Unionists work together at many levels in government and throughout other institutions? Does that not offer real hope for success?

Mr. Mandelson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Despite the understandable expressions of anger and some acrimony that followed the unfortunate but inevitable decision by the Government to suspend the institutions, people from different parties and different parts of the political spectrum are continuing to work extremely well throughout Northern Ireland, most notably in local government. We can get progress only with agreement on the part of Unionists, nationalists and republicans. That requires confidence on all sides, which was badly dented earlier this year. It is to restoring the confidence that all parties need to go forward that we are devoting our energies, and we shall continue to do so.

Ministerial Posts

2. **Mr. William Thompson** (West Tyrone): What discussions he has had with the Prime Minister on the complement of his Department's Ministers since the suspension of the Northern Ireland Executive. [113216]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. Peter Mandelson): No discussions have taken place with my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister on the complement of Northern Ireland Office Ministers since suspension took place on 12 February.

Mr. Thompson: Given the disarray and acrimony among the pro-agreement parties, surely it is unrealistic to imagine that there will be an early return to an Executive in

Northern Ireland. Surely the Secretary of State is burying his head in the sand to think so. May I ask the right hon. Gentleman to reconsider his view? It is unrealistic to expect two Ministers to cover 10 Departments in Northern Ireland. As it may be some time before an Executive is re-formed, surely we need extra Ministers to ensure that important decisions can be made and implemented and that we have the continuation of good government.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): He is looking for a job.

Mr. Mandelson: I do not know whether that was an offer by the hon. Member for West Tyrone (Mr. Thompson).

The decision of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister not to reappoint additional Ministers reflects our desire to make the renewed period of direct rule as short as possible. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that no local departmental matters will be neglected in the meantime. I hope that we can restart the institutions as soon as possible. They are certainly needed if we are to be successful in implementing the Good Friday agreement as a whole, and that is in the urgent interests of all the people of Northern Ireland.

Mrs. Anne Campbell (Cambridge): Does my right hon. Friend agree that while the parties are continuing to talk round the table and the ceasefire remains intact, the two Governments are absolutely right in their determination to keep all possible avenues open so that parties can take the important extra step?

Mr. Mandelson: Yes, that is very important, and it is particularly important that the two Governments continue to work closely together. We are working with them and in co-operation with the parties. The consultations that both Governments started and had with the parties last week will continue in Washington, as I have said, over St. Patrick's day. Next week, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach will meet to review what progress has been made, and I think that that is to be followed by an intensive period of activity prior to the Easter break.

Employment

3. **Mr. Tony Colman** (Putney): If he will make a statement on levels of employment in Northern Ireland. [113217]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr. Adam Ingram): Latest estimates derived from the labour force survey show that there were approximately 691,000 persons employed in Northern Ireland in the period November 1999 to January 2000.

Mr. Colman: I thank the Minister for that information and congratulate him on his work in ensuring that unemployment has fallen steadily in Northern Ireland over the past three years. I commend the work of the Industrial Development Board, so ably chaired by Alan Gillespie. Does my hon. Friend share my amazement that the £400 million loan guarantee and the £38 million of intervention fund grants were described by Harland and Wolff management, in its tender for the Cunard liner, as too little, too late, and contrast that with the general welcome that has been given by both sides of the House to the £500 million loan guarantee given to British Aerospace, which will result in many jobs?

Mr. Ingram: I thank my hon. Friend for making a good point. The scale of the offer to Harland and Wolff was unprecedented. It involved two Departments: the Department of Trade and Industry and the Northern Ireland Office. It is a matter of regret that the yard did not obtain the contract; if it had, future employment could have been guaranteed to some extent.

I share my hon. Friend's amazement that the official Conservative spokesman on Northern Ireland has criticised the Government's actions. He represents a party that, in the 1980s, went out of its way to destroy the manufacturing sector throughout the United Kingdom and argued against any form of state intervention to support companies. We have shown our determination to save the yard and we shall continue to work to do so.

Mr. Roy Beggs (East Antrim): In spite of the Minister's heavy load, he will be aware of the fears of Harland and Wolff's 1,700 employees and the many hundreds of others whose livelihood depends on continuous employment in the shipyard. Although the recent lack of success is disappointing, will he continue to work with management and trade unions to secure a future for Harland and Wolff and to save the shipyard from closure?

Mr. Ingram: I met senior management of Harland and Wolff last Friday, after the announcement was made. I have offered to meet them again to discuss what assistance we can offer the company in bidding for future contracts, because we value the yard and the type and quality of work it brings to Northern Ireland's economy. I am due to meet unions to discuss their concerns. I welcome the hon. Gentleman's comments.

Mr. Peter Robinson (Belfast, East): Has the Minister had an opportunity to speak to his right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence about the possibility of the Ministry of Defence revising its timetable for placing orders and seeking quotes from various yards within the United Kingdom in respect of MOD contracts?

Mr. Ingram: It is more appropriate that I first discuss in detail with the company the contracts for which it intends to bid. If it wants additional support from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and me in terms of making representations to other Departments, we stand ready to hear its requests and to make such representations.

Decommissioning

4. **Mr. Nigel Waterson** (Eastbourne): What assessment he has made of when the decommissioning section of the Belfast agreement will be fully implemented. [113218]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. George Howarth): As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, under the Good Friday agreement all parties are committed to working to achieve complete decommissioning by May 2000. In the context of the implementation of the overall settlement,

the obligation is on the paramilitaries to make clear how and when they will put their illegal arms fully and completely beyond use. They should do so without delay.

Mr. Waterson: Can the Minister confirm the parliamentary answers given to my hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr. Paterson), to the effect that since the Good Friday agreement more than 2,400 injuries and 49 deaths have been inflicted by terrorists in Northern Ireland? Does not that underline the importance of making no more significant concessions to Sinn Fein until there is meaningful and verifiable decommissioning?

Mr. Howarth: Of course any violence is to be deplored and no member of the Government would apologise on behalf of any party involved in violence. We will behave toward such parties in the appropriate way. However, the hon. Gentleman should be aware that our actions should not be regarded as concessions; they are all part of the Good Friday agreement. It is not true to say that we are making concessions. What we are doing is delivering on the obligations that we and all the other parties made when we signed up to the Good Friday agreement.

Mr. Ken Maginnis (Fermanagh and South Tyrone): Will the Minister join me in deploring the fact that not one of his colleagues on the Government side of the House seems interested in decommissioning, or has asked a question on that issue? Will he confirm that he and the Secretary of State still consider decommissioning an essential part of the Belfast agreement, and that they will not be beguiled by the unilateral dissent from the 22 May date demonstrated by the junior Minister at the Department of Foreign Affairs in Dublin? Can the Minister—*[Interruption.]* I know that Labour Members do not want to hear about decommissioning. Has the Secretary of State obtained an answer to the question put by the hon. Member for Newry and Armagh (Mr. Mallon)? Does the IRA intend to disarm, and if so, when?

Mr. Howarth: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman was in the House at the time, but if he was, he would have heard my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State dealing earlier with questions from both sides of the House on the subject of decommissioning. And a few moments ago, I dealt directly with a question on decommissioning from an Opposition Member. With all the respect that I can summon for the hon. Gentleman, I conclude that he was not listening, or he chose to ignore what took place earlier.

My right hon. Friend, Ministers from the Republic of Ireland and I are working hard to ensure that all the important aspects of the Good Friday agreement, including decommissioning, are met in a way that is acceptable within the terms of the agreement. That is what my right hon. Friend said, and I repeat it. I do not know what more I can say to satisfy the hon. Gentleman, except that I know that he agrees with us on that point.

Mr. Robert McCartney (North Down): Is the Minister aware that the Secretary of State said earlier that decommissioning could take place only in the context of the overall implementation of the agreement? Are they both aware that that is an exact repetition of the IRA demand made in its statement to General de Chastelain in February this year?

Mr. Howarth: The hon. and learned Gentleman is trying to work into his question and our answer some sort of collusion that does not exist. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has given a proper assessment of the situation as regards decommissioning, in the context of the Good Friday agreement. To seek to misinterpret or reinterpret that is nothing short of mischievous. If the hon. and learned Gentleman wants to be mischievous, that is his prerogative. We are seeking to bring about peace, and I am sure the entire House would agree that that is the right thing to do.

Mr. John M. Taylor (Solihull): Will the Minister give an assurance to the House this afternoon that the Executive will not be reconvened until there has been a serious start on decommissioning?

Mr. Howarth: The hon. Gentleman ought to be aware of the fact that we are seriously engaged with our colleagues from Ireland and all the other parties that signed up to the agreement in trying to get the process back on track. I shall not second-guess where those discussions will lead. However, we are seeking to deliver every part of the Good Friday agreement, which includes obligations on decommissioning.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): May I press the Minister further? What evidence is there that there will be any decommissioning before 22 May?

Mr. Howarth: At the moment, there is no evidence that decommissioning will be completed—or even started—by 22 May. That is why my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will be involved in discussions with the Taoiseach next week, and why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I met our Irish colleagues and representatives of the political parties last week. We are trying to deliver the Good Friday agreement in full. We shall continue to pursue that objective.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [113245] **Mr. Simon Burns** (West Chelmsford): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 15 March.

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Mr. Burns: Does the Prime Minister agree that the incidence of beggars in the street caused by economic migration to this country is an affront? Will he answer the question that my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway) asked him two weeks ago: why do

council tax payers have to pick up the bill for the mess in the Home Office, which deals with a record number of bogus asylum seekers who come here because the Government's policy has made the country a soft touch for economic migrants?

The Prime Minister: First, we are making available up to £10 million of extra special grants to support local authorities this year. As for the rules on asylum, they were introduced by the Conservative Government. In the teeth of Conservative opposition, this Government are changing the asylum rules so that from 3 April proper asylum measures will be in place for the first time, no thanks to the Conservative party.

Mr. Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield): Is my right hon. Friend aware that people throughout the west midlands and all areas that depend on the Rover group are holding their collective breath this afternoon as reports come from Germany? Does he agree that it is intolerable that people should hear about further threats to their livelihoods from a newspaper leak in south Germany? Does he also agree that BMW and the Government agreed an aid package on the basis of BMW's long-term commitment to the Rover group and that BMW should remember that in its board meeting tomorrow, and keep faith with the many thousands of people throughout the country who have kept faith with them over the years? Will my right hon. Friend do all that he can to safeguard jobs in that vital manufacturing industry?

The Prime Minister: I agree with my hon. Friend. We have made it clear that we have been willing to back BMW's plans with Government support. That has been made clear repeatedly in the past few months, and was reiterated today. We are in close touch with the company. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry spoke to the chairman of Rover today; he will also speak to the BMW chairman. He has made clear the enormous strategic importance that we attach to safeguarding Rover's future. We shall do everything we can, including making good our offer of support, to safeguard the future of the plant.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): Before the election, the Prime Minister promised that he had no plans to increase tax. Yesterday, his press secretary— *[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. Less noise down there.

Mr. Hague: Yesterday, the Prime Minister's press secretary said that the Government had increased taxes. In that new spirit of honesty, will the Prime Minister admit that Labour's promises on taxes at the election were a total, barefaced election lie?

The Prime Minister: I certainly will not. We promised that we would not raise the basic, standard or higher rate of tax, and we kept that promise. For the first two years, the Government's duty was to cut the huge deficit that we inherited. However, this financial year, the tax burden falls; that will happen again next year. Future years depend on Budget decisions. No risks will—or should—be taken with the strength and stability of the economy.

We inherited a national debt that had doubled and a borrowing requirement of £28 billion. When we came to office, we were paying more in interest payments on the debt under Tory plans than we were spending on the whole school system. I make no apology for saying that we cut the budget deficit in our first two years. We were right to do that.

Mr. Hague: Well, the Prime Minister has obviously forgotten what he said. He said he had

no plans to increase tax at all.

Was that just a joke or another rib tickler from the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, launched upon the country? Let me remind him that he said:

our proposals do not involve raising taxes.

That was in August 1996. He said:

we want people to pay lower taxes.

That was September 1996. He said:

the programme of the Labour Party does not imply any tax increases.

That was January 1997. He said:

The entire Tory case that there is a . . . hidden agenda . . . of tax increases is simply untrue.

That was April 1997. So it was not a joke; it was systematic, dishonest and deliberately misleading. Yesterday, his press secretary admitted that the tax burden had risen, so will he now admit that he has broken that whole long list of promises?

The Prime Minister: Not at all.

An hon. Member: He is a liar.

Madam Speaker: Order. Where did that come from? Where did that come from? *[Interruption.]* Order. I see that no one is going to own up, but I distinctly heard it.

The Prime Minister: This quote—

our principle to establish sound public finances comes first— [*Official Report*, 25 January 1994; Vol. 236, c. 170.]

is from the right hon. Gentleman's shadow Chancellor, when he was dealing with the last Tory deficit. For the first two years we had to get rid of the budget deficit. As a result of those measures, and I make no apology for them, the tax burden is falling this year and will fall again next year. Look at the result of the policy: for the first time in decades, the economy has slowed without a recession; debt repayments are £4 billion less this year—money that goes to public services; interest rates are half what they were for years under the Tories; and there are 800,000 more jobs, higher living standards and more take-home pay. Yes, we are proud of our economic record.

Mr. Hague: And the Prime Minister still will not admit what is clearly true: he has broken that whole long list of election promises. Now that he is letting his press secretary speak on the record, he will have to get used to this problem because we can see that his answers are less honest than those of his press secretary. "Less honest than Alastair Campbell" are not words that any of us want on our tombstones. His Government have increased taxes on mortgages and marriages, petrol and pensions, savers and self-employed, large businesses and small, air travel and

insurance, and home buying and charities. The result is not only that taxes have gone up, but that they are continuing to rise. Will he admit not only that he has broken his promise not to raise taxation, but that he is continuing to break that promise?

The Prime Minister: No. The figures are 36.5 per cent. for 1997–98 and 37.4 per cent. for 1998–99, falling to 37 per cent. this year and 36.8 per cent. next year. I also have the figures that the right hon. Gentleman agreed to when a member of the Cabinet in 1996. I think the House should hear them: 36.3 per cent. in 1997–98, 36.6 per cent. in 1998–99, and 37.1 per cent. and then 37.6 per cent. We can simply look at the Tory record. If it is immoral to raise taxes ever, then the last Tory Government were immoral, were they? I have looked at the record under Margaret Thatcher. The tax burden rose by 3 per cent. Was she immoral? [HON. MEMBERS: "Yes!"] I am sorry to say that about someone who I know means so much to the right hon. Gentleman, but we do not have to look at the last Tory record. Let us look at the last two years of the Tory Government, when he was a Cabinet Minister. The tax burden went up a full 2 per cent. Was he immoral?

Mr. Hague: Let us have a look. Everything that the Prime Minister has said is based on the Chancellor's way of calculating the tax take.

PricewaterhouseCoopers, one of the largest accounting firms in the world, says that the Government's figures are a less accurate indicator, because they involve reclassifying items in the middle of the period. That is polite accountant-speak for a barefaced election lie, which is what we were talking about at the beginning. The figures also show that the tax burden will continue to rise from this year to next year, from next year to the year after and so on, until the last possible date for a general election.

Is it not now clear from all independent sources that the Prime Minister has broken his promises, and is continuing to break them?

The Prime Minister: No. The PricewaterhouseCoopers figures exclude the working families tax credit as a tax cut; if it is added, the figures are as I said.

What is the right hon. Gentleman's policy? His policy is the Tory tax guarantee. That was tried before, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and what did it give us? Interest rates went through the roof, 1 million jobs were lost in manufacturing alone, there was record borrowing and recession; and then what? Twenty-two Tory tax rises.

Yesterday, the right hon. Gentleman said that it was the moral duty of Government always to cut taxes. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]. Hon. Members say "Hear, hear"; I say that a return to boom and bust is not moral. What is moral about 3 million unemployed? What is moral about 1 million small businesses going to the wall? What is moral about 1 million homes being repossessed? What is moral about 4 million children living in poverty that we inherited?

We know Tory morality: tax cuts for a few at the top, and boom and bust for the rest of us.

Mr. Hague: What is moral about breaking every promise on taxation, and delivering worse public services at the same time? Let us have an answer now: does the Prime Minister admit that he has broken all those promises? The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development says that Britain has the fastest-rising tax burden in the developed world. The Institute of Fiscal Studies says that

there is no question that UK taxes are rising.

So do the Confederation of British Industry, the Institute of Directors, the British Chambers of Commerce and the Fabian Society. *[Interruption.]* Even the Fabian Society. The Prime Minister should pays more attention to his heartland. *[Interruption.]* We know that Labour Members do not want to hear about what they have done— *[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. I will have order in the House, on both sides.

Mr. Hague: Every independent organisation agrees that the tax burden is continuing to rise. No independent organisation accepts the figures that the Prime Minister just gave, because there is no institute of manipulation and broken promises.

Let us ask the Prime Minister the question for the fifth time. Is it not clear that he has broken all his promises on taxation?

The Prime Minister: No. The promise that we made about the basic, standard and higher rates of income tax has been kept, and rightly too; but we do not, I repeat, make any apologies for having got rid of the budget deficit in our first two years. Surely what the country needs above all else economically is stability and strength, and surely, when there are more jobs, higher living standards, more take-home pay and greater stability in the economy than we have had for years, that is the right test of an economic policy. If we went back down the road proposed by the right hon. Gentleman—massive tax cuts, at the same time as promises of extra spending—we would end up with cuts in public spending, increased taxes, and boom and bust. That is the truth.

Mr. Hague: We would not end up with those things. Of course we would not. What about saving the hundreds of millions of pounds that are being spent on asylum seekers because the right hon. Gentleman has made this country a soft touch? What about saving tens of millions of pounds on preparing for the euro, when people do not want to join the euro? What about saving the extra £1,000 million that the right hon. Gentleman has spent on running Whitehall? What about saving on the welfare budget, which has run out of control while we have proposed savings of £3 billion?

Is it not clear that the right hon. Gentleman's promises have been systematically, deliberately and endlessly broken, and is it not clear that this is the Government who tax more and deliver less?

The Prime Minister: As for that last rant, let me first deal with the welfare position. Under this Government, the welfare bills on social and economic failure are £4 billion down as a result of the new deal. On welfare spending, even if the working families tax credit, the increased child benefit and the extra money for pensioners, which the right hon. Gentleman is opposed to, are included in that—let me give him the figures—it is a 1 per cent. real-terms increase over this Parliament. When he was in office, it was a 4 per cent. real-terms increase, so contrast that with the idea that he will get all this money out of the welfare budget.

As for asylum, the right hon. Gentleman's party opposed the measure that we are introducing from this April to replace the benefits for everyone with a tougher, tighter system. The Tory proposals on the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, which the shadow Home Secretary tabled, would have added £500 million to the bill, so, next time he engages in some economic debate, let him get his facts right.

Angela Smith (Basildon): The Prime Minister will be aware that many Labour Members take every opportunity to lobby him for extra resources for our constituencies, particularly in health and education. Has he received any representations from Conservative Members for cuts in services in their constituencies, given their tax guarantee? Does he believe that we can spend more if we are getting less in?

The Prime Minister: I should inform the House of the latest stage of the Conservatives' thinking. What they now desire to do is not just to oppose the extra money on schools and hospitals as reckless and irresponsible; they are now saying that they are going to savage the welfare budget. But the part of the welfare budget that they will savage is the extra £100 for pensioners, the extra child benefit, the working families tax credit and the new deal. We will expose it day in, day out before the election.

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): The House is rightly concerned about possible overheating of the economy, but we should be much more concerned about the clear overheating of the leader of the Tory party. Will the Prime Minister resist the Conservative-led endeavours to get into a Dutch auction about tax? Will he take this opportunity to confirm that it remains his commitment and his ambition to get our health service spending—what people really care about out there—up to European levels sooner rather than later?

The Prime Minister: We want to ensure that proper funds go into the national health service. We want, too, to ensure that hard-working families get the benefit of saving as much of their income as they can, which is why we have the basic rate income tax cut, but taxes should be cut consistent only with the proper management of the economy. Of course, that is the case.

Mr. Kennedy: At a time when we are seeing cardiac operations postponed, insufficient provision in intensive care, and the health service not meeting the aspirations that it felt it could attain under a new Labour Government, should not the priority for the Chancellor and the Prime Minister be further investment sooner rather than later, rather than a tax cut next month, which all evidence of public opinion shows people do not want as the public priority?

The Prime Minister: It is, of course, important to get the investment in the health service, but I emphasise to the right hon. Gentleman that we are already putting a substantial amount of extra investment into the health service. This is, after all, the first year of significant additional increases in health spending. For the first two years, for the very reason that I was giving earlier, we had to ensure that we brought the public finances under control, but we need to ensure that we get that extra investment—and we are. That is the very reason why we now have 4,000 new nurses in the national health service and why all the accident and emergency departments are being renovated.

The right hon. Gentleman mentioned heart disease. There are problems in cardiac and cancer specialties. They can be cured only by more specialist staff, more intensive care beds and more consultants. We are investing in all three of those, but it does take time. This year, for example, we will have another 70 cardiac specialists coming on stream. In the years following, we will have even more than that, but it has to be done step by step, obviously, as a result of the problems that we inherited and as a result of the time that it takes to train people.

Mr. Tom Levitt (High Peak): Will my right hon. Friend take this opportunity to express the House's gratitude to the members of the disability rights task force for the excellent work they have carried out over two and a half years? Does he have a message today for the newly appointed members of the Disability Rights Commission, who start their work next month?

The Prime Minister: We are proud of the work that will be undertaken by the Disability Rights Commission. I am sure that it will do an excellent job. That was a manifesto commitment, and we have fulfilled it. I am delighted to see that it has so much support everywhere in the country.

Q2. [113246] **Mr. John Bercow** (Buckingham):Given that there are now over 48,000 school classes with 31 or more pupils and that the number of secondary school classes with 36 or more pupils has more than doubled since he took office, should the Prime Minister's election slogan have been not "education, education, education", but "humbug, humbug, humbug"?

The Prime Minister: There are 300,000 five, six and seven-year-olds in classes of fewer than 30 pupils who were not in classes of fewer than 30 pupils during the time of the previous Government. The reason for that is simple: we took the measures necessary to reduce class sizes and we made the necessary investment. The hon. Gentleman opposed that investment. The truth is that we can get class sizes down only if we make the additional investment in the system. We are making that investment and the hon. Gentleman's party is opposing it.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): One of the things that is wrong with the Leader of the Opposition is that he gives slapheads a bad name. I have a possible untapped tax suggestion for the Prime Minister, which could be developed. The exchange of goods and services throughout the world accounts for only a small amount of the money that changes hands. Most money is involved in currency speculation. If there were to be an internationally led tax on currency speculation, it would raise millions of pounds that could be used in Mozambique and other areas to tackle problems in the third world. Will our Government take a lead to see that that is on the agenda, because it needs to be done, not just by this Government but by other Governments and financial centres?

The Prime Minister: That is an interesting suggestion. I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor will have paid close attention to it. The best way to help the developing world is through the cancellation of debt. I am proud of the fact that our Chancellor and our Secretary of State for International Development have led the way on that. The Government are also increasing the aid and development budget, which means that millions of people throughout the world are feeling the benefit of our policies. I have a feeling that, although we will pay careful attention to my hon. Friend's suggestion, we will continue with our policy.

Q3. [113247] **Mr. Andrew George** (St. Ives): In welcoming the lobby here today, may I ask the Prime Minister whether he agrees that our dairy farmers are the best and most efficient in Europe, but have suffered the costs of gross negligence because of the Tory handling of BSE and the lowest prices in Europe as a result of the Government's failure to protect them from the larger processors and supermarkets? Does the Prime Minister really believe that 8p a pint for our dairy farmers is enough for them to survive? If not, what action will he take?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Gentleman probably knows, on 30 March I have a meeting with representatives of the National Farmers Union and representatives of farmers in every part of the United Kingdom. We will see what measures we can take to help the dairy industry and other sectors, such as the pig industry, that are experiencing real difficulties. As I have said constantly, there is a limit to the amount of public subsidy we can provide. We are putting in a significant amount of money. We understand that the position has worsened recently, particularly for the dairy sector, and we will do what we can. I will say no more before the meeting on 30 March. We are aware of the problems, but we need long-term solutions as well as solutions to get them over a short-term crisis.

Mr. Barry Jones (Alyn and Deeside): Will my right hon. Friend forgive me if I tell him very bluntly, man to man, that—*[Interruption.]* Yes, I have been waiting years to tell my right hon. Friend this, whether he likes it or not. Does he know that, in my constituency, 4,200 Airbus workers are cheering the Government's decision to pay £530 million into the Airbus project, which will create 1,400 jobs in my constituency?

May I also tell my right hon. Friend that, among the work force, there is just a little perplexity that there seems to be some tardiness by the Welsh Assembly in its apparent inability to pay just £25 million in grant? Will he address that issue, send for the First Secretary—*[Interruption.]* Thank you very much for the £530 million.

The Prime Minister: I shall certainly use my renowned influence with the Welsh Assembly to make the points that my right hon. Friend has just made. It is a very important investment, which will not only bring jobs, but safeguard a large part of the United Kingdom's technological and skill base.

Q4. [113248] **Mr. Christopher Chope** (Christchurch): May I turn the Prime Minister's attention to the morality of the taxation of employee benefits? For example, does he think that, when he paid for his nanny and butler to go to the south of France—for their first-class airfare and their holiday at the flat of the then Paymaster General—it was fair that the taxation liability for that holiday should have fallen on the nanny and the butler, rather than on him as their employer?

The Prime Minister: That is about the level of today's Conservative party. I do not know what nonsense there is about me having a butler—thank you very much—but, if the hon. Gentleman has any complaint—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. Mr. Hayes, it is not your turn to ask questions.

The Prime Minister: If the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) has any complaint, he can take it to the appropriate authority. I should have thought that, when he had the chance to ask a question of the Prime Minister, he might have thought of a better one.

Q5. [113249] **Mr. John McFall** (Dumbarton): Now that the £28 billion inherited public deficit has been eliminated, does the Prime Minister agree that it is a cause of optimism that, this year, economically, we have decreasing unemployment, stable prices and economic growth? Does he agree that a strong economy is needed to deliver a social justice agenda, for stronger public services, and for improvements for the poor and disadvantaged in our society? At the core of it, at the next general election, is not the real moral choice between a Government who care for a social justice agenda and an Opposition who, 20 years ago, threw such an agenda overboard?

The Prime Minister: It is important not only that we have rising prosperity in the British economy, which we have, but also that that prosperity is extended to everyone. That is the difference between the two sides. It could be no more clearly demonstrated than in the new deal, a policy that has delivered literally 200,000 people in unsubsidised jobs. The Conservatives consigned those 200,000 people to the scrap heap. Under new Labour, those people have been given choice and opportunity. That is the difference in the moral values between the two parties.

Q6. [113250] **Mr. Roy Beggs** (East Antrim): Having declared my interest in livestock, I have also readily taken the advice of my friends to look after my day job. Does the Prime Minister accept reports that, compared with their Great Britain counterparts, Northern Ireland farmers have fared disproportionately badly, sustaining a 79 per cent. drop in income since 1995, compared with a 60 per cent. drop in Great Britain? Will he give us an assurance that he will urgently consider the recommendations of the Northern Ireland Select Committee on the current problems in the livestock industry, and seek Treasury support to bring relief urgently?

The Prime Minister: Farmers in Northern Ireland will be represented at the 30 March meeting that I mentioned a

moment ago. The problem that the farming industry has had, in Northern Ireland and elsewhere, has been a combination, obviously, of the strong pound, which has caused problems, plus the leftover from the BSE crisis, which has hit not only the beef sector, but other sectors. We will do what we can in the short term to help the industry, and we have already drawn down very considerable sums to do that. However, it must be tied to a long-term strategy for the future health of the industry. The farmers that I meet do not want to be dependent on subsidy. They have a good business and they are working extremely hard. Our agricultural produce is probably the finest anywhere in the world. We have to make sure that farmers live within a long-term strategy that gives them a viable future.

Madam Speaker: Thank you. Time is up.

Mr. Ken Maginnis (Fermanagh and South Tyrone): On a point of order, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: There can be no points of order until after the statement.

Selection in Education

3.30 pm

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead) (*by private notice*): To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment to clarify the Government's position on selection in education following their defeat in the House of Lords yesterday on amendment No. 138A to the Learning and Skills Bill.

The Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. David Blunkett): I am happy to repeat the Government's position on grammar schools. We have said on a number of occasions that we have no intention of changing the status of grammar schools unless parents wish it. I am happy to repeat that commitment today.

The policy that we set out in 1995 and in our manifesto in 1997 indicated that we would leave the decision on grammar schools to parents and that they would continue with the 11-plus only if parents wished it. Our position remains the same today. In that agreed policy statement, we were clear that we were not in favour of the 11-plus; nor were we in favour of tackling grammar schools without parents being involved. That was agreed by both Houses of Parliament and was affirmed in the School Standards and Framework Act 1998.

Last night, my noble Friend the Minister for Education and Employment confirmed that position and indicated that the House of Commons would seek to reverse the Lords amendment. I repeat that commitment today—we shall seek to overturn that amendment when the Learning and Skills Bill comes before the Commons.

We fully respect the vote of parents in Ripon, but we find it extraordinary that from one ballot in one grammar school, one should argue that all other ballots should be overturned and the rights of parents denied. If that were the case, a by-election would determine the results of the following general election. Had that been the case, the Conservative party would have lasted less than two years in government after 1979.

While the Opposition continue to run the debate of a bygone era, we are determined to focus our policies on the needs of all children in 24,000 schools and 4,000 secondary schools, on lifting standards and achievements for all. The Government have already significantly extended the diversity and the excellence of the education available to pupils throughout the country. There are now nearly 500 specialist schools and there will be 250 beacon schools by the end of this year. We have brought into the new voluntary-aided sector independent schools, Jewish, Muslim and Sikh schools. The excellence in cities programme, which affects London and five other major areas, has been spreading excellence for all children in all major urban centres. We have been ready to tackle failure wherever it exists. As a party, we are opposed to simply sitting on our hands, as the Opposition did when in government, rather than taking decisive action against failure.

The result of the failure is that children are denied a decent education in whichever school. That is why, through our actions, we have been able to reduce the time that it takes to turn around schools subject to special measures from 25 to 17 months during our time in office.

We can learn from the past and from existing policy, including the fresh start measures that have been taken over the past 18 months. Today, I can tell the House that we are inviting promoters from the voluntary, religious and business sectors to make proposals to take over weak or failing schools or to replace them with city academies where existing measures to overcome failure have been unsuccessful.

The promoters of academies will have to have plans for improving the education of all the pupils attending the school or schools. We will use existing legislative powers to establish the academies. They will be built and managed by partnerships involving the Government and the voluntary, Church or business sectors. Over the next year, we intend to launch at least one new academy and we will pilot others over the next few years.

We will look for imaginative proposals and new potential for such schools. The aim will always be to improve pupil performance by breaking the cycle of disadvantage and low expectation. Promoters will use different approaches. They will have to fit in with the framework of our admissions code, but they will be able to make imaginative proposals for the schools' management, governance, teaching and curriculum. We will expect at least one specialist focus and, as with other specialist schools, we will expect that focus to be shared with the wider community of schools in the area.

Yes, we will leave the decision on grammar schools to parents, but no, we will not leave failure where it exists in our communities. Unlike the Conservatives, we will take decisive action to change standards, not structures.

The confusion of Conservative Members is illustrated by the statements of their spokesperson in the Lords last night, who tabled an amendment, which did not succeed, to expand grammar schools. The hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May), in the *Times Educational Supplement* on 1 October 1999, said:

> I don't get the impression that in areas where there are no grammar schools, there is a great groundswell of opinion in favour of introducing them.

There is not a groundswell in favour of further selection. There is a groundswell in favour of raising standards for all children, whichever school they go to. When they had the chance to prove what they could do with our education system, the Conservatives failed.

Our task is to ensure that we have equality of opportunity and fulfil the potential of all individual children and schools, not with rigid uniformity but with diversity designed to bring excellence. That is why I am willing to leave the decision on existing grammar schools to parents and why I am ensuring that all our attention and our policies and focus are on raising standards for all our children.

Mrs. May: At the weekend, the Secretary of State said that

> arguments about selection are a past agenda

and that he was not "hunting grammar schools". Does he accept that those words will ring hollow with teachers and parents of children in grammar schools when they hear his intention to put their schools under threat once again?

Contrary to those statements at the weekend, the Secretary of State has confirmed that he is against the 11-plus. Does he not accept that there are many activists

campaigning against grammar schools who will see that as a sign, egging them on to continue their vendetta? What is his view on the use of any form of selection in education? Does he not accept that, by seeking to reverse the decision to abolish grammar school ballots, he is prolonging the uncertainty for the country's remaining grammar schools?

Does the Secretary of State realise that his decision will hit especially hard in areas where anti-grammar school campaigners have been active—such as in Barnet or at Latymer school in Enfield—where the grammar schools woke up this morning free from the threat of abolition but now face months of uncertainty until the Learning and Skills Bill has completed its passage through Parliament? If he is really interested in raising standards, why does not he remove the legislative death threat from the grammar schools and let them get on with the job of delivering excellence in education?

Will the Secretary of State confirm that the city academies that he announced to the press yesterday and has spoken of today will have freedom over their admissions policies and will be free to select by examination and/or interview? Will he also confirm that that would lead to further selection compared to the position in 1995? That was when he told the Labour party conference

no selection by examination or interview under a Labour Government.

At the weekend, the Secretary of State said that that statement was a joke. Does not he accept that it was not a joke then for parents, children or staff involved in grammar schools or for those who aspire to go to grammar schools, and it is not a joke today? Because the Secretary of State spins his message according to his audience, parents now know that they can have no faith in what he says. His claims at the weekend that he supported the grammar schools were simply another example of a Government who say one thing and do another.

Mr. Blunkett: I support excellence wherever it is. The idea that parents are a threat to grammar schools is an insult to parents who have the ballot. One cannot, as the hon. Lady and her colleagues did at the weekend, parade the glory of winning a ballot in Ripon, and then tell parents elsewhere that they should be denied the right to ballot. The hon. Lady cannot parade democracy when the result is in her favour and fear it when it is against her. Democracy involves winning and losing, and giving people the ability to make a choice is an essential part of democracy.

Had we taken action to remove the selective system in Ripon from the centre, there would have been an outcry demanding to know whether we had the legitimate right to second-guess the wish of parents. We did not do that; we gave parents the right to decide for themselves, as we will elsewhere.

Admissions policies will be within the code that we have laid down and on which the House voted. It is important that the action which is taken to improve and overcome failure deals with the children who are in that position. Anyone can improve a school if they reject all the pupils and then select them on an entirely different basis. That is why we have not engaged with the past agenda about structure or selection but concentrated all our efforts on raising standards.

For those whose memories stretch back as far as 1995—for journalists who have left school since then and for ageing, beloved politicians who have campaigned from that October day to this against what I said—of course "Watch my lips" was a parody. The difference is that after the level 2, level 3 and level 4 achievements in primary school, even an 11-year-old will know the difference between a parody and a joke about a speech. The parody was a parody of someone else's words, at which the conference laughed. The selection policy that was laid out in the manifesto and was contained in the document that was voted on that day was far from a joke, and that policy has been carried out faithfully for four and half years by me and my colleagues.

Mr. Gordon Marsden (Blackpool, South): Does not my right hon. Friend think that there is something very sad about the Conservatives' obsession with the grammar school ballot issue when 95 per cent. of our children are not educated in that system? Does he accept that when I speak to teachers, parents and children in Blackpool, they are concerned about issues such as the raising of standards, the success of the literacy and numeracy hours, the family learning centres and all the other initiatives that the Government have introduced, not the paranoid obsessions of the Conservatives?

Mr. Blunkett: Yes, I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. As more children reach level 4 at the age of 11, the anachronism of selection will become apparent to everybody.

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): Does the Secretary of State agree that this is a sad occasion? Even though we have had a social exclusion report, "Bridging the Gap", which said that 9 per cent. of our young people leave school with no qualifications, no hope and no future, we spend our time on an obsession with the 4.5 per cent. of our youngsters who are in grammar schools. That is the real disgrace of what is happening today. Does the Secretary of State agree that, between 1979 and 1997 under the previous Administration, there was a net loss of 96 grammar schools? In fact, roughly one grammar school out of every three or four disappeared, without arousing much protest from Conservative Members,

However, does not the right hon. Gentleman agree that there are serious flaws in the current ballot arrangements? For example, one in four of those eligible to vote in Ripon had put their children in private schools. The children in the grammar school were denied a vote. No full explanation was ever offered of what would happen when the grammar school was abolished, and the local education authority was not allowed to put in place the organisational structure needed to pick up the pieces if the grammar school had been abolished.

Is the Secretary of State prepared to do more than overturn the Lords amendment? Should not he give serious consideration to the question of ballots, and to the idea that LEAs should be responsible for all schools and admission arrangements in their areas?

Mr. Blunkett: I certainly agree with the hon. Gentleman's first point about the number of grammar schools for which selection was abolished by the previous Government. I have travelled the country over the past

[Mr. Blunkett]

three years, but, as yet, have not come across any local campaign to bring back selection where it has been abolished.

I am not prepared to reopen consideration of the ballot question. When my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Mr. Kilfoyle) attended the preparatory schools conference just before the last general election, he committed the Labour party to including those of primary age who were in the private school sector. He did so because he thought it right that parents with children in any school that had a direct feed into an area's grammar schools should be part of the total picture. It would be wrong to consider reopening that debate now. Those who are engaged in seeking the petition for a ballot should be allowed to progress under the existing rules.

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield): May I urge my right hon. Friend to continue his pursuit of a vision of diversity and excellence? He should not be distracted by a petty squabble whipped up by Conservative Members about the 4.5 per cent. of the population who are obsessed with grammar schools. Nor should he be distracted by the hypocrisy of Conservative Members, given that the previous Conservative Government got rid of one grammar school in three.

Will my right hon. Friend look carefully at diversity in the new academies and specialist schools, and ensure that they reach out to other schools in their areas? The city technology colleges were set up by the previous Government, but they failed to share their excellence and their mission, just as they failed to spread good teaching throughout their communities.

I welcome my right hon. Friend's new initiatives. He must make sure that they enthuse the rest of the teaching community and benefit every child in every school.

Mr. Blunkett: I agree with my hon. Friend. The provisions covering specialist schools specifically require that a third of the additional resources are used in work with neighbouring schools and the wider community. The original 15 technology colleges have been warmly welcomed and have sought actively to collaborate with schools and the wider community in their areas.

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): If the Ripon parents had voted in favour of reorganisation, that decision would have been irrevocable, even though—because they were not consulted—they would not have known what form the reorganisation would have taken. However, the parents voted against reorganisation. Should not that decision also be irrevocable? Is it fair to schools that they should face another five years of uncertainty, and all the difficulties that that will cause for pupils, parents and teachers—and to the very head teachers whom the Secretary of State wants to fulfil a leadership role? Should not a decision reached by ballot decide a matter once and for all?

Mr. Blunkett: I take very seriously what the right hon. Gentleman says. There will be no threat to the school in the next five years. The outcome in Ripon was decisive, and people will take note of that. However, I would take his question more seriously if, under the balloting arrangements for grant-maintained schools, there had been any provision for the next generation of parents and children to have any say in the status of those schools. The Conservative party turned parent against parent, teacher against teacher and school against school, and the parents of the generation of children about to enter the school, or whose children had an expectation of going to the school, had no chance of a say in its status.

Mr. Llew Smith (Blaenau Gwent): Does the Secretary of State accept that if all our children are to have the opportunity to develop all the skill, talent and creativity at their disposal, we need to abolish the 11-plus and grammar schools? Unless we have the courage to do that, our youngsters will still lose out, and many of them will be written off at the grand old age of 11.

Mr. Blunkett: There are parts of the country where the traditional 11-plus continues across the authority. That causes undoubted difficulties for secondary modern schools in achieving the kind of levels that they wish for their pupils. I commend them for the work that they are doing.

One thing was absolutely certain to us in October 1995. If we were elected, we would be diverted into spending all our time dealing with a very small number of schools in a very small number of areas, rather than dealing with standards and overcoming failure. That is why we took the decision to ensure that parents had the democratic right to decide and that Ministers did not spend all their time dealing with a handful of schools.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): First, I congratulate the Secretary of State on his city academies initiative. I hope that that will open the way to cities such as Manchester having a new tradition of grammar schools that will be open to all pupils, regardless of their parents' ability to pay.

Secondly, in relation to last night's amendment in the Lords, if the right hon. Gentleman insists on using the Government's Commons majority to override that decision, will he at least take another look at the ballot regulations? Will he remove the rigged ballot question that favours those who want to abolish the grammar schools, and ensure that the question refers instead to losing grammar schools? The Government should not use a rigged, fudged question to try to con parents so that they do not know what they are voting for.

Mr. Blunkett: That is a real insult to the parents in Ripon. They seemed well aware of what they were voting on. If the hon. Gentleman thinks that they were not, he is insulting their intelligence. He says that I rigged the ballot one way, while Lord Hattersley says that I rigged it the other way. Somewhere in between lies rational common sense and a reasonable way forward.

On the hon. Gentleman's first point, I very much welcome Manchester grammar school coming back into the public sector. My right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman), who represents the constituency that the school is in, has rightly pointed out that there are thousands of deprived youngsters around that school who would benefit greatly if its admissions policy enabled them to enter, rather than those living in Cheshire and beyond.

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. I remind

him that, before the election, the people of my constituency voted three times in local ballots, at the behest of Tory-controlled Buckinghamshire county council which was attempting to impose a grammar school on the people of Milton Keynes. That grammar school was rejected three times by the people of Milton Keynes, yet Buckinghamshire county council persisted, with the Conservative Government, in trying to force that school on a community that did not want it. It was this Government who finally went along with the wishes of the local people. Does not that demonstrate the Conservative party's lack of commitment when it comes to listening to parents, except when they say what it wishes them to say?

Since that grammar school proposal was finally killed, the quality of education in Milton Keynes overall has improved because teachers, the local council and the Government can concentrate on providing an excellent education for all children without the divisiveness that was forced on them by the Tory county council.

Mr. Blunkett: Yes, I agree. That shows the sheer, naked opportunism of the amendment last night in the other place and of the private notice question this afternoon.

Sir Teddy Taylor (Rochford and Southend, East): Everyone seems to be criticising the Secretary of State. Is he aware that in Southend-on-Sea we have no fear of democracy. We have a unique system, with 25 per cent. of our children going to grammar schools and getting opportunities that they would not otherwise have? We have gained the clear impression that the right hon. Gentleman has become more understanding and positive about our situation. Bearing in mind the fact that our unique 25 per cent. system produces results for all children in all areas and provides opportunity, is he willing to come to Southend to visit one of the schools? May I assure him that he would get a great welcome?

Mr. Blunkett: How could anyone refuse such a warm embrace? Certainly not my right hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards, who was in Southend last week to celebrate the education action zone. We wish those in Southend well, as we wish the top 25 per cent. well throughout the country in comprehensive schools who get five or more A to C grades.

Mr. Ben Chapman (Wirral, South): Is my right hon. Friend aware that for proof that the Government are about standards rather than structures, he need look no further than the grammar schools on the Wirral, which provide an excellent standard of education? Does he also understand that this is not a matter for exclusivity? Excellence can sit alongside excellence and does so in the Wirral in the form of, for example, Bebington and South Wirral high schools and Plessington Roman Catholic high school.

Mr. Blunkett: When my hon. Friend was elected, I was pleased to be in his constituency at Wirral grammar school for girls, particularly as it was when the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), who was then an Education Minister, was trying to break in through the gate and was being ejected by the governors and staff. I repeat what I said then: we welcome excellence in those schools and their willingness to share what they are doing with the wider community.

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): If the Secretary of State is serious about his project for city academies, will he accept my invitation to visit Guildford, where a private sector company founded by a city technology college is turning around a failing school, which our Conservative local education authority inherited from its Lib-Lab predecessor? Will he accept my regrets that it has taken him two years to understand what I have been telling him—that Conservative policies on failing and inner-city schools are the best for Guildford and for Britain?

Mr. Blunkett: I think that one has to have had different experiences to describe Guildford as the inner city, but nevertheless, as Kings Manor school progresses I will happily consider an invitation to visit it and find out what the staff, governors and non-teaching staff are doing. We are trying to tackle deep-rooted failure through diversity—it does not matter which authority, or its political complexion. However, when Surrey county council talks about failure, it must examine its own part in letting down schools such as Kings Manor. In that context, we will take action from the centre to ensure that no child is left in a failing school simply because the authority has failed to live up to expectations.

Charlotte Atkins (Staffordshire, Moorlands): Does my right hon. Friend remember the Opposition pledge for a grammar school in every town? If that were to be the case, which of the two excellent comprehensive schools in Leek would they choose to be the secondary modern—Westwood high or Leek high?

Mr. Blunkett: I do not think that I had better second-guess that proposition. Fortunately, as I am in favour of supporting both those excellent comprehensive schools, I do not have to do so.

Inherited SERPS

3.59 pm

The Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Alistair Darling): With permission, Madam Speaker, I would like to make a statement on entitlement to inherited state earnings-related pensions.

Fourteen years ago, the previous Conservative Government made a series of pensions policy changes, which they took through Parliament. One of those changes meant that, from this April, a husband or wife could inherit a maximum of one half of their spouse's SERPS entitlement.

The Department of Social Security published the correct information for about a year after the policy change. Pensions professionals also knew about the change. However, it is clear that, from early 1987 until 1996, DSS information leaflets were issued that did not refer to it. Furthermore, it is clear that wrong information was given to a number of people by some Benefits Agency staff during that period, and for some time thereafter. There is no doubt that, as a result, some people were misled, and so could have lost out.

The giving of wrong information by a Department is inexcusable. There is a clear responsibility to ensure that the information that Departments provide is accurate and complete. In this case, it was not. Furthermore, even the serious implications of giving the wrong information were not appreciated by the Department. That should never have happened. The previous Government should have sorted the matter out years ago.

Three reports are being published today. The first is the ombudsman's investigation of four sample complaints. The second is the Comptroller and Auditor General's report on what happened and on the action needed to prevent a repetition. The third is from the National Audit Office, which, at my request, also carried out a joint review, with internal audit, of the DSS management during the relevant period. Together, the reports provide a damning indictment of what happened over those years. All the reports will be available in the Library and Vote Office.

I intend to accept all the recommendations made by the NAO and the ombudsman. I can tell the House that I propose to go further in two respects. I shall, of course, respond to additional recommendations that might arise from any subsequent Public Accounts Committee or Select Committee investigation.

Before I turn to the steps I am taking to ensure that the problem does not happen again, I shall set out my proposals to provide redress for those who lost out.

First, certain groups cannot be affected in any way. They include people who would have retired before SERPS was introduced, single and divorced people; and those who have already been widowed.

Secondly, the policy change due to come into force this April will not come in until 6 October 2002—in two and half years' time. Because of that, anyone who is widowed before October 2002 will not be affected; their spouses will still be entitled to inherited SERPS under the current rules.

Thirdly, we shall also provide redress for those people who were wrongly informed and who, had they known the true position, might have made different arrangements.

Ministers have approached the matter in the following way. As a matter of principle, we believe that when someone loses out because they were given the wrong information by a Department, they are entitled to redress. In applying that principle, Ministers considered two options: first, deferral for up to 14 years; and secondly, a protected rights scheme.

We want to ensure that everyone who has been misled and has lost out gets redress. Deferral alone does not solve that problem. For example, let us consider a 65-year old today who was previously given the wrong information. If he dies, at, say, 80, his widow would still have lost out, but that is not what he was told would happen. We believe that she must have access to redress, but deferral will not provide a solution for that couple. Of course, someone who received the correct information, and spent money buying alternative arrangements, would feel aggrieved if it now turns out that he need not have done so.

However, a protected rights scheme does provide redress. None of those—including people already retired—who were misinformed, and who might have acted differently had they had the correct information need lose out. Therefore, I am setting up an inherited SERPS scheme, which will allow individuals to apply to have their current rights to inheritance of SERPS preserved. To be eligible to apply, applicants must be married; they must have paid national insurance contributions since 1978; and they must have been misinformed after 1986.

The NAO report identifies a number of criteria considered essential to the success of the scheme. I agree with those recommendations. The scheme will be well publicised. We will consult widely, and, crucially, we will not proceed with processing applications from the public until we are satisfied that they can be dealt with effectively.

Postponing implementation of the policy for everyone will also allow time for claims to the scheme to be made and processed. Because I do not consider that the Benefits Agency has the capacity to deal with that work, we will set up a separate unit specially for the purpose.

We will consult the appropriate interested bodies on the delivery of the scheme, including the ombudsman and the National Audit Office. We are also writing to a number of interested organisations today. In working out the details of the scheme, there is an obligation on the Government to ensure that we have a system to get money to those who have lost out, just as there is an obligation on individuals to tell us the truth.

I shall put before the House the full details of the inherited SERPS scheme, including what information we will require from those wishing to claim and the procedures that will be followed to scrutinise those claims. The NAO and the ombudsman will be fully involved in developing those procedures.

I am setting up a helpline for anyone who is concerned. Newspaper advertisements over the next few days will publicise its number: 0845 600 6116. It opens tomorrow at 7 am. I am also writing to all right hon. and hon. Members today, setting out our proposals.

I have set out my proposals to put matters right for those people affected, but I also want to prevent this problem from happening again. The crux of the problem was that there was no clear line of accountability in the Department for ensuring that the policy changes were

properly implemented or that information provided to the public was accurate and complete. That is symptomatic of a wider problem that I had already identified in the Department: it was not focused on the people whom it was meant to serve, who in this case were the pensioners of today and tomorrow.

I have already begun the process of change by focusing the Department on its key client groups: children, people of working age and pensioners. We need to give a better, dedicated service to pensioners. I am already setting up a modern service with better communications, so that pensioners can get information and advice on pensions and benefits available to them.

Today, I can announce the next step. I am bringing together policy and operational responsibility for pensions under a single organisation, distinct from the Benefits Agency. The new organisation will be solely focused on the needs of pensioners and pensions policy. It will deal with everything from policy development to front-line service delivery, and from changes in the law to changes in leaflets.

We also have a responsibility to provide clear information to the public. We have already tightened up the procedures for checking leaflets and guidance, but we need to do more. The public rely on Government information and they are entitled to be reassured that leaflets are accurate and comprehensive. I believe that all our leaflets should be subject to external independent audit. That should include consultation with others to ensure that all DSS leaflets are written in plain English. I have therefore asked the Social Security Advisory Committee, which is an independent statutory body, to do that.

This failure was deplorable. It should not have happened and it will cost a minimum of £2.5 billion to put right. How much more than that depends on the number of successful claims. We are deferring the change for two and a half years. We are making sure that people do not lose out because they got the wrong information. We are making root-and-branch reforms of the DSS, and, in future, DSS leaflets will be subject to external audit, so that people can rely on clear and accurate information.

The previous Conservative Government have to take responsibility for that mess, and I will take responsibility for clearing it up. I commend the statement to the House.

Mr. David Willetts (Havant): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. I begin by making it clear that I make no attempt to evade responsibility. Everyone involved must take his or her share of responsibility. We accept the ombudsman's finding that there was maladministration. It took far too long to start giving people the advice that they are entitled to expect on the changes to SERPS provisions for widows. As a result of that failure to give the right advice, many people have not made the alternative arrangements that they otherwise would have made.

We regret what happened, and much of it happened on our watch. It should not have happened. There were some attempts to give the correct advice. I have the "Benefits Information" guide of May 1995, which makes the position clear. However, there are worrying cases of people still receiving the wrong advice as late as 1999. Indeed, the National Audit Office report, which makes damning reading, expresses concern that from November 1999 to 10 January 2000 contradictory lines were taken in official correspondence and in other sources of information about the legal position after 5 April 2000.

The NAO report—

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): Oh!

Mr. Willetts: This is a very important point about the advice that was given. I want the Secretary of State to promise that somewhere, someone in some benefit office is still not giving out-of-date information to people who are asking about their SERPS position.

The NAO report goes on to discuss the 3,500 written queries to Ministers where the Department should have provided an update on the situation of those who had expressed their concerns. It states:

> We understand that this was considered but that a decision was made not to go ahead on the grounds that an announcement was expected before Christmas.

Was it the Secretary of State who decided not to respond to the 3,500 questions? Was it his colleague, the Minister of State? Was the decision made by officials? What is the Secretary of State's answer to that specific charge in the NAO report?

We accept that there is a serious problem of maladministration. However, will the Secretary of State accept—*[Interruption.]* As I have said, we very much regret that. I am asking the right hon. Gentleman to accept something in return, which is the policy that the Labour party opposed when it was in opposition and the Conservative Government's original policy, by which the Government now stand. Will he confirm that the Government have no plans to change the 50 per cent. formula for widows' entitlement to SERPS, which was introduced in the 1986 legislation? Indeed, will he confirm that they carry that formula through into the state second pension in legislation that is now before the House? Will he confirm also that the only change to widows' SERPS entitlements introduced by the Government has been a further cut in those entitlements as part of the Government's wider cuts in widows' benefits?

Many Members on both sides of the House have been approached by constituents who phoned the Department of Social Security to check on their future SERPS entitlement and were given the wrong advice. They will surely expect to be covered by the right hon. Gentleman's scheme. That is the crucial issue, but he has ducked it today. I remind him of the assurances of his ministerial colleagues during the past few months, both in another place and in this place, about compensation. In another place, the Under-Secretary of State, Baroness Hollis of Heigham, said:

> There is a very real issue of proof . . . No record is kept of telephone calls, any more than a record is normally kept of conversations at the desk. Paper records are kept for about six months. But if someone asserted that he had received that misleading advice, I suspect it may well be the case that the Government would have to prove that he had not, rather than the contrary, because there would be no evidence to counterbalance it.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 6 July 1999; Vol. 603, c. 847.]

The then Minister with responsibility for pensions, who is now the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, went even further when he said:

> If, for example, people have received advice by telephone, we shall take that into account. If what the hon. Gentleman is putting to me is that people may have received advice—for example, over

the telephone—on the basis of which they decided not to do something that they would otherwise have done, then they, too, will have a case for compensation.—[*Official Report*, 24 June 1999; Vol. 333, c. 1313.]

I ask the Secretary of State to promise not to breach the undertakings which Ministers in his Department have already given to the House and to another place. If people say that they asked for advice and they then did nothing because of the advice that they received, does the right hon. Gentleman accept that as proof enough?

Ministers have admitted that the DSS will not have proof of the advice given because its records are destroyed after six months. Therefore, the Secretary of State's scheme, the details of which we await, must not ask pensioners to do the impossible.

The statement has been delayed from before Christmas—we know from the NAO when it was originally due to be made—because the Secretary of State has been fighting an unsuccessful battle with the Treasury on precisely that point. That is why it is so important that the right hon. Gentleman sticks to the promises that were made by his colleagues.

Does not the approach set out today contrast strikingly with that adopted by Ministers to private personal pensions? Private pension providers were presumed guilty unless they could prove that they were innocent; now, the Government intend to regulate themselves far more leniently than they have regulated others.

The DSS is acquiring an unenviable record for getting things wrong in the first place, which is bad enough, and then compounding the problem by making a mess of getting things right. We ask for a simple assurance from the Secretary of State that the widows and the people planning for their pension who have followed today's announcement will not be let down because of another DSS mess.

Mr. Darling: I am sorry that the Opposition spokesman has struck such a tone, because the matter is extremely serious. Many people in this country have been caused great distress by something which, as he acknowledges, happened largely during the period for which Conservative Ministers were responsible.

The hon. Gentleman made several points that I shall answer specifically. He referred to the mis-selling of personal private pensions, but I can tell the House what that problem has in common with the inherited SERPS problem: the Tories did nothing about either. Twenty Tory Ministers, including the Leader of the Opposition and the shadow Chancellor, served in the DSS during the period in which the problems originated, but they did nothing about them. We are now sorting things out and providing to those who lost out the same measure of redress as we ask the private sector to provide to those who were mis-sold pensions.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the changes being made through the state second pension. I will happily deal with that matter at great length when the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill is reported to the House. Suffice it to say that, because of our reforms, the state second pension extends the rights that people get under SERPS.

The hon. Gentleman's central point is an important matter of concern to all hon. Members: the question of what standards are required and what the public require. Let me repeat that the guiding principle is that people who have lost out will get redress. We shall work out the details of the scheme in consultation with the NAO and the ombudsman; that scheme will be laid before the House so that all hon. Members will have an opportunity to comment on it.

We have a clear obligation to establish a system that provides redress, just as there is an obligation on individuals to tell us the truth about what happened. People will be required to give us information on how they were misled when they make a claim, and we shall, of course, ask them questions about that when we process the claim. However, if there is no documentary evidence, it will be for the Department to challenge or disprove the claim. I hope that that makes the position absolutely clear. We recognise the difficulties caused by the fact that many people will not have documentary evidence, and we are determined to be fair to the people who have lost out.

Finally, I made it clear in my statement that I accept full responsibility for anything that goes on during the course of this Government in the Department for which I am responsible. The mess was created by the Conservatives when they were in power, but I take full responsibility, down to the last word and detail of the scheme, for trying to sort out the mess for the benefit of many pensioners.

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement. Does he agree that it is important that we make a distinction between the gang opposite and their incompetence and the way in which we shall respond to their incompetence? Does he accept that, because there is such chaos in the Department that he must now set up a separate unit to deal with the issue, nobody outside will accept the word of the Department or that unit against the word of our constituents who say that they asked for advice, that they were given bad advice and that they acted accordingly?

Mr. Darling: No, I do not agree with my right hon. Friend on that point. The basic problem with the Department of Social Security over the years is that it did not have a clear enough focus on its client groups—children, people of working age and pensioners. The Benefits Agency in particular, which is the organisation under discussion, has a wide focus because of the varied needs of all the types of people who come through its doors.

In a new organisation created to deal solely with pensions and pensioners, the staff will be totally focused on pensioners' needs. As my right hon. Friend knows, we have some excellent staff in the Department of Social Security, who sometimes have to work with policies introduced by politicians which are not easy to implement. Nothing in my remarks was intended as criticism of the general quality of our staff.

We must make sure that we have a scheme in place that is workable and fair, and that provides redress for the people who lost out. We also need to make sure that the DSS and its agencies are reorganised to be better focused on the people whom they are meant to serve. That is what I am determined to see through.

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon): I am afraid that the Government's response is wholly inadequate, not because

of what it does for the people who were actively misled, but because of what it does not do for the far larger number of people who were simply never told.

Does the Secretary of State accept that the pensioners who ring the Department and write letters are atypical, and that most pensioners do not ring up and do not go to get leaflets—they just carry on. They assume that if their rights are to be slashed, someone will tell them.

Can the Secretary of State say whether he told pensioners that their rights would be slashed in good time for them to do something about it? If he and his predecessors did not do that, how can he justify going ahead with the cuts now—the Tory cuts that he would have opposed?

The delay until October 2002 is a fig leaf. Can the Secretary of State confirm that his own statement proves that the deferral to 2002 is an irrelevance to most pensioners? For a younger pensioner, as long as her husband lives for two years now, the deferral is irrelevant. Can the right hon. Gentleman confirm that people who have reached pension age, provided that their husbands survive a few more years, will face the full cut and may never have been told about it?

Given the healthy state of the national insurance fund and a £3 billion surplus of revenue over expenditure next year alone, could not the right hon. Gentleman have persuaded his former friends in the Treasury to allocate that to Britain's widows? Is it not time that the Secretary of State and his colleagues stopped being the Treasury's poodles and started standing up for pensioners?

Mr. Darling: The hon. Gentleman has an exceedingly short memory. With regard to the national insurance surplus, he spent that two debates ago. I forget what he spent it on—some other pension provision—so, if he had had his way, the national insurance surplus would have been spent already. It is not available a second time round.

I said that the hon. Gentleman had a short memory. Only yesterday, he tabled an early-day motion calling on us to provide compensation for those pensioners. We are providing a scheme for redress for pensioners. Only 24 hours later, he has forgotten that that is what he asked for.

Let us go back to first principles. The principle must be that if the Government give people the wrong information, they must face the consequences and provide them with redress. That is precisely what we are doing. We are doing so whether people are still working or have already retired. If they received the wrong information, they will all be eligible to receive redress.

The hon. Gentleman must remember that there are many people now working and many who have retired who did know about the changes and made alternative provision, for which they had to pay. He would say that they need not have spent all that money. If he is saying that he is in favour of deferral, he must bear in mind the fact that I said in my statement—the hon. Gentleman nods. That is today's policy, so I shall deal with it. Now he shakes his head. That policy lasted five seconds.

Through deferral, the problem is merely postponed. That means that the widow of a man who dies in 10 or 14 years would still lose out. Unlike the Liberals, who do not have to face any of these problems—it is all pretty theoretical, as far as they are concerned—we are facing up to a real problem that we inherited. Far too many people received the wrong advice, and we are giving them redress.

The hon. Gentleman asked why we had deferred the policy to 2002. That is to ensure that we can get the scheme under way and provide redress for the pensioners about whom we should all be concerned.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Order. I should now like short questions. Several hon. Members want to ask questions, and I want to safeguard the business of the House for the rest of the day. I should also like brisk answers from the Secretary of State.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): If we were considering local government maladministration, a surcharge would have been imposed on those responsible for the problems. Those responsible for the problems that we are considering are getting away scot free.

I welcome the postponement in implementing the policy to 2002. Putting aside the way in which the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) made his point, would it be possible for the policy to be reconsidered? Many of us believe that the Tories were wrong to do what they did in the first place.

Mr. Darling: The policy change was announced 14 years ago. It is not possible to turn the clock back to the world of 1986. Many people have made provision in good faith as a result of the law since 1986. If any Government turn the clock back, they will create a new group of losers. Most people would find that unacceptable.

Sir Norman Fowler (Sutton Coldfield): I thank the Secretary of State for his courtesy in informing me about the statement in advance. I have had the opportunity of reading only the Parliamentary Commissioner's report. I support the Secretary of State's statement, and I take responsibility for my period of office from 1981–87.

On the parliamentary process, will the Secretary of State confirm that the changes were set out in a Government White Paper in December 1985, that they were outlined in a statement that I made to the House on 16 December 1985, and that they were fully debated in lengthy Committee proceedings in 1986? In accepting responsibility, will the Secretary of State confirm that the parliamentary process was openly followed?

Will the Secretary of State also confirm that, while the Government are deferring the change that I proposed in 1986, they are continuing with the basic policy that I introduced then? My hon. Friend the Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) pressed the Secretary of State to confirm that.

Mr. Darling: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his first comment. I wrote to all my predecessors, including the former Prime Minister, who was also a Minister in the former Department of Health and Social Security, because I believed that it was right to do so.

The right hon. Gentleman would not have seen the National Audit Office report or the ombudsman's report because their publication is not a matter for me. The reports are rightly made directly to the House.

[Mr. Darling]

There was a lot of publicity about the changes when they were made. The first leaflet that the Department of Health and Social Security produced was right. I tried to explain to the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) that many people knew about the changes and planned accordingly. Paragraph 1.12 of the National Audit Office report states that pension professionals, who advise people, also knew about the changes. That is our problem. Some people knew about them and acted accordingly, but others who picked up leaflets published by the DHSS and the BA did not know.

I am addressing the fundamental problem in the Department that was not tackled during the Conservative years: making sure that the correct information is issued and that our staff know the policy.

Mr. Terry Rooney (Bradford, North): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. Given NIRS2 and other problems, are there any more ticking time bombs, which cost billions of pounds, left by the previous Administration? How long does my right hon. Friend envisage that it will take to settle claims once they are made? I welcome the new pensions department. Can we at last get rid of the question on the income support claim form for pensioners that asks whether they are pregnant?

Mr. Darling: On the latter point, I certainly hope so. Indeed, the steps that I have announced this afternoon whereby all DSS leaflets will be externally audited will improve matters. There are two reasons for that: they need to be right and they need to be readable. I suppose that it is conceivable—to coin a phrase—that a pensioner could be pregnant, but probably unlikely. However, I shall certainly consider that.

My hon. Friend asks whether there are any more ticking time bombs. When the problem came to light—I was first made aware of it at the end of 1998—I asked the Department to read all the leaflets that are now being produced to ensure that they are accurate and up to date. I am as satisfied as I can be that that is the case, but I do not suppose that I am any different from any of my predecessors as Secretary of State for Social Security in that I spend rather more of my day than I would like dealing with time bombs that may not be ticking, but look like they might tick in future.

Mr. Willetts: Stakeholders.

Mr. Darling: I was thinking of some of the other problems that we inherited—NIRS2, the benefit payment card and the mis-selling of SERPS. I have a long list of messes to clear up as a result of the Tory Government.

Mr. David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden): I welcome the Secretary of State's deferment of the change in the SERPS scheme and his undertaking to enact the National Audit Office recommendations and any subsequent Public Accounts Committee recommendations, but he will be aware that the ombudsman and the NAO expressed reservations in their reports about the second stage—the protected rights compensation. Can he answer three points? Can he confirm that the costing for his proposed scheme assumes only one third take-up among SERPS holders, which is an important measure? Will he give an undertaking that not only will the scheme be laid before the House, but that we shall have a debate on the Floor of the House—not in a Statutory Instrument Committee—after the ombudsman has commented on it? After the scheme has been operating for a year, but before the two and a half years are up, can we have a review, perhaps by the NAO? We must look to see whether justice has been done to all those people who have been misled over the years.

Mr. Darling: The right hon. Gentleman raises three points. The NAO and the ombudsman properly said that the redress provided is a matter for Parliament, not them. They have both said that they would like to comment on it and I made it very clear in my statement that I want them to do so. I shall listen to any recommendations that they want to make because it is important to take on board what the Department's external auditor—which is what the NAO is—and the ombudsman have to say.

On costings, I said earlier that the minimum cost is £2.5 billion. It could be more, depending on the number of people who tell us that they were misled. We shall not know the position for some time, but my guess is that, during the year, especially with the helpline opening, we shall get a better feel for exactly how many people were misled. The scheme has to be confirmed by the House so that it is debatable. That is a matter for the usual channels.

Finally, we would clearly want to review the scheme continuously. I shall reflect on what the right hon. Gentleman has said and I am not giving him any undertakings. I hope that we are all trying to do the best that we can for those people, and Members—Front-Bench or otherwise—should try to make sure that we have a scheme that works and put right what went very wrong for a large number of people.

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): The Secretary of State will be aware that the NAO report states:

even though the absence was noted—

that is the absence of the information—

when a draft was circulated within the then Department of Health and Social Security

in 1987, when a leaflet was being prepared. Obviously, that statement was made on the basis of evidence. What is the evidence that that absence was noted? Does it take the form of a memo? If so, from and to whom was it sent? Does it take the form of minutes of meeting? If so, who was present at that meeting, who drafted the minutes and to whom were they circulated? It is fundamental that we find out who knew that the draft leaflet did not contain the appropriate information.

Mr. Darling: Perhaps I should explain to the House and my hon. Friend that the NAO was asked to consider these matters because it can read all relevant papers, including those given to Ministers in the previous Government, and the advice. He will know that, by convention and quite rightly, I cannot see the advice given to Conservative Ministers, but the NAO and the ombudsman did see it. However, they do not say that such and such information was in a minute sent to the Secretary of State.

I do not know where the information came from, because the NAO produced the report, but I can say that the NAO and the ombudsman reached similar

conclusions. They did not believe that any deliberate attempt had been made to stop the information from being made public; they concluded that, because of the byzantine structure of the Department at the time—we are now putting that right—too many people had an interest in preparing the leaflets, and no one person was there to take responsibility for ensuring that they were correct and up to date.

I am now remedying the problem. Three weeks ago, I announced major management changes in the Department to streamline it and make it more effective, and today I am going a step further with the new pensions organisation. As for who wrote what and when, we asked the NAO to investigate because it is external to the Department and acts without fear or favour. I am happy to accept its recommendations, but I cannot see all the papers that may have been circulated in 1987.

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove): I, too, thank the Secretary of State for making it clear which pensioners will have preserved rights. Many of my constituents are concerned about the matter.

It is obvious that those who have written documentary evidence that they were misled about their entitlement will have a bang-to-rights case. However, is the right hon. Gentleman saying that merely stating that they had discussed the matter with a benefits officer, or had discussed it on the telephone—presumably the DSS could not disprove that, as it does not keep records for very long—would entitle my constituents to preserved rights?

Mr. Darling: As I said a moment ago, we shall present to the House proposals giving details of the procedures that people will have to follow, and the scrutiny that the Department will conduct to ensure that claims are well founded. All that will be clearly set out, so that people will know exactly where they stand.

Mr. Mark Todd (South Derbyshire): The scheme that my right hon. Friend has described may well deal with those who have been misinformed, but I am less sure that it deals with those who have not been informed of the changes made in 1986. At any point, were those who might have been affected posted clear information by the previous Government explaining the implications of the change?

Mr. Darling: I do not think that any Government have written routinely to all citizens telling them about changes they have made to any law, let alone this one. When my hon. Friend thinks about it, he will realise that that would be a massive undertaking.

Let me return my hon. Friend to first principles. In the Government or the private sector, when someone does something as a result of which someone else loses out because they could not make arrangements, redress must be provided, and that is what we are doing. We are providing redress on the ground that some people went to the Department and were given the wrong information. That is the principle, but my hon. Friend suggests that we should go beyond it. I am saying that, when the Government give wrong information, they clearly have a responsibility to provide redress.

Mr. David Rendel (Newbury): May I draw the Secretary of State's attention to two comments in the NAO report—which I am happy to have helped to instigate by requesting such material from the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee? First, the figures for the preserved rights scheme suggest that, even if only a third of claims are met, the total cost may be £8.2 billion. The report says that that implies a great risk, in that, if all the claims are met, the cost could be more than £20 billion.

Secondly—this, surely, is a critical aspect of the preserved rights scheme—how will the Secretary of State ensure that everyone who might be eligible applies? Will he write to everyone who might be eligible, just as he demanded that people should be written to when the private pension mis-selling scandal arose? Will he also confirm that there will be no time limit? Will someone who is widowed in 2005, and has not at that point had the rights preserved, still have a chance to do so?

Mr. Darling: If the hon. Gentleman has read the reports from the NAO and the ombudsman, he will have seen that both ask that we spend some time doing a number of things to ensure that the scheme works. One is to discuss the publicity with them. The Government are determined to ensure that the scheme gets the widest possible publicity, including advertising. We will consult the NAO, the ombudsman and other interested bodies to find out what else we need to do.

The second thing comes back to a familiar theme. It is important to remember what the principle is: where the Department has given the wrong information, we provide people with redress. It follows, therefore, that we need to do everything that we possibly can to draw that to the public's attention.

Mr. Keith Darvill (Upminster): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement. It is clearly another mess created by the Conservative party, which the Government are sorting out.

May I ask one or two practical questions? Do those constituents of ours who have already written to complain need to submit a formal application? Is there a time by which those applications need to be submitted? Indeed, will there be a limitation period for submitting applications for claims by constituents generally?

Mr. Darling: About 3,000 people have written to the Department or contacted it. We have a note of their names and addresses. We will write to them in the next few days. It will be made clear to them and, indeed, to the population at large that, once the scheme is ready to receive claims, there will be further advertising telling people where to write, what information to include and how we intend to process it. Included in that will be the dates by which we want to get the applications in.

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): Can the Secretary of State confirm that those people who did not know that the Government had made changes in 1986 and who at no point during the past 14 years knew that the changes had been made will effectively be excluded from the preserved rights scheme? By dint of not knowing, they did not pick up the telephone, look at the leaflet or write a letter. Many people outside the House will find it hard to understand why they are being excluded from his scheme.

Mr. Darling: If the hon. Gentleman thinks about it, the logic of what he has said is that, if anyone anywhere were

[Mr. Darling]

to say that they did not know about any change in the law, they could say to the Government, "You had better scrap the law." Even for the Liberal Democrats, that is pushing matters. We are saying that, where people were given the wrong information and, because of that, lost the opportunity to do something differently, we will provide them with redress. That is the right thing to do in principle. It is what we would require of the private sector. It is the right thing for the public sector to do.

Angela Smith (Basildon): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement, which obviously concentrated on the practical and financial aspects, but does he accept that, when people retire, or make provision for their spouse after their death, one of the things that they need most in life is security and certainty? The catalogue of Conservative horrors has created greater fear, worry and uncertainty for many people. Many who come to our surgeries are very upset and worried. Does he share my frustration that, although we have heard the Conservative party say that it accepts responsibility, it has at no stage said sorry?

Mr. Darling: On the latter point, that is something that most of us are well used to, so perhaps we are not as sensitive to it as others, but it is better to concentrate on what we will do to put matters right. I make just two points. First, we are making changes to SERPS and the state second pension that will mean that people who are on low pay—say, about £6,000 a year—will get about £54 a week through SERPS, instead of £14 a week, which is a big change.

Secondly, shortly—over the next few years—we will be able to provide everyone in this country with an annual pension statement, which will tell them exactly how much they are retiring on. That will be one of the single biggest ways in which to give people reassurance. They will be able to see in black and white what they are getting from the state, from their occupational or stakeholder pension. If any future Government come along who are like the last lot over there and start slashing things, privatising basic state pensions, or whatever the latest policy is, people will know about it very soon.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): Am I right in thinking that the right hon. Gentleman plans to do something about the sins of commission but not the sins of omission? He will do something about actively misleading, but not about failing to give proper advice. Will he now give an answer to the hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Miss Kirkbride)? Is it correct that that assertion, in the absence of any contrary proof from the Department, will be sufficient evidence for the scheme? What will be the position of someone who can prove that they were misled but second hand—in other words not directly from the Department but from some intermediary who has taken advice from the Department?

Mr. Darling: I have just told the House that the details of the scheme will be worked out after consultation and will come before the House. I have also made it clear that all claims will be scrutinised. As I said in my reply to the hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts), the Department will have to challenge any information. If people think that they have a claim, they should come forward and we will look at it and scrutinise it in the normal way.

Mr. John Cryer (Hornchurch): Does my right hon. Friend accept that, however outrageous the behaviour of the Conservative party when in government, it was entirely consistent with the culture of fraud and mis-selling in the pensions industry which I believe that the Conservatives deliberately engineered during the 1980s? Will my right hon. Friend consider that there will be some problems with pensioners proving that they were misinformed or misled? My right hon. Friend mentioned the guidelines. How soon will they be produced? What definitive criteria will they contain and to what extent will it be a question of individual social security officers adjudicating on individual cases?

Mr. Darling: On the latter point, I want to avoid creating a further problem by producing guidelines that are so general that we get into a host of other problems. The rules and regulations under which the inherited SERPS schemes will work will be as strict as possible so that all our staff know how they operate. I repeat that we want to discuss the guidelines with the NAO and the ombudsman, as they have requested, so that we get them right. Also, we are writing today to many organisations, such as Help the Aged and Age Concern, to ensure that the scheme is operated fairly so that we can put right the problems that so many people face. We will make every effort to ensure that the guidelines are right. Getting them right is rather more important than trying to rush forward with rules and regulations that do not work. I want to take time to get it right because that is precisely what the ombudsman and the NAO are asking us to do.

Kali Mountford (Colne Valley): Does my right hon. Friend agree that acceptance and regret do not add up to sorry?

My right hon. Friend's announcement about the new organisation for pensioners is a significant move. Will that include all work for pensioners such as state pensions, SERPS, second state pensions and minimum income guarantee? How soon will it be set up and will it be able to liaise with other Departments and organisations such as the national health service and local government so that benefits work together properly for pensioners and so that security and service really start to mean something?

Mr. Darling: The pensions organisation will be responsible for pensions and pensions policy operations. It will also be responsible for the benefits that go to older people, including the minimum income guarantee. I will have something further to say about that in the not too distant future.

Mr. Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar): Does the Secretary of State realise that his reply to the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) is inconsistent with his earlier statement that he will accept the ombudsman's report in full? He told the hon. Gentleman that applications would be challenged in the normal way. On page 13 of the ombudsman's report, paragraph 32 says that the normal burden of proof should be changed round and that the burden of proof must

rest with the Department. Let me be clear: if an uncorroborated telephone call is made, will it be up to the Department to prove that it did not take place?

Mr. Darling: Let me repeat what I said when I answered the hon. Member for Havant and other hon. Members. We will set out in the regulations what information is required and what questions people will be asked when the claim is processed. I said that, where there is no documentary evidence, it will be for the Department to challenge or disprove the claim.

Points of Order

4.50 pm

Mr. Ken Maginnis (Fermanagh and South Tyrone): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. The matter relates to the hon. Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara) and me. I am conscious that you are jealous of the protocol maintaining that, when a matter is referred to you for consideration, an hon. Member should not discuss that matter either in the media or outside the House until you have delivered your ruling on it. I assume that the same courtesy and protocol should be applied in the matter of findings by the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards.

I should like to draw your attention to the fact that I was never notified that the hon. Member for Hull, North would be raising an issue—in relation to my interests, which were registered—to cast doubts on my integrity, and that he would do so publicly, in the media, prior to an adjudication. I should add that the Commissioner found that I had no case to answer.

May I also ask you to adjudicate on whether an hon. Member who asks—at a cost of more than £52,000, and in a comparatively short period—153 parliamentary questions, which amount to a denigrating campaign against the Royal Ulster Constabulary, is infringing the privileges of the House?

Mr. Kevin McNamara (Hull, North): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. I listened with interest to what the hon. Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone (Mr. Maginnis) had to say. It was interesting that the questions to which he referred—which were tabled to the Ministry of Defence—revealed that rifles used on Bloody Sunday were destroyed when they were under the control of the Ministry of Defence. I should have thought that they would have been vital evidence in the Bloody Sunday inquiry.

It would also have revealed that the Police Federation of Northern Ireland used a Government website to state its opposition to the Patten committee report. That matter concerns the spending of money.

It would also have revealed that the questions that I was tabling concerned police action, or lack of action, in the killing of Mr. Hamill—

Madam Speaker: Order. May I inquire how this information concerns me? I am prepared to deal with the original point of order, but how does that information concern me?

Mr. McNamara: The point that I am making is that the hon. Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone tabled a question that cast aspersions on the cost of the questions that I had tabled and on my activities as a Member of Parliament, in tabling those questions to check the Executive. I thought that that was in my power. That is my response to the hon. Gentleman's latter point.

As for the hon. Gentleman's first point, he did not inform me that he would table a question about me. It is common practice for hon. Members, particularly Opposition Members, to say that they have referred matters to the Registrar. I should have thought that such referrals are a matter of public knowledge.

[Mr. McNamara].

I am still in correspondence with the Registrar, on the basis of her reply. I think that it is proper, under the rules of the House, to say that registered interests must be declared when a question is tabled, and that a man who receives from the Police Federation of Northern Ireland money, to the extent of £4,000 annually, to help him in his research, and who is a former B special—

Madam Speaker: Order. I think that I should now give a ruling on the matter.

Let me deal, first, with the latter point, raised by the hon. Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara), on the number of parliamentary questions that are tabled by hon. Members. I cannot give a ruling on that matter. I have no responsibility whatsoever to restrict such questions. I am sure, however, that hon. Members will use their discretion in the matter, knowing full well the cost of such questions.

I am very pleased that the hon. Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone (Mr. Maginnis) raised the original point of order, as it dealt with a matter that has troubled me very considerably. There is nothing in the rules of the House that prevent an hon. Member who complains to the Parliamentary Commissioner about a colleague from informing the media. However, I have to say that I regard such actions as discourteous, unjust and unfair. In particular, it can give credence to accusations that subsequently turn out to be unfounded, by which time the damage has been done and cannot be repaired.

I hope very much that all right hon. and hon. Members in all parts of the House will pay attention to the ruling that I have just given, which is a very considered one.

Mr. McNamara: In view of what you have just said, Madam Speaker, all my future actions will follow your ruling, although Opposition Members have not always done so.

Madam Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who is a good and long-standing Member of the House.

Angela Smith (Basildon): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. During Prime Minister's Question Time, you and other right hon. and hon. Members heard someone heckling my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister in unparliamentary language and you seemed concerned when no hon. Member admitted using that unparliamentary language. Have you taken the matter further, and do you intend to ask the Leader of the Opposition to take it up with his Back Benchers and report to you who is responsible?

Mr. Stephen Pound (Ealing, North): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. As many of us were disgusted and rather saddened by the use of the unparliamentary and inaccurate epithet that was hurled from the Opposition Benches, have you received any representation on the subject from the hon. and gallant Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan)?

Madam Speaker: Let me reply to the hon. Member for Basildon (Angela Smith). I shall not take the course of action that she suggests and ask the Leader of the Opposition to take up the matter. This afternoon, the Opposition Benches were particularly crowded and noisy, and I clearly heard an unparliamentary word. I did not know which hon. Member uttered that word. Had I done so, I would have immediately asked him to withdraw it. When I attempted to find the hon. Member responsible, as the House saw, no one admitted using that word. However, I have noted what the hon. Lady said and I have some indication of the area—I shall leave it at that—from which the word was uttered.

BILL PRESENTED

Criminal Justice and Court Services

Mr. Secretary Straw, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr. Secretary Prescott, Mr. Secretary Cook, Mr. Secretary Blunkett, Jane Kennedy and Mr. Paul Boateng, presented a Bill to establish a National Probation Service for England and Wales and a Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service; to make further provision for the protection of children; to make further provision about dealing with persons suspected of, charged with or convicted of offences; to amend the law relating to access to information held under Part III of the Road Traffic Act 1988; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed [Bill 91].

Broadcasting of Recorded Music in Public Places

4.57 pm

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to prohibit the broadcasting of recorded music in certain public places.

First, as a good Conservative, may I say how much I dislike regulations in principle. However, we spend our time in this place regulating human behaviour in one way or another—as we have just seen. I dislike imposing my prejudices, my preferences and my will on other people, but I also dislike them imposing theirs on me. However, politics is not just the art of the possible; it is the art of getting the balance right. It is precisely because I believe that in this case the balance has swung too far in the wrong direction that I seek to introduce this Bill.

The Bill is not anti-music. Nor is it anti-recorded music, though it is certainly pro-live music. I am passionate about music. Music has always been of huge importance to me, both as a listener and as a singer. I have been privileged to sing with some of the great choirs of this country including the Academy of St. Martin in the Fields and the Monteverdi Choir. I must have sung in hundreds of live performances with them and made a fair number of recordings.

My taste may not be your taste, Madam Speaker, and I would not wish to impose it on you. Music is an intensely personal thing. Much as I love Mozart and Handel, there are moments when I crave Ella Fitzgerald, Queen or, just maybe, All Saints.

Piped music, muzak or canned music is increasingly disliked and despised. All music is devalued if it is treated as acoustic wallpaper. People mind if they are trapped with no chance of escape from someone else's choice of music on a plane, in a bus, on a train, in a restaurant or pub, during otherwise decent television programmes, while held in a queue on a telephone or while sitting worrying in a doctor's surgery or a hospital.

The Bill would exclude the playing of piped music in a very limited number of public places. Places such as pubs, shops, restaurants and hotels would not be affected, because there is a choice—we can always walk away—but the Bill would exclude the playing of piped music in the public parts of hospitals, doctors' surgeries, public swimming pools, bus and railway stations, airports and public highways.

Perhaps the ultimate affront is the playing of piped music in the streets, as is done in many French towns, especially on market days. There have been one or two attempts to do that here. I notice that, for example, Harvey Nichols in Knightsbridge jingles into the street at Christmas time. Busking is entirely different, although I draw the line at amplified busking in the street.

People might be surprised to hear that muzak is invading our hospitals. I have seen anguished letters from patients in Grimsby hospital; Nelson hospital, Merton; St. Richard's hospital, Chichester; and the Royal eye hospital in Kingston.

A patient from Barnstead had day surgery on his hand last year. In the ward where he was prepared a radio was playing loudly. He was delayed in going in for the operation because his blood pressure was too high. He said that he would be far calmer if the wretched machine were turned off. The nurse explained that she did not like the radio herself, but that she was not responsible for it. He complained to the hospital trust, but got the usual big organisation blather saying that most people liked it.

What are the facts? Gatwick airport carried out a survey of travellers' attitudes to piped music. Of the 68,077 who replied, 43 per cent. said that they disliked piped music, 34 per cent. said that they liked it and 23 per cent. had no opinion. Gatwick airport has since discontinued playing such music.

A November 1998 NOP poll that showed that 34 per cent. disliked piped music and only 30 per cent. liked it. Among those aged over 45, a majority hated it, and, even among young people, one in five disliked it. In January 1997, a poll for *The Sunday Times* asked people what single thing they most detested about modern life. Third in the list of most hated things was piped music. The first two were other forms of noise.

All unwanted noise raises the blood pressure and depresses the immune system. A survey of blood donors at Nottingham University medical school in January 1995 found that playing piped music made blood donors more nervous before giving blood and more depressed afterwards. The NOP poll of 1998 found that among deaf people—nearly one in five of the population have hearing problems—86 per cent. disliked piped music. The Royal National Institute for Deaf People now backs a campaign against piped music.

Blind people, who rely on background sounds to help to find their way around, find piped music upsetting. Musicians of all sorts loathe piped music because they find acoustic wallpaper offensive. Of course, piped music does not come free. It is an extra that has to be paid for with every meal, drink, book, ticket and piece of clothing. Incidentally, there is no objective evidence that customers in shops either like piped music or spend more because of it. In fact, Tesco, the John Lewis Partnership—including Waitrose—Sainsbury's and the Wetherspoon pub chain have all decided not to install it.

A guide to muzak-free pubs, "The Quiet Pint", has been produced by the campaign for freedom from piped music, known as Pipedown, which has its headquarters in my constituency. It is supported by a galaxy of stars. The patrons of Pipedown include Alfred Brendel, Tom Conti, Antonia Fraser, Stephen Fry, Lesley Garrett, John Humphrys, Julian Lloyd Webber, Joanna Lumley, Peter Maxwell Davies, George Melly, Spike Milligan, Simon Rattle, Prunella Scales and many others.

Piped music is pollution: a pollution from which there is no escape. The Chartered Institute of Environmental Health reports that noise complaints rose from 200 per million of population in 1971 to 5,051 per million in 1997. The commonest type of offending noise is not pneumatic drills, cars or aircraft but music.

Noise remains the least recognised form of pollution. Sufferers from noise pollution—the victims—are inherently quiet people who do not like protesting. Of course, the pollution leaves no mark the moment that it stops, except on the shattered nerves and health of its victims. Unwanted noise raises blood pressure and cholesterol levels, increases muscle tension and induces hormone secretion among sufferers. It can also intensify hearing problems and may trigger attacks of tinnitus among vulnerable people.

[Mr. Robert Key]

The dangers of passive or involuntary listening are only beginning to enter the realm of public awareness. Noise pollution is often seen as unpleasant but inevitable. It is not. The Noise Act 1996 increased environmental health officers' powers to deal with noise, but 94 per cent. of local authorities have decided not to implement the Act, and only 10 authorities have done so.

Of course, I would be far happier if my Bill were not necessary. Is it too much to hope that, by my raising the issue in this way, people will think twice before installing muzak? An old proverb, thought to be of oriental origin, has it that speech is silver but silence is golden. There is a Hebrew equivalent—if a word be worth one shekel, silence is worth two. That is all true. But as Spike Milligan put it, "Tranquillity lubricates the soul, piped music destroys it."

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. Robert Key, Mr. Michael Fabricant, Mr. Gerald Kaufman, Mr. Paul Keetch, Miss Anne McIntosh, Mr. Michael Mates, Mrs. Gillian Shephard and Dr. Jenny Tonge.

BROADCASTING OF RECORDED MUSIC IN PUBLIC PLACES

Mr. Robert Key accordingly presented a Bill to prohibit the broadcasting of recorded music in certain public places: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 7 April, and to be printed [Bill 90].

Orders of the Day

CONSOLIDATED FUND (No. 2) BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Question, That the Bill be now read a Second time, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 56 (Consolidated Fund Bills), and agreed to.*

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

Question, That the Bill be read the Third time, *put forthwith and agreed to.*

Bill accordingly read the Third time, and passed.

Terrorism Bill

As amended in the Standing Committee, considered.

New Clause 1

FINANCIAL INFORMATION

'. Schedule *[Financial information]* (financial information) shall have effect.'.—*[Mr. Charles Clarke.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

5.7 pm

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): With this, it will be convenient to discuss the following: Government amendment No. 39.

Government new schedule—*Financial Information.*

Mr. Clarke: The purpose of the new clause is to provide a new power to investigate terrorist finance. New schedule 1 sets out how, and new clause 1 switches on the new schedule. Amendment No. 39 adds the two order-making powers in the new schedule to the list of orders under the Bill to be made by affirmative resolution.

A similar power is already in use in Northern Ireland for proceeds of crime investigations. It is a very powerful tool and has proved its effectiveness. A so-called general bank circular, once authorised by a circuit judge or equivalent, allows the police to write to financial institutions asking them whether they hold accounts in particular names. The financial institution only has to say whether it holds accounts in the names given. If a person under investigation has, for example, a very large number of accounts, or accounts with a very large number of banks, that in itself can be a useful lead.

The general bank circular does not enable the police to look at the details of what is in the account. If the police wanted to do that, they would need to seek a production order under schedule 5. The new schedule is modelled on certain powers of financial investigators under schedule 2 to the Proceeds of Crime (Northern Ireland) Order 1996. However, rather than proceeds of crime, the new schedule is for investigating terrorist finance: that can, of course, include money intended for use in terrorism, not just proceeds of acts of terrorism, as in the definition of "terrorist property" in clause 14. That is why the new power is needed in Northern Ireland, as well as in Great Britain. In Northern Ireland, it will complement the existing power in the proceeds of crime order. In Great Britain, it will be new.

We have consulted the banking and financial services industry on the proposal. The banks were generally supportive and supplied helpful information on compliance costs and other practical issues, for which I put on record the Government's thanks. We have taken their views into account in developing the proposal. Further details of the consultation are in the regulatory impact assessment document, which has been placed in the Library.

Where an order is made under paragraph (1), a constable can require financial institutions, as defined in the Bill, to provide customer information, which is also defined in the Bill.

The new schedule contains two order-making powers, to change the definitions of the terms "financial institutions" and "customer information" for the purposes of the schedule. Amendment No. 39 ensures that those orders are subject to the affirmative procedure of the House.

Mr. David Lidington (Aylesbury): Throughout the proceedings on the Bill, the Opposition have joined the Government in stressing the importance of having on the statute book measures that are comprehensive and effective when it comes to dealing with terrorist finances. Therefore, we support the new measures that the Minister has just described.

The safeguards built into the new clause and the new schedule are sufficient to enable us to accept that the liberties of the people and institutions affected by the proposals have been protected, and the Minister has set out how the affirmative resolution procedure will be utilised. A police officer of senior rank seeking an order under the arrangements will have to get the permission of a senior judge in order to proceed.

As the Government made clear in the regulatory impact assessment, the proposed annual review of the legislation will give the Government and Parliament the opportunity to hear representations from the financial services industry about the practical effect of the measure. There will as a result be an opportunity for the House to consider possible changes to the law in the light of those representations.

I have one minor criticism. The consultation period lasted from 2 September to 15 October last year, and it is a pity that the Government could not present detailed conclusions about this aspect of the Bill a little earlier. Although the financial institutions were consulted earlier, and their views taken into account last autumn, they have not yet had the opportunity to consider the Government's final proposals at length, or to consult members of the various representative organisations.

However, the new clause and new schedule are welcome and have our support.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): We consider the power proposed in the new clause and new schedule to be reasonable. I have two specific questions for the Minister about the results of the consultation, which he has been kind enough to allow us to see.

First, has the Minister received an opinion from the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, the statutory body established to consider such matters? Secondly, a review of emergency legislation is reported to the House every year. Has the Minister received advice from any independent, Government-appointed person—Lord Lloyd, for example—who has undertaken such a review and can give authority to the proposal?

In general, we are happy with the new clause and new schedule. As the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) said, adjustments may have to made in the light of experience, but it is appropriate that this necessary power should be in this Bill.

Mr. Charles Clarke: I welcome the support from the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties, and I accept the gentle and gracefully phrased rebuke from the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington).

[Mr. Charles Clarke]

I can tell the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) that our principal consultation was held with members of the financial, business and banking community. They would be most affected by our proposals, which we modified to some extent to meet the points that they raised. For example, we included the provision in paragraph (4)(b), which states that an institution can offer the defence that it has not complied with the requirement because to do so "was not reasonably practicable". That defence could be employed if an enormous number of names were involved, for example, or if there were other practical problems of a similar nature. The costs involved will not be disproportionate, as the regulatory impact assessment makes clear. We estimate that compliance costs to the banking and financial services industries will total about £900,000.

I cannot give the hon. Gentleman the detailed comments of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, Lord Lloyd or anyone else, because our focus was on the banking community. However, I will write to him on that, as he requests.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause read a Second time, and added to the Bill.

New Clause 2

DETENTION OF TERRORISTS

'. Schedule [*Detention of Terrorists*] to this Act shall have effect with respect to the detention of terrorists and persons suspected of being terrorists.'.—*[Mr. MacKay.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

5.15 pm

Mr. Andrew MacKay (Bracknell): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to discuss new schedule 2:—*'Detention of Terrorists—*

Advisers

1. The Secretary of State shall for the purposes of this Schedule appoint such number of Advisers as he may determine to advise him on matters concerning the detention and release of terrorists.

2. An Adviser shall be a person who holds or has held judicial office in any part of the United Kingdom or who is—

(a) a person who has a ten year general qualification within the meaning of section 71 of the Courts and Legal Services Act 1990; or

(b) an advocate or solicitor in Scotland of at least ten years' standing; or

(c) a member of the Bar of Northern Ireland or solicitor of the Supreme Court of Northern Ireland of at least ten years' standing.

3.—(1) An Adviser shall hold and vacate his office in accordance with the terms of his appointment and shall, on ceasing to hold office, be eligible for reappointment.

(2) An Adviser may at any time by notice in writing to the Secretary of State resign his office.

(3) The Secretary of State may pay to the Advisers such remuneration and allowances as he may determine.

Interim custody orders

4.—(1) Where it appears to the Secretary of State that there are grounds for suspecting that a person has been concerned—

(a) in the commission or attempted commission of any act of terrorism, or

(b) in directing, organising or training persons for the purpose of terrorism,

the Secretary of State may make an interim custody order for the temporary detention of that person.

(2) An interim custody order shall be signed by the Secretary of State or a Minister of State or Under Secretary of State.

5.—(1) The Secretary of State may, at any time before the expiry of the period of fourteen days following the date of an interim custody order, refer the case to an Adviser and, unless the case is so referred, the order shall cease to have effect at the expiry of that period.

(2) A reference to an Adviser under this paragraph shall be by notice in writing signed on behalf of the Secretary of State and a copy of the notice shall be sent to the person detained.

Reference to an Adviser

6.—(1) As soon as possible after a case is referred to an Adviser under paragraph 5, the person detained shall be served with a statement in writing as to the nature of the terrorist activities of which he is suspected.

(2) A person detained may, within seven days following the date on which he receives any such statement as is mentioned in sub-paragraph (1), send to the Secretary of State—

(a) written representations concerning his case; and

(b) a written request that he be seen personally by an Adviser,

and the Secretary of State shall send a copy of such representations or request to the Adviser concerned.

(3) The Secretary of State may pay any reasonable costs or expenses incurred by a person detained in obtaining legal advice or legal assistance in connection with the preparation of any representations he may make concerning his case.

7.—(1) Where the case of a person detained under an interim custody order is referred to an Adviser, he shall consider it and report to the Secretary of State whether or not in his opinion—

(a) the person detained has been concerned in terrorist activities; and

(b) the detention of that person is necessary for the protection of the public.

(2) In considering any case referred to him an Adviser shall have regard to any information (whether oral or in writing) which is made available to, or obtained by, him and to any representations (whether oral or in writing) made by the persons detained.

(3) No person shall be present during the consideration of an Adviser of the case of any person referred to him, except—

(a) any person who for the time being is being seen by the Adviser;

(b) any assistant to the Adviser; and

(c) any person who is present in the interests of security.

(4) The Secretary of State may, at the request of an Adviser pay any reasonable expenses incurred by any person in connection with a reference to the Adviser.

Detention orders

8.—(1) After receiving a report made by an Adviser under paragraph 7(1), the Secretary of State shall consider the case of the person to whom it relates and, if he is satisfied—

(a) that the person has been concerned in the commission or attempted commission of any act of terrorism, or in directing, organising or training persons for the purposes of terrorism, and

(b) that the detention of that person is necessary for the protection of the public,

the Secretary of State may make a detention order for the detention of that person.

(2) If, on considering any case under sub-paragraph (1), the Secretary of State is not satisfied as mentioned in that sub-paragraph, he shall direct the release of the person concerned.

(3) Subject to sub-paragraphs (4) and (5), where—

(a) a person is detained under an interim custody order; and

(b) a detention order is not made in respect of that person within the period of seven weeks following the date of the interim custody order,

the interim custody order shall cease to have effect.

(4) The Secretary of State may, where a person is required to be detained under an interim custody order, give a direction in writing extending the period of seven weeks mentioned in sub-paragraph (3) (or that period as extended under this sub-paragraph) for a further period of one week if it is stated in the direction that the report of the Adviser in relation to that person's case has not been received before the sixth day immediately preceding the day on which the interim custody order would, but for the direction, cease to have effect.

(5) Not more than three directions under sub-paragraph (4) shall be given in respect of any one interim custody order.

(6) A detention order shall be signed by the Secretary of State, and a direction under sub-paragraph (4) shall be signed by the Secretary of State or a Minister of State or Under Secretary of State.

Supplemental

9.—(1) The Secretary of State may at any time refer the case of a person detained under a detention order to an Adviser and, if so requested in writing in accordance with sub-paragraph (2) by a person so detained, shall do so within fourteen days beginning with the receipt of the request.

(2) A person detained under a detention order shall not be entitled to make a request for the purposes of sub-paragraph (1)—

(a) before the expiry of the period of one year beginning with the date of the detention order; or

(b) within a period of six months from the date of the last notification under sub-paragraph (5) below.

(3) On any reference under this paragraph, an Adviser shall consider the case and report to the Secretary of State whether or not the person's continued detention is necessary for the protection of the public.

(4) Paragraphs 6(3) and 7(2) to (4) shall apply for the purposes of a reference under this paragraph as they apply for the purposes of a reference under paragraph 5.

(5) Where a case is referred to an Adviser in consequence of a request made in accordance with this paragraph, the Secretary of State shall, after receiving the report of the Adviser, reconsider the case of the person to whom it relates and, if he decides not to release that person, shall notify him of his decision.

(6) A notification under sub-paragraph (5) shall be by notice in writing and signed by the Secretary of State.

10.—(1) The Secretary of State may, as respects a person detained under an interim custody order—

(a) direct his discharge unconditionally; or

(b) direct his release (whether or not subject to conditions) for a specified period.

(2) The Secretary of State may, as respects a person detained under a detention order—

(a) direct his discharge unconditionally; or

(b) direct his release subject to conditions or for a specified period, or both.

(3) The Secretary of State may recall to detention a person released under sub-paragraph (1)(b) or (2)(b) and a person so recalled may be detained under the original interim custody or detention order, as the case may be.

(4) Where a person is released under sub-paragraph (1)(b), any period during which he is not in detention shall be left out of account for the purposes of paragraphs 5(1), 6(2), and 8(3).

11.—(1) A person required to be detained under an interim custody order or a detention order may be detained in a prison or in some other place approved for the purposes of this paragraph by the Secretary of State.

(2) A person for the time being having custody of a person required to be detained as aforesaid shall have all the powers, authorities, protection and privileges of a constable.

(3) Subject to any directions of the Secretary of State, a person required to be detained as aforesaid shall be treated as nearly as be as if he were a prisoner detained in a prison on remand and any power of temporary removal for judicial, medical or other purposes shall apply accordingly.

(4) A person required to be detained as aforesaid who is unlawfully at large may be arrested without warrant by any constable or any member of Her Majesty's forces on duty.

12. Where a person required to be detained under an interim custody order is unlawfully at large, the interim custody order shall not cease to have effect under paragraphs 5 or 8 while he remains at large; and, upon his being taken again into custody, those paragraphs shall have effect as if the date of the interim custody order were that of his being taken again into custody.

13. Any person who—

(a) being detained under an interim custody order or detention order, escapes;

(b) rescues any person detained as aforesaid, or assists a person so detained in escaping or attempting to escape;

(c) fails to return to detention at the expiry of a period for which he was released under paragraph 10(1)(b) or (2)(b); or

(d) knowingly harbours any person required to be detained under an interim custody order or detention order, or gives him any assistance with intent to prevent, hinder or interfere with his being taken into custody,

is guilty of an offence and liable on conviction on indictment to imprisonment for a term not exceeding five years or a fine or both.

14.—(1) Any document purporting to be an order, notice or direction made or given by the Secretary of State for the purposes of this Schedule and to be signed in accordance with this Schedule shall be received in evidence and shall, until the contrary is proved, be deemed to be duly made or given and signed.

(2) Prima facie evidence of any such order, notice or direction may, in any legal proceedings, be given by the production of a document bearing a certificate purporting to be signed by or on behalf of the Secretary of State stating that the document is a true copy of the order, notice or direction; and the certificate shall be received in evidence, and shall, until the contrary is proved, be deemed to be duly made and signed.

15. The Secretary of State may make such payments to persons released or about to be released from detention under this Schedule as he may, with the consent of the Treasury, determine.'.

Mr. MacKay: The new schedule and the new clause would, quite simply, return internment to the statute book. Let me say immediately that I do not necessarily see the need for internment at present, and I do not necessarily advocate internment at any particular time. However, I sleep easier in my bed, and I think that the people of Northern Ireland and the Republic do as well, knowing that internment is readily available for the Secretary of State at any given time.

The House will be aware that from this Dispatch Box, I, and others, rigorously opposed the Government's decision, nearly two years ago, to remove internment from the statute book. We thought that that was ill advised, ill conceived and unnecessary. We have since noted that our

[Mr. MacKay]

friends in the Republic have not followed suit. Internment remains on the statute book in the Republic of Ireland, and rightly so.

Let me briefly explain why I believe that it is in the interests of all law-abiding people that the Secretary of State, in extremis, has recourse to internment. I know that the Minister of State, who will be replying to this debate, will agree with me that we all hope and pray that the process moves forward. It is going through a difficult period at present, but we have had choppy water before, and we will have it again. We hope that in the not-too-distant future there will be a lasting peace in Northern Ireland. We hope that that lasting peace will include the paramilitaries—both so-called loyalist and republican—and their political parties, which signed up to the Belfast agreement, renouncing violence for good, decommissioning all their illegally held arms and explosives and playing their full role in the democratic process: that would include being Members of the Assembly and, in the case of Sinn Fein, resuming their ministerial positions in the Executive.

If those happy circumstances were to occur, history dictates that almost certainly splinter groups, both so-called loyalist and republican, would break away and say that the cause had been let down. They would not join the process and would not give up violence.

In the last few weeks, by and large, the guns have been silent and there is no certain evidence that those who signed up to the Belfast agreement have resumed serious violence. We know that there have been beatings, mutilations and kneecappings, but let us leave those to one side for the moment. There have not been other terrorist acts by those who signed the Belfast agreement. *[Interruption.]* I am very happy to give way to the hon. Member for Belfast, East (Mr. Robinson), but I would prefer that he did not intervene from a sedentary position.

Mr. Peter Robinson (Belfast, East): Has the right hon. Gentleman acquitted the Ulster Volunteer Force of the two murders in Armagh?

Mr. MacKay: That will be for the security forces and the judiciary to decide. No one has been convicted of those crimes yet.

I am saying that the guns of the mainstream paramilitaries are silent at present. Long may that continue, but the splinter groups are very active. As we know, and as the Minister and his security advisers will confirm, Continuity IRA was responsible for a bomb that could have killed many people in Irvinestown only a few weeks ago. Mercifully, attempts on two separate Army barracks, at Ballykelly and at Dungannon, were thwarted. If the security forces had not been vigilant, there could have been a huge loss of life.

If the process reaches a happy and logical conclusion, those splinter groups will become even more aggressive and violent. They will be capable of destabilising the process. In those circumstances, the Secretary of State and his opposite number south of the border may well think it wise to reintroduce internment temporarily. I will not second-guess whether they would be wise to do so, because we will not know the exact circumstances until they happen. I am convinced that that rather blunt instrument, which did not work in the 1970s but worked extremely well in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s and in the 1957-62 campaign, and was used effectively by both the De Valera and the Lemass Governments in the south, is worth having in any Government's armoury.

The previous Secretary of State foolishly said, "Don't worry. I will reintroduce legislation on internment if necessary." That was one of the more preposterous suggestions that she made at the Dispatch Box. Clearly, internment works only if there is an element of surprise. If internment is on the statute book, it can be used at extremely short notice. Primary legislation—even emergency legislation—takes time, as you are aware Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Finally, the men of violence would certainly sleep less easily at night if they believed that internment was possible. They would be constantly on the run, under threat and destabilised and surely hon. Members on both sides of the House would want that. Therefore, I urge the House to make good the Government's mistake in taking internment off the statute book and to return through this legislation by supporting the new clause and the new schedule.

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): I apologise for missing the first couple of minutes of the speech of the right hon. Member for Bracknell (Mr. MacKay). I spoke with the right hon. Gentleman before the debate and had a clear picture of what he intended to do, and I understand his reasoning.

The Liberal Democrats take a different view on the issue. While I understand the right hon. Gentleman's logic and his argument that Ireland still has internment, which is correct, the act of using it in Northern Ireland in the 1970s was tremendously provocative. If we reintroduce it now, we will be sending all the wrong signals to Northern Ireland, especially to the nationalist communities.

The right hon. Gentleman correctly said that surprise was an important element in the use of internment. However, to reintroduce it to the Northern Ireland environment at this time would be a very active step and might be detrimental because of the tensions that it would generate in the nationalist communities. More tensions are the last thing that we need while the Assembly is suspended. As the right hon. Gentleman noted, internment did not work in the 1970s. In our judgment, it would not work in the current Northern Ireland environment—even if there were to be a further deterioration of the situation.

The right hon. Gentleman prefaced his comments with many "ifs". It is true that if those circumstances occurred, the security situation would be serious. At that point, we should have to consider what to do about it. However, my fear is that if we were to introduce internment, it would prompt some of those "ifs" into reality. It would provide some of the hardliners in paramilitary organisations with the opportunity to point at Westminster and claim that there had been a breakdown in faith through the reintroduction of practices that were almost universally condemned as detrimental to the Northern Ireland political environment in the 1970s.

Although Ireland retains internment on its statutes that does not provide an accurate comparison because in Northern Ireland, internment means something different. Furthermore, it is regarded as a clumsy and fairly ineffective means of state—or Westminster—control over nationalists.

I hope that the matter will not go to a vote, but if there were to be a vote on the new clause, my party and I will be obliged to support the Government.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): In supporting the new clause tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Mr. MacKay), I should like to go back to those halcyon days when I was young, and when one or two Ministers had less grey hair. In 1972, Operation Motorman brought about the introduction of internment in Northern Ireland. Many of my friends were involved in that operation, although I was still a callow youth at university. When I was in Belfast in 1975, internment was still much on people's minds, because it had ended only within the previous nine months.

In 1972, internment was not a success—apart, perhaps, from the fact that it provoked support for the terrorists. However, that does not condemn it for ever as a legitimate weapon in the anti-terrorist armoury. On my subsequent visits to Northern Ireland, I found that most people involved in security and in keeping the peace said that it was useful to keep internment in the back locker. Terrorists are frightened of the idea of internment; key people can be locked up for a long time with no justification, thereby ruining terrorist operations.

Internment failed in 1972 because the intelligence that led to the arrest of many people—almost wholly from the nationalist community—was hopeless and out of date. That was what stirred up so many members of the nationalist community and provoked support for the IRA. However, that does not mean that a time could not come when one had sufficient intelligence to nobble top terrorists and remove them from the streets, while one carried out some political activity or sorted out security arrangements.

Despite that lack of success in 1972, the subsequent 28 years have shown us that great strides have been made in the improvement of intelligence and in the knowledge of who, and where, the terrorists are. In 1972, the personnel of Operation Motorman were knocking at the doors of houses that had been boarded up for months or years. They arrested the wrong people; they had no intelligence—frequently, they did not even have photographs. However, things are now much better.

The hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik) said that the reintroduction of internment would send the wrong messages. However, removing it from the statute book—as we did in 1997, against Conservative opposition—sent entirely the wrong message: that there might never be another occasion on which one might want to lock up dangerous and unpleasant terrorists who had been killing people and against whom one could not, perhaps, obtain a conviction in court.

Mr. Öpik: All the legal powers still exist—they are open to the police and the security forces—to apprehend individuals who are regarded as a threat.

Mr. Robathan: Yes, indeed. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will correct me if I am wrong, but I think that we can hold people, only in Northern Ireland, for 72 hours.

Mr. Öpik *indicated assent.*

Mr. Robathan: The hon. Gentleman confirms my belief.

5.30 pm

Mr. Kevin McNamara (Hull, North): Under this legislation, one could possibly hold them for a week.

Mr. Robathan: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his knowledge of the situation.

Both hon. Gentlemen who intervened will know that hardened terrorists shrug their shoulders at the prospect of being held for a week by the RUC. They eat rather better than they might have done otherwise; they have a break from alcohol and perhaps from cigarettes. They do not get roughed up, as is occasionally alleged, and these days they have a pretty easy time, although I accept that perhaps that was not always true in the past.

My point is that one day we may need to be able to arrest known terrorists and keep them in detention indefinitely. The message that we are sending by not having internment is that we do not think that there can ever be circumstances in which we will have to return to such action. That sends all the wrong messages to the terrorists, who believe that, yet again, the British Government are giving up more of their powers and their ability to deal with terrorism. Terrorism does not affect most of us in this room, but it affects deeply and permanently the few people who live in Northern Ireland, and it changes the pattern of life of all the communities in Northern Ireland.

Internment was one weapon against terrorists, and I very much regret that it is not on the statute book. I applaud the initiative of my right hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell in trying to bring back internment in the Bill, because it would be welcomed by all those who want peace and an end to the troubles in Northern Ireland.

Mr. Peter Robinson: I had not intended to speak on the new clause, but lest my earlier intervention be interpreted as a desire to pick a fight with the mover of the new clause, the right hon. Member for Bracknell (Mr. MacKay), I want to clarify my position. I entirely support the new clause, and I do so as someone who opposed internment in 1972 and whose party also did so.

I intervened because I am concerned that we often allow terrorist organisations—which now operate a no claim, no blame policy—literally to get away with murder. Everybody knows that the Provisional IRA has been guilty of a number of killings, including the killing of Charles Bennett. However, if we apply the same criteria as the right hon. Gentleman did, we cannot make that assumption because no one has been charged, even though all the intelligence available to the RUC leads it to that conclusion.

The dogs in the street know full well that the Provisional IRA killed Charles Bennett and a number of others. Equally, they know that the UVF killed the three Quinn children and that UVF members were involved in the killing of two young men in County Armagh. We should not attempt to protect terrorist organisations from the condemnation of the community by allowing them to hide behind the policy of not claiming their acts and therefore getting away with them.

We should take account of the written answers on 17 February to several questions seeking information

[Mr. Peter Robinson]

about the number of terrorist actions since the so-called "peace process" began. The first question asked:

how many people . . . have been (a) shot and (b) mutilated by terrorists since the Good Friday Agreement.—[*Official Report*, 17 February 2000; Vol. 344, c. 617W.]

The Minister of State replied that 155 had received gunshot wounds, 456 had been injured in explosions and 1,811 had been injured under the heading "Other", giving a total of 2,422.

When asked specifically about attacks on the Royal Ulster Constabulary, the Minister said that there had been 23 attacks by firearms, 45 by explosives, 2,348 by missiles including petrol bombs, six assaults and 279 attacks under the heading "Other". That is a total of 2,901 attacks on the RUC. On the question of the number of casualties as a result of paramilitary-style attacks, the Minister said that republicans were responsible for 46 shootings and 88 assaults, and so-called loyalists were responsible for 79 shootings and 172 assaults.

All that shows that there have been thousands of incidents, which in any other community would be recognised as terrorist related, at a time when we are told that there is a peace process. No one in the House should fool themselves into believing that those incidents are entirely the result of dissident groups. Some of them may well be due to dissidents, but the majority of those attacks are taking place under the direction of the main paramilitary organisations, which have declared a ceasefire.

The Opposition are right to table the new clause, and it deserves support. As I said, I opposed internment in 1972. It was ham-fisted and it was carried out at a time when insufficient up-to-date information and intelligence were available to the security forces. I agree entirely with the policy of selective internment, of which the hon. Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone (Mr. Maginnis) and I have approved for many years. Under that policy, the security forces can, on the basis of firm information available to them, pick up ringleaders if there is no other course through the normal rule of law. In those circumstances, internment is justifiable.

The new clause does not even ask for the introduction of internment, so there should be no alarm in the Chamber. It asks only that the instrument be available if the circumstances merit its use. It deserves the support of the House. Internment would be a weapon available to the security forces, should circumstances dictate its need. However, as an instrument it is useless unless there is a will on the part of the Government to take whatever measures are necessary against terrorist organisations.

I do not find that the Government have the will to deal with terrorist organisations. That will can be demonstrated by introducing measures under the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act 1998. Under that Act, the Government could take action today, because it places on the Secretary of State a duty to stop any further prison releases if an organisation is not co-operating fully with the decommissioning body. General de Chastelain has indicated in writing to the Government that the IRA is not co-operating with the decommissioning body, and, on that basis, the Secretary of State should be taking action. He should consider other criteria that, on their own, allow him to take action.

The Government refuse to do that because their policy is to appease terrorism, do a deal with terrorism and reach agreements with terrorism. That is the weakness in their whole policy. When dealing with terrorism, there is only one policy that works—zero tolerance. The Government do not adopt that policy; their policy is one of appeasement.

Mr. McNamara: I had not intended to speak in the debate, but I find the last words of the hon. Member for Belfast, East (Mr. Robinson) appalling. I do not believe that appeasement is the policy of Her Majesty's Government, any more than I believe that it was the policy of the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke) or his successors, as they sought to bring the terrible tragedy of Northern Ireland to a peaceful conclusion. I therefore rebut the hon. Gentleman's remarks.

I think that I am the only Member now in the Chamber who was a Member of this place when internment was introduced. I am certain that I am the only Member now in the Chamber who voted against it after we had an opportunity to debate it. I voted against it along with about 100 Labour colleagues, because we felt that internment was wrong.

We are fighting people who refuse to accept the concept of the rule of law. We shall not defeat them by ourselves doing away with the rule of law; we shall defeat them by bringing people before properly constituted courts and putting them on trial, where their guilt or innocence will be proved.

I find it strange that people forget the debacle of 1971, when internment was introduced. They seem to go back to the halcyon days of 1956 to 1962, or some others. They do not accept, or they refuse to accept, that the campaigns in those days were very different from what was happening in Northern Ireland in 1968, after the attempts to crush the civil rights movement by the then Stormont Government.

The earlier campaigns were inspired mainly by those outside the Six Counties of Northern Ireland. The present campaign, whether we like it or not, is mainly indigenous to Northern Ireland. That makes it very different. When the then Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath), accepted the advice of Brian Faulkner that internment was the answer, that led to the tragedy of it becoming an enormous recruiting office for the Provisional IRA. Secondly, it was an anti-internment march that led to Bloody Sunday. Thirdly, there was the handling of the hunger strikers. Those three classic mistakes between them managed to inspire the Provisional IRA, and enabled it to draw recruits into its camps at times when it was not having the support of very many people in the community of the north of Ireland.

I am surprised that the right hon. Member for Bracknell (Mr. MacKay) tabled the new clause. The circumstances as described by him and by the hon. Member for Belfast, East are similar to many circumstances that existed in Northern Ireland after the Government of the now Lord Callaghan phased out internment. With the legislation on the statute book, they could have reintroduced internment at any time if they had wanted to. They chose not to do so because they realised the psychological impact that internment would have if it were reintroduced in Northern Ireland.

It is easy to say that the dogs in the street know who is guilty. The problem is that we have not yet been able to translate the barking of the dogs into English, so we do not have the evidence. If everybody knows, why do we not have the evidence? Once we start a process of doing things on the basis of suspicion and saying, "This is our evidence", we are on a slippery slope right along the line. Moreover, we would have to derogate from the European convention on human rights, which I understood the Opposition supported when its provisions came before the House, especially article 5—the right to a fair trial and that there should be lawful arrest and detention only. That means that a person is arrested or detained so as to bring him before a properly constituted court, as is laid down in article 5.

We would be in real difficulty if, for even one moment, we were to consider doing what the Opposition suggest that we do. We are right to congratulate the Government on keeping the undertaking that they gave the Opposition that we would repeal the internment provisions and would not put them back on the statute book.

5.45 pm

Mr. Richard Shepherd (Aldridge-Brownhills): I do not think that any Conservative Member has worked harder than my right hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Mr. MacKay) to try to advance what the Government are trying to do in Northern Ireland, and to offer support for that. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Belfast, East (Mr. Robinson) for reminding us of some of the circumstances in Northern Ireland, but the truest words were spoken by the hon. Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara).

Most of us in England—or in this country, England, Scotland and Wales—grapple even to begin to understand the dilemma, the hatreds and the causes that have brought Northern Ireland to the centre of everyone's attention. Yet the truth is that we are a land of liberty. This is a great democracy and we struggle and thrash around in the face of irreconcilables. What does one do when people do not accept the authority of the words or views of a state's citizenry? It is a true dilemma that seems to be more immediate and more urgent across the surface of the globe.

The history of detaining people by internment has, by and large, been very unhappy throughout the globe. If anything, it concentrates the passions on both sides. I follow the argument of the hon. Member for Hull, North, which is rare, when he says that the process of law and the rule of law is what we are about.

Mandating and detention depend on knowledge, but knowledge without the standards of proof that would bring people to court. These processes are bedevilled by the informer, and sometimes the paid informer. As often as not, they provide the opportunity for settling old scores. Over the years, we have seen that awful injustices have been done when informers have been employed. The intent is to pacify and remove from society a danger and a threat. However, let us reflect on our own circumstances, because our appreciation of liberty and the rule of law must derive from how we would react if we were placed in circumstances where, through malignancy, people gave false information about ourselves. The circumstances could be construed in such a way as to give, however fleeting it may subsequently turn out to be, some appearance of reality. Would we not be enraged if our son, our brother or a member of our family were incarcerated by that means?

By and large, decent people take the judgments of the courts and the authority of Government to indicate that the individual so identified is naturally, rightly and effectively detained. I am extremely unhappy about setting aside—

Mr. Ken Maginnis (Fermanagh and South Tyrone): Is the hon. Gentleman not arguing from the specific to the general? Is it not the case that people have been convicted through the courts, at times—rarely, thankfully—on the basis of false information? Is it any more likely that those who are leading terrorist organisations would be wrongly interned if internment were introduced? Where is the difference between the protection of society through internment and through the courts when it comes to that odd case of wrong information?

Mr. Shepherd: My fear about the processes of detention used under provisions such as the new clause and the new schedule is that the powers granted are general. A court specifically identifies through due process the case for the prosecution and the case for the defence; by and large, society has trusted that process for a long time. The history of detention is unsatisfactory, unhappy and, in some cases, tragic.

Mr. Harold Best (Leeds, North-West): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the potential for internment opens up the possibility of a presumption of guilt being made? Does he also agree that those who are interned might be regarded by some as either guilty or very guilty, and that that would have more to do with the weight of evidence rather than the quality of evidence involved? Does not justice stand on the quality of evidence?

Mr. Shepherd: I notice that, in the new schedule, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell allows for the intermediation of an adviser. If I understand it correctly, the adviser is to play an almost judicial role. If so, my argument is that the due processes of court should be used.

Mr. McNamara: Is not the whole point of the adviser to ensure that the person interned does not see the evidence against him, and so is not in a position to refute it? Even though representations may be made to the adviser, he sees only one side of the case, and the burden of evidence is not seen by the person who is interned. On the question of errors made in court, does the hon. Gentleman agree that, if such errors are made—many have been—society recognises that and, to the extent that it can, compensates those who have been wrongly accused and later had their conviction quashed?

Mr. Shepherd: Yes, but internment is generally used against a whole class of people—it does not result from individual assessment and weighing of evidence. From that usage emerge great tensions and hatreds—one need only look at the example of the Boer war to realise that. Across the world, we have seen the containment of sections of populations and witnessed how the hatred and revulsion already present in the community so detained is clarified by the act of general internment.

I do not imagine that the powers in the new clause and new schedule will be used, but it is important that we understand that the history of internment can give us no

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confidence in its utility—nor can the need to rely on informers, sometimes paid informers, or the appreciation that the information given is often provided for reasons other than to serve justice. The truth in life and democracy is that, even if a man or woman has been convicted in the past of an act that we loathe, that does not mean that that individual is guilty of that with which he or she is subsequently charged, independent of the original act.

Mr. Robathan: My hon. Friend makes a powerful and typically high-principled argument, but it is important that we understand the circumstances in which internment might be used. I have said before that I do not like internment, but I understand from newspaper reports—I do not necessarily believe them—that the head of the Garda in the Republic has said that he knows perfectly well who the Omagh bombers are, but that he cannot convict them. Yes, the process uses informers, which is unpleasant, and of course some people will be wrongly interned, as they have been in the past; but when one sees the reasons why witnesses will not stand up and testify against murderers such as the Omagh bombers—those reasons being intimidation and threats of murder and maiming—one has to face up to the fact that internment, preferably not used, might be a weapon worth having.

Mr. Shepherd: I do not doubt that the head of the Garda is a sincere and honourable man, but I have heard of many people who have asserted that they know all manner of things—they know the guilt of others. However, our process is not about individuals knowing the guilt; we require a higher standard than that.

That is the crisis the House always faces when it deals with terrorism. We fear terrorism because it strikes at the very existence of Parliament, and in our fear we reach for instruments. However, we do so in advance of events. The powers in the new clause and new schedule are meant to be reserve powers, to be used if necessary. My point is that that is not necessarily appropriate or helpful. The notion that we can take the power to confine people based on the assertion, "I know it's them", is an extraordinarily draconian response. In a democracy such as ours, such a power should be invoked only in time of war, when the very survival of the nation is at stake.

I defer to those hon. Members who represent the people of Northern Ireland. Mine must appear a highly abstract argument to those who are confident that they know who the bad ones are and who face them every day. Perhaps they are right, but the House should require a higher standard than that. That is why I am extremely cautious about the new clause and the new schedule.

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr. Adam Ingram): I start by saying that if my voice gives up in the middle of my speech it is because I have been suffering from flu for the past few days; I may have to pause now and then to take a sip of water.

Because of its history, internment is an extremely sensitive issue on both sides of the Irish border, as our short debate has shown. I have listened carefully to the debate, which touched on some profound issues.

I shall deal first with the points raised by the hon. Member for Belfast, East (Mr. Robinson), who repeatedly makes the charge that the Government are involved in a form of appeasement of terrorism. I can rebut that by pointing out that there are 15,000 British soldiers and more than 12,000 RUC officers in Northern Ireland. They are not involved in appeasement. They are acting according to the wishes of the Government and to protect human rights and human life.

When the hon. Gentleman makes such allegations against the Government, he never offers anything positive. A genuine democrat would set out the way forward, but the hon. Gentleman never does that. All he does is spray around allegations, label people as criminals without evidence, and charge the Government with appeasement. There is no foundation for his allegations and I ask him to reflect on those brave men and women who serve in Northern Ireland in the armed forces and the RUC. They do not see themselves as appeasers—*[Interruption.]* As usual, the hon. Gentleman shouts from a sedentary position: I shall give way if he wishes to intervene.

Mr. Peter Robinson: Is the Minister referring to the "chinless wonders" mentioned by the Secretary of State?

Mr. Ingram: We are trying to have a serious debate, but the hon. Gentleman is dragging it down. I do not know whether he was present at today's Question Time when my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State expressed his regret about having made that comment. I believe he described it as a gaffe; well, everyone makes gaffes. The hon. Member for Belfast, East makes gaffes whenever he makes his allegations against the Government and against the brave men and women who serve in Northern Ireland.

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Mr. Robathan: This is a serious point. I do not necessarily accuse the Government of appeasement, although I am pretty worried about it from time to time. The Minister prays in aid the brave men and women serving in the RUC and the Army. I can tell him that in the autumn, when the present Secretary of State took over, three battalions of Foot Guards out of five were serving in Northern Ireland under the jurisdiction of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. I can tell him categorically that they are fed up with what he said at the weekend. It may have been a flippant gaffe, but it reveals a lot about the Secretary of State's thinking.

Similarly, enforcing all the Patten commission's recommendations is undermining the morale of the brave men and women of the RUC—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is straying a little too far from the new clause.

Mr. Ingram: I am prepared to defend the Secretary of State in all that he is trying to do to achieve peace. All his energy is directed at trying to bring about a new future for Northern Ireland. He has apologised for that comment, and we should let the matter rest. To return to it constantly serves no useful purpose.

If it were in order, I would also be prepared to debate the Patten report and the way in which that was envisaged in the Good Friday agreement, which I thought the hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan) supported. As usual, he wants to cherry pick. He supports the bits with which he agrees, and rejects the rest. We cannot move forward on that basis.

The Government acknowledge that different views on internment are held by people inside and outside the House who have Northern Ireland's best interests at heart. However, the Government stand firmly by their position, because we have yet to be convinced that internment represents an effective policy in Northern Ireland at the beginning of the 21st century.

Right hon. and hon. Members are aware that executive detention powers were removed from the statute book during the passage of the Northern Ireland (Emergency Provisions) Act 1998. The issue was further debated that same year in the context of the Criminal Justice (Terrorism and Conspiracy) Act 1998, which was passed in the wake of the Omagh bomb.

It may be helpful if I refer to the Prime Minister's words on that occasion. He said:

> We had to make a judgment about internment. We have made it clear that we do not rule anything out for ever, but my judgment is that the history of internment as it operates here and in the Irish Republic is different.
>
> All the way through, we are trying to take carefully targeted measures that allow us to deal with these terrorist groups, but do not provoke such a backlash in other parts of the community that they undermine the fight that we are trying to secure. I agree that that is a matter of judgment, but that is our judgment; although, as I say, we rule nothing out for the future, should things be necessary.—[*Official Report*, 2 September 1998; Vol. 317, c. 697-8.]

The case presented by the right hon. Member for Bracknell (Mr. MacKay) for the Opposition was predicated on the possibility or even the probability of failure. He argued, as he has done previously, that the peace process, which he genuinely wants to reach a successful conclusion, could none the less have certain ramifications, such as the fragmentation of the paramilitary groups.

If we send out a message that fragmentation is inevitable and that it will be on such a scale that we will have to take such punitive action in the future, the right hon. Gentleman is implying the failure, not the success, of the peace process. *[Interruption.]* The right hon. Gentleman says from a sedentary position that he is being realistic, but we must deal with the implications.

Under the Good Friday agreement, the Government are committed to moving towards normal security arrangements in Northern Ireland as quickly as possible, consistent with the level of threat. That includes the removal of Northern Ireland specific temporary legislative powers as soon as it is safe to do so. Obviously, the reintroduction of internment, even if its immediate use were not advocated, would be a negative step in the context of that objective.

I believe that those who advocate the return of the powers proposed in the new clause have a responsibility to be frank and tell the House when they would propose using them and against whom. There are a number of profound questions which it is right to pose at this point. How would those who argue for the return of internment guarantee that those powers would be used against the right people? On what basis would people be rounded up?

The hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd) spoke about malicious information. People could be rounded up wrongly and interned as a consequence. Intelligence is not necessarily perfect. We cannot always guarantee that the information available to us would stand up in a court of law. We may have well-founded suspicions and a good knowledge base, but they may not stand examination in court.

The hon. Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone (Mr. Maginnis) pointed out that the law courts could get it wrong. If the courts get it wrong, it is more likely that, as the hon. Member for Aldridge–Brownhills commented, executive detention provisions would get it wrong as well.

Let us consider that possibility. What would be the consequences for civil order in Northern Ireland? Everyone admits that the last time internment was used, it failed. Now some argue that it would be more likely to succeed because of better intelligence. However, they forget about the reaction within the community from which people would be swept up.

Those who argue for the reintroduction of internment must tell us what would be the consequences for civil order and the implications for the peace process, which would be in the process of evolution. In advocating that approach, the right hon. Member for Bracknell must deal with those questions.

There is a further fundamental question. Do those who advocate internment genuinely believe that its introduction at this stage will help the peace process? Will it assist the republican and loyalist communities if those who advocate a peaceful progress towards democracy and away from violence now acknowledge the possibility of failure somewhere down the line? The right hon. Gentleman must answer that. Does he believe that the new clause would help the peace process or deflect us from it? He did not deal with that in his contribution.

It is important that we legislate on the basis of a reasoned assessment of the security situation. We are not in the business, and Government should never be in the business, of legislating for hypothetical situations. Unless there is a clear-cut case for taking the powers suggested, to do so would be a backward step now or in the foreseeable future.

Mr. Maginnis: The Minister has access to enough high-grade intelligence to know that the Real IRA was responsible for the Omagh bomb, and that a man called McKevitt is the leader of the Real IRA. How will the Minister deal with the terrorist organisation that McKevitt is putting together, before that organisation, made up of cells, is so big and so efficient that the whole of society is once again in jeopardy? He must address that question, side by side with the question of internment.

Mr. Ingram: The hon. Gentleman is right about the level of intelligence that I receive. With the exception of the Minister of State, Home Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), I receive the highest level of intelligence in the House. However, I will not confirm or deny that intelligence, or confirm the allegations of the hon. Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone at the Dispatch Box, because I could thereby jeopardise any possible court action against individuals, or even groups if decisions on proscription or specification were made relative to other legislation.

We have to tackle the new growth in dissident groups. That is a matter for the security forces, not politicians, although we have to deal with it in some forms. However, the criminal justice system—including the police, the prosecution authorities and the courts—ultimately and rightly brings people to justice, not politicians.

I have tried to present counter-arguments. We had the same debate when the Government removed executive detention, known as internment, and on subsequent

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occasions. We have returned to the subject because the right hon. Member for Bracknell and the Conservative party want to have the debate without proving conclusively that they would achieve the objective that I share with the right hon. Gentleman—a peaceful future in Northern Ireland. The right hon. Gentleman must make his case on that point: will the new clause help or hinder the process? We conclude that it could hinder the process. The right hon. Gentleman has to prove that it would help the process. He has not done that. I therefore ask him not to press the new clause to a vote.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time:—

The House divided: Ayes 140, Noes 330.

Division No. 108] **[6.11 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Baldry, Tony
Beggs, Roy
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forsythe, Clifford
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Horam, John
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Maginnis, Ken
Major, Rt Hon John
Maples, John
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Robathan, Andrew
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ross, William *(E Lond'y)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, Rt Hon John D *(Strangford)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thompson, William
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mrs. Eleanor Laing and
Mr. Keith Simpson.

NOES

Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Barnes, Harry
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brake, Tom
Breed, Colin
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Browne, Desmond
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corston, Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dawson, Hilton
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Ennis, Jeff
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*

Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harris, Dr Evan
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hurst, Alan
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Rt Hon Adam
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Laxton, Bob
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Linton, Martin
Livsey, Richard
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
Mackinlay, Andrew
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McNamara, Kevin
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moore, Michael
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Rendel, David
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Shipley, Ms Debra
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Tynan, Bill
Wallace, James
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
Welsh, Andrew
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Willis, Phil
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Kevin Hughes and
Mr. Mike Hall.

Question accordingly negatived.

New clause 3

Expiry of Part VII

'.—(1) This Part shall, by virtue of this subsection, cease to have effect at the end of the period of one year beginning with the day on which it is brought into force.

(2) The Secretary of State may by order provide that a provision of this Part shall cease to have effect.'.—*[Mr. McNamara.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

Mr. McNamara: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following: New clause 8—*Expiry and revival (No. 2)*—

'(1) This Act shall (subject to subsection (2)) cease to have effect at the end of the period of five years beginning with the day on which the Act is brought into force.

(2) The Secretary of State may by order provide—

(a) that a provision of this Act which is in force (whether or not by virtue of this subsection) shall continue in force for a specific period not exceeding five years;

(b) that a provision of this Act shall cease to have effect;

(c) that a provision of this Act which is not in force (whether or not by virtue of this subsection) shall come into force and remain in force for a specified period not exceeding five years.

(3) An order under subsection (2) shall be made by statutory instrument; and no such order shall be made unless a draft of the statutory instrument containing the order has been laid before, and approved by a resolution of, each House of Parliament.'.

Amendment No. 143, in page 51, line 38, leave out Clause 111.

Mr. McNamara: Later this evening, we shall debate the prevention of terrorism order for the last time, and my new clause draws attention to that. The lifespan of part VII, which deals specifically with Northern Ireland, is five years. That seems unacceptably long in the absence of a debate, which we have had in the past, to decide whether these extraordinary powers, or some of them, should be reconsidered or continued or repealed.

My new clause proposes that part VII have effect for only a year, with the provision that the Secretary of State should be able to lift certain of its requirements at times. I do not believe that that is unreasonable. Had I had the time and thought more carefully, I should have drafted it to include a renewal order so that we could consider that matter. Unfortunately, I did not do so. Even so, we have the Government's undertaking that there will be an annual independent review of the Bill's operation, but we have not had an undertaking that the review will be debated. Nor have we had an undertaking that notice will be taken of the reviewers' suggestions on additions or deletions. In the past, proposed deletions have nearly always been ignored and proposed additions have always been seized on and included.

If the Government have related part VII specially and specifically to Northern Ireland, it should be subject to statutory review. Northern Ireland is, sadly, an unhappy part of the country at present and specific legislation deals with the problems there. We hope that those problems will go away and that the Good Friday agreement will be implemented, but we should nevertheless examine the legislation, and very much so.

An associated matter has been a disappointment. The criminal law review in Northern Ireland has progressed slowly. My right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office has said that he hoped that it would be completed either when we were dealing with the later stages of consideration of the Bill or before Easter, possibly in the other place. I do not hold it against him that it has not been completed, but I am concerned that we are passing legislation without having a proper opportunity to review it and without any undertakings being given about the Government's attitude to that review and what changes will be made in respect of part VII. That is the burden of my case.

We are considering serious legislation specific to one part of the United Kingdom and the precedent has been that we examine such legislation every year. We should do so again. If my new clause does not meet the precise requirements, I am happy to leave it to my right hon. Friend to draft a fresh one for the other place, but I believe that the House would abdicate its responsibility if it did not at least provide for renewal orders relating to the implementation of the Bill.

I believe that in happier days, when this legislation was first considered, we hoped that the Good Friday agreement would be implemented, and that—apart from having to deal with a few dissidents—the legislation might disappear for ever. That may happen—I hope that it will—but, just in case it does not, we should have an opportunity to examine the way in which the legislation is dealt with, especially the parts introduced as a result of the terrible Omagh bombing.

6.30 pm

Mr. Simon Hughes: The new clause tabled by the hon. Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara), whom I am happy to follow, relates specifically to part VII—the Northern Ireland section that we debated in Committee with the Minister and some of our colleagues.

I told the Minister and the Committee that it was our considered view that it was right for us to look forward to the early conclusion of special powers for Northern Ireland and right for those powers to be reviewed regularly on the basis of a report and the agreement of Parliament, but that we were happy for the end of the period concerned to remain unspecified for the moment. There is a backstop of five years. The Government would have to return to Parliament again if other existing legislation were repealed or changed once this law was enacted. We felt, however, that there must be a degree of flexibility.

As the Minister may remember, since the Committee stage, I have visited Northern Ireland to talk to people about, specifically, aspects of the Bill that relate to the Province. I was pleasantly surprised and encouraged by the widespread view across the political parties and the community divides, and among senior members of the police service—and elsewhere—that action should be taken as quickly as possible to restore the normal processes of the court structure: hearings, trials and police procedures. They hoped that that would happen much sooner than in five years' time. No one argued to the contrary, which I found encouraging.

New clause 8 concerns a linked but different issue. We have what is, in effect, renewable legislation. The Bill will introduce permanent legislation. Even after the courteous and reasonable debate in which we engaged with the Minister in Committee, my hon. Friends and I are not persuaded that we should move, all in one go, to a UK-wide Bill of a permanent nature.

We are persuaded—indeed, we have always argued the case; I have argued it since I became my party's home affairs spokesman—that there should be UK-wide legislation, rather than legislation treating Northern Ireland separately from Great Britain. One of the reasons why I always thought that the old legislation was improper, and never voted for it, was the fact that it contained exclusion clauses, and treated citizens of one country as though they could be compartmentalised. We consider UK-wide legislation to be entirely proper, as the Minister knows.

However, we consider it dangerous to table a Bill that is not just UK-wide but much more far-reaching, without giving Parliament a chance to bring it back to see how it is being implemented. New clause 8 suggests that, once enacted, the Act should cease to have effect five years after enactment without Parliament's approving its continuance. Its maximum length would therefore be the maximum length of a Parliament, although a Government could return to it before that. We think that such a safeguard is necessary.

I will not go into details, but we need to be particularly attentive about two actions that we are taking in the Bill. We are creating permanent UK anti-terrorism legislation, and we are extending its remit. We will discuss definitions later, but I am not talking just about what is defined as terrorism; I am talking about the definition of the powers given to the authorities of the state—the police, the courts, and others.

Exceptional measures—steps towards the removal of liberty and the increasing of state powers—should be taken with great care in a democratic country. We have been careful and we are careful, but we are in danger of unwittingly not being careful if we suddenly sign up to legislation that will come back only if whichever party is in power brings it back, or if a majority in the House wants to bring it back. The new clause would enable all Members, from all parts of the United Kingdom, to debate the issue.

Let me say a word particularly to my Northern Ireland colleagues, from whose expertise—exemplified by the contributions of the hon. Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone (Mr. Maginnis)—we benefited during much of the Committee stage. Until Northern Ireland is at peace, which we pray will be soon, we must ensure that all of us—not just a corner of the House in which Northern Ireland Members talk to each other and to Northern Ireland Ministers—can learn from their experience.

I think that subsection (2) deals with one of the two objections raised by the Minister in Committee. He suggested that the requirement for the Act as a whole to be brought back within five years was an inflexible tool. Subsection (2) would allow certain parts of the Act to be continued, certain parts to be discontinued, and certain parts that had been discontinued to be brought back. It is not inflexible: it is possible to look at each and every clause and to say, "This is right" and, "This is wrong."

Of course, if we wanted to amend the legislation, there would have to be a process allowing that, but there is no reason why we could not do what we are doing today—coincidentally. There is no reason why we should not include in our debate both a Bill to amend existing legislation and an order to continue or discontinue part of it. It would be logical to do both at the same time.

The Minister argued, perfectly reasonably, that we might need to act more quickly. In Committee, I said that I had been advised, and feared, that the Bill as drafted might contain breaches of the European convention on human rights, and that, if the European Court made a finding similar to its finding in the Bulger case in December, the Home Secretary would have to come to the House and announce a change in the law, or the procedure.

That is, of course, true. At any stage, if there is a ruling against the Government that relates to legislation, the Government must come back to the House. Let me point out to the Minister, however, that the new clause does not suggest that the legislation can come back only every five years; it provides a backstop. Of course, if we find that, despite the Home Secretary's declaration on the front of the Bill, the Bill breaches the convention, it will have to come back earlier; but I hope that members of all parties will learn the lesson that we all painfully learned in two ways two years ago.

After the Omagh bombing, which was painful enough in itself, we returned to the House for two days in September 1998 to pass yet more emergency legislation. That was not good legislating, as anyone involved will recall. We legislated in haste, and, as Ministers confirmed in Committee, much of the legislation has never been used. Perhaps none of it has. That is the practical implication of what was done. Sometimes—indeed, nearly always—it is better to have a opportunity to consider, to reflect on what needs to be done and to take advice. In the case of this Bill, we have taken account of a report by Lord Lloyd of Berwick, and have consulted the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, which was established by a governmental statutory body. It is certainly the commission's view that we should not have permanent legislation.

Interestingly, in all my discussions in Northern Ireland last month, and without naming any individual—I talked to very senior representatives of the relevant parts of society—no one argued for permanent legislation. They said not only that there should not be permanent legislation in Northern Ireland—let alone in Great Britain—but that there was benefit in reviewable and renewable legislation.

One person convincingly put the following argument to me. If we have special powers and there is a group in the community that feels that it is oppressed, troubled, or likely to be the targets of those powers, it is much better for the law and order agency—the police or armed services—to be able to say that those will be reviewed in time and are not a permanent part of the state, than for people to feel that there will be no opportunity for a review that is apart from the forces of law and order.

Mr. Mike Gapes (Ilford, South): The hon. Gentleman referred to the Omagh bombing. Does he not accept that, at the time of the bombing, there was a great desire among the British and Irish Governments to work together as far as possible and to ensure that legislation on both sides of the border was consistent, so that people could not play the game of moving from one side to the other? Does he accept that that was one of the motivations that led to the legislation being introduced? Whether it was good legislation or not, does he at least accept that, at the time, the motives for introducing it were, effectively, to try to combat terrorist organisations that used the different jurisdictions to avoid detection or arrest?

Mr. Hughes: I accept that. The hon. Gentleman is right.

Mr. McNamara: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the courts in the Republic are now very reluctant to use that particular legislation and are not accepting the word merely of a senior police officer? They are looking for other things and more corroboration. We should not legislate in this country just to meet the needs of the Republic of Ireland. He might remember that, when these matters were discussed, Downing street's official spokesman issued statements saying that we did not need stronger legislation, as we already had all that we needed. All that we were doing was legislating to please the Irish Government and, incidentally, the Home Office and the Saudis.

Mr. Hughes: The hon. Gentleman is right. Both points raise an important issue. I was going to make a linked point. There is every benefit in being in touch with the Irish Government and the Irish Parliament and knowing

[Mr. Hughes]

what they are thinking. There is clearly every benefit in compatible systems north and south of the border to deal with people who can easily go back and forth across the border every day.

However, one of the reasons why we would be wrong to enact permanent legislation is that, at this very moment in Ireland, a review of the constitutional provisions is going on. It has not been concluded. It has touched on the Disqualifications Bill, which we considered in December and January.

There is some sense both in retaining independence, so that we can do what we think is best for this country, and in at least trying to understand what is happening elsewhere and not anticipating something: the Republic may come to a different conclusion as a result of the review. The unanimous view in Northern Ireland was that we should not have permanent legislation. One of the things that seem to strengthen that case is that there is a review of the legislation in the Republic and that it would be helpful to be able to take changes into account. If we have permanent legislation on the statute book, by definition, we will not be able to look at the matter again in the light of what is going on in Ireland.

6.45 pm

One of the places that I went to when I was in Northern Ireland again recently was South Armagh, which has suffered as much as anywhere, if not more. There were clearly differences of view about some of the details of what is going on in terms of the whole settlement process in Northern Ireland, but on one thing there was no controversy: if we had an exceptional set of powers—which are clearly needed at the moment—the people of Northern Ireland, their representatives in this Parliament and in the Assembly should be able to play a part in discussing how they should be continued.

Once we put something permanent on to the statute book, the chance of being able to have such a debate—involving Members in the Northern Ireland Assembly, listening to people in local government in Northern Ireland, talking to the Royal Ulster Constabulary—goes. It is locked in, and only the Government can press a button that unlocks it.

I ask colleagues on both sides of the House, and the Government in particular, to think again about their view that we do not need reviewable legislation. The Minister offered a concession, or came forward with a proposal in Committee that was welcome—a periodic report on the legislation will be laid before Parliament, as happens now—but it does not go far enough. There is all the difference in the political world between a report that we can read and legislation that has to come to Parliament to continue, or to be altered. I urge the House as strongly as I can to vote for our new clause, in the hope that we get terrorism legislation that Parliament can keep regularly under review at least once every Parliament.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): I have some sympathy for the observations of the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) on the need for impermanent legislation. He called it renewable legislation.

I support the view of my hon. Friend the Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara). I listened carefully to what he said. He talked about an independent review, whereas the hon. Gentleman talked about a periodic report. I was not on the Committee, but an independent review sounds more powerful than a periodic report. If an independent review has been promised, that is reassuring.

I agree with my hon. Friend that such a review should be debated in the House, so that all sorts of concerns can be raised. There are some powerful elements in this part. I mention three at a glance: clauses 97, 98 and 99, which deal with the independent assessor of military complaints procedures, the code of practice on police and Army powers and the code of practice on video recording respectively. A debate such as that mentioned by my hon. Friend would give us the opportunity to voice concerns about the imperfections of those clauses, or about where they could be strengthened or modified.

It may not be feasible in parliamentary terms, but my view is that it would be better to submit such an independent report to a Select Committee for examination. A three-hour or five-hour debate in this place does not allow for the cross-examination of Ministers that a Select Committee hearing allows.

With respect—it certainly does not apply to my right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office—I have heard Ministers brush aside questions on important issues from the Opposition and others. That cannot be done within the framework of a Select Committee investigation. I am not suggesting for one moment that he conducted himself in that way when I questioned him, but I make a serious point. It is one that I made in relation to the Sierra Leone affair. I told the Foreign Secretary at the time that it was good that he had offered to make a statement from the Dispatch Box, but that it would be better for all concerned that that matter should be subjected to a Select Committee inquiry.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I hope that the hon. Gentleman did not think that I was arguing that we should not have an annual report or an opportunity for the matter to be taken before a Select Committee. The question is whether we also have the ability over a longer period—five years as opposed to every year—for Parliament to be able to make a positive decision that it wants the legislation, whole or in part, to go on. They are not incompatible.

Dr. Godman: I am grateful for that clarification and reassurance. I thought that I was listening intently, but I must have strayed a little.

If we are to have independent reviews, I believe that a Select Committee is a better instrument for monitoring the implementation of legislation, especially controversial legislation such as this Bill. Such legislation ought to be renewable rather than permanent.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey mentioned that he had been to South Armagh recently. I visited a police station in the constituency of the hon. Member for Belfast, East (Mr. Robinson) where the RUC officers are working extremely hard to develop good community relations in a nationalist community. It is essential that legislation does not impede that sort of remarkably fine work.

I am asking for renewable rather than permanent legislation.

Mr. Shepherd: I commend to the Government the purposes behind the new clauses. The Bill, as we all understand, gives extraordinary powers to the Executive. It is appropriate to have what is, effectively, a sunset clause—perhaps the Government can draft something suitable.

I am a believer in sunset clauses. The House has too little opportunity on a general range of legislation to review its workings under the necessity of having to justify it. A sunset clause gives the Government an opportunity to explain their stewardship of these extraordinary powers. I say this gently because it is important that where such powers are available to the Executive they must justify their exercise of them. I am grateful to the hon. Members for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara) and for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) for giving the House the opportunity to pause to consider an important point.

Mr. Lidington: No one in the House would quarrel with the call from my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge–Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd) for the Executive, whichever party happens to be in government, to be held to account for the exercise of the powers given to them by counter-terrorist legislation. These are far-reaching powers.

The debate is about the most appropriate mechanisms for holding the Executive to account and subjecting Ministers to sustained questioning over their role as custodians of the legislation. The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) and my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills have set out eloquently the case for the sunset clause.

I should mention the new clause moved by the hon. Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara). The Opposition are satisfied that the provisions already incorporated in the Bill in clause 111 provide adequate safeguards in respect of the special powers for Northern Ireland, and Northern Ireland alone. We are not persuaded by the hon. Gentleman's argument for new clause 3.

New clause 8 was spoken to by the Liberal Democrats. The arguments for the sunset clause were powerful and well put and it would be wrong to dismiss them, but there is a compelling counter-argument. The first Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Bill was introduced by Lord Jenkin, then Home Secretary, in the immediate aftermath of the Birmingham bombings. Probably everybody assumed at the time that the powers would be needed only in respect of a crisis arising from terrorist violence in Northern Ireland, perhaps spilling over to the mainland of Great Britain. Everybody assumed that, within a few years, it would be possible to revert to normal criminal justice powers and legislation without the need for the special provisions. Sadly, that has not been the case. As the hon. Members for Fermanagh and South Tyrone (Mr. Maginnis) and for Belfast, East (Mr. Robinson) can testify, the need to be vigilant against terrorism in Northern Ireland remains to this day.

Even if there were to be an established and enduring peace in Northern Ireland, there still remains a case for permanent counter-terrorist legislation. The first recommendation of Lord Lloyd when he summarised the conclusions of his review of counter-terrorist legislation was that

> When lasting peace is established in Northern Ireland there will continue to be a need for permanent anti-terrorist legislation.

He went on to argue—we will come to this in later amendments—that new legislation should apply not just to violence related to Northern Ireland but to terrorism throughout the United Kingdom, covering domestic as well as international terrorism.

I fear that organised and ruthless terrorism is not some temporary feature of the political landscape but is endemic. We have seen examples of middle eastern terrorism which has, on occasions, spilled over into the United Kingdom and other European countries and we have seen what has happened in Tokyo. I can recall that, at the time of the Gulf war in the early 1990s, there were acute fears in this country that Saddam Hussein, in order to further his campaign, would seek to sponsor or promote acts of terrorism in allied capital cities so as to try to induce the populations there to withdraw support from the United Nation's alliance which was confronting him over Kuwait.

Mr. Gordon Marsden (Blackpool, South): I have been listening carefully to what the hon. Gentleman said about the assumptions in the 1970s when the prevention of terrorism legislation was introduced in the wake of the Birmingham bombings and his views on the on-going problem of terrorism. I do not disagree with him. However, in the context of new clause 3, is that not an argument, if not for a sunset clause, for some form of subsequent review of whether the powers as cast should be changed, revised or muted? After all, terrorism, even if it is a permanent feature of the landscape, is likely to change its form.

7 pm

Mr. Lidington: I agree with the hon. Gentleman on the need for regular and thorough reviews of the legislation, but I doubt whether new clause 3 provides the best mechanism for such reviews. The Government have offered us an annual review. In Committee, the Minister said that the Government were minded to appoint an independent examiner—someone in the tradition of Mr. John Rowe and Lord Colville—to examine from an outsider's perspective the operation of legislation and to report to the Government. I should hope that, subsequently, the Government would ensure that the examiner's report was fully debated by both Houses of Parliament.

Mr. Alan Simpson (Nottingham, South): Does the hon. Gentleman not recognise that one of the difficulties in Lord Lloyd's analysis of the matter was the failure to explore the difference between permanent counter-terrorism legislation and renewable counter-terrorism legislation? The latter would maintain the House's rights and responsibilities to deal with the matter in primary legislation, and would also allow the Government of the day to get out of the other trap. In a world in which the character of terrorism changes as quickly as economic circumstances change, if we try to deal with the matter in permanent legislation, we will inevitably be forced towards adopting much too broad a definition of terrorism, thereby casting long and dark shadows over the nature of democratic society and open government. A sunset clause would get us out of that predicament.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. That intervention was far too long. The hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) could also perhaps deal with that matter in the debate on the next group of amendments.

Mr. Lidington: The difficulty that I have with the argument being made, quite honourably, by the hon. Members for Nottingham, South (Mr. Simpson) and for Blackpool, South (Mr. Marsden) is that we could end up deluding ourselves into thinking that we were supporting counter-terrorism powers that were in a realistic sense temporary.

We have to acknowledge that the character of the international political environment in which British Ministers, British security and intelligence agencies and British police officers have to take their decisions has changed, and that it has probably changed irrevocably. It has been a change for the worse, but we have to come to terms with that change. There will be a need for us not only to remain vigilant about how Ministers and officials exercise the powers that they have been given in statute, but to ensure that our legislative safeguards are kept up to date, so that we are able to respond to what I fear might be the proliferation among terrorist groups of yet more deadly weapons.

Professor Wilkinson's report, which was appended to Lord Lloyd's, mentions the fact that, in the next few decades, chemical, nuclear or biological weapons might fall into the hands of terrorist groups which are prepared, if not to use them as such, to use them as instruments of blackmail and coercion. We have also to ensure that our legal arrangements are kept up to date with whatever new technologies become available to terrorist groups.

The best way of approaching that issue is to build on the process of annual review, which the Government have offered to us; to ensure that Parliament has the opportunity to demand of Ministers that they introduce amending legislation as and when it is demonstrated to be necessary; and, as the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman) said, to use the Select Committee system that is available to us. I should certainly hope that not only the Intelligence and Security Committee, which would have an important role to play in the matter, but the Select Committees on Home Affairs and on Northern Ireland Affairs would interest themselves in the detail of how those powers are exercised in future.

Coupled with the formal procedure of annual review and annual report that the Government have already offered, the Select Committees—with the interplay of question and answer that they allow, and their capacity to subject Ministers to sustained interrogation, rather than simply allowing them to make an introductory speech, and then wind up the debate, giving way as frequently or infrequently as they choose—are a better way of approaching the matter.

For those reasons, I am not prepared to support this group of amendments.

Mr. Charles Clarke: This has been a useful debate. As hon. Members on both sides of the House have acknowledged, the issue was debated very fully in Committee. I am delighted to return to the subject now.

New clause 3 and amendment No. 143, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara), would time-limit the Northern Ireland-specific provisions to one year. New clause 8, tabled by the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), would provide for the expiry and revival of the Bill every five years. That provision is identical to the hon. Gentleman's new clause 2 in Committee, which we debated for 45 minutes, on 8 February.

I shall deal with the detail of the two specific proposals. First, however, I should like to make a couple of general points about the role of Parliament in all this.

As has been generously acknowledged by various speakers, the Government have sought to respond to the concerns expressed on Second Reading by establishing an annual report process, which was not in the Bill on Second Reading. We listened to comments made by hon. Members on both sides of the House, and felt that there was merit in the case for producing an annual report.

I can also confirm that we did, indeed, commit ourselves to that report being prepared by an independent person. The document would not be internal and secret but out in the public domain. I should like to place that commitment on record now—as I did in Committee—as it is helpful to do so.

It is important that we should have a little discussion about Parliament's role in dealing with this form of accountability. The hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd) used a good phrase—explanatory stewardship—to describe the role, and he was quite right about that. The question is how best stewardship can be explained. A wide range of parliamentary devices is available. My hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde mentioned Select Committees, which are the first possibility.

As all hon. Members who have served on a Select Committee will know, the Select Committee process can indeed be far more effective than a general process in the House. One of my first duties after being elected to the House was to serve as a member of the Treasury Committee. I am sure that the Governor of the Bank of England would agree that the regular interrogation to which the Committee subjected him and the Monetary Policy Committee on their policy on setting interest rates was much more rigorous than a regular debate in the House, or some other process, would have been. As the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) said, we also have the Home Affairs Committee, the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee and the Intelligence and Security Committee. They are an important part of the process. The House also has the capacity for debate in a variety of forms—a short debate on the Adjournment, or a more substantial debate, such as we are having today.

Contrary to the comments of the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey, it is not the provision that will serve as a backstop, but this Parliament. If ever one wanted evidence that this Parliament has been a backstop in our consideration of such issues, one would only have to study the way in which legislation has been dealt with, often very rapidly, by the House. Although I take the point about consideration, the suggestion that there is any inflexibility in Parliament's ability to consider new legislation as circumstances change is simply not correct. It is a fact that over the years—in this as in other matters—Parliament has shown a tremendous readiness to

respond rapidly to the issues raised by changing events such as judgments by the European Court of Human Rights, or by more dramatic events such as bombs and explosions, which require issues to be dealt with differently.

My response to the general discussion—before moving on to the particulars of the two proposals—is that it is quite wrong to describe Parliament as inflexible in its ability to address such questions. The reverse is true: Parliament has tremendous flexibility to achieve by a variety of different means the explanatory stewardship suggested by the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills. It would be unwise to opt for one constitutional straitjacket in seeking to address it.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Of course there is the flexibility that the Minister described. Can he confirm that clause 124, which provides for a report, does not necessarily trigger a parliamentary yes or no process? More important, looking back over any number of years, the two circumstances in which the Government come to the House to seek changes are when the are obliged by a court judgment to do so or when they are seeking more power. Governments do not readily seek to give up power even when there is a large clamour outside telling them they should do so.

Mr. Clarke: I am not sure that that analysis is correct. In certain circumstances Governments seek the withdrawal of power as a result of events changing. *[Interruption.]* My right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office suggests that that has happened recently in respect of the EPA.

The amendments tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Hull, North are aimed at time-limiting the Northern Ireland- specific provisions to one year from the date on which they are brought into force. There would be no power to continue the provisions beyond that point—nor could a provision be brought back into force if it had been lapsed by order.

I shall set out again the Government's position on the Northern Ireland-specific measures. I am happy to do so as it is very important. I emphasise strongly that the Government wish to move to the position where there are no Northern Ireland-specific measures. The aim of the Bill is to have a UK-wide approach to combating terrorism. We remain strongly committed to this—indeed the Good Friday agreement requires us to remove the emergency powers in Northern Ireland as soon as the security situation allows it. That is our intention and desire.

My right hon. Friend the Minister of State made the point that the test of a normalised society is to achieve that common basis. That is what we seek to do. It is an important policy consideration.

If I thought that the security situation would allow for that in one year's time, I would be delighted to accept the new clause. Of course I cannot predict the security situation in a year's time—and neither can anyone else. The key is flexibility. Clause 111, which amendment No. 143 seeks to remove, time-limits the part VII provisions to five years. It allows powers to be switched off by order and to be revived if it is proved they are needed.

Let me deal with a specific point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Hull, North. He suggested that the temporary Northern Ireland provisions would remain on the statute book for five years without the need for parliamentary approval. Clause 111 provides that part VII lapses after 12 months unless renewed by an affirmative resolution order for further periods of 12 months, up to a maximum lifespan of five years. That renewal will be informed by the annual report in all the ways that we know, and on the operation of the Act under clause 124. So there is a parliamentary approval process.

Although I sympathise with the thrust of what my hon. Friend said, his amendments would tie the Government's hands to a degree that I cannot accept. There have been too many events reminding us of the terrible situation.

My hon. Friend referred to the criminal review. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State assures me that it will be published soon, so as to enable further debate and consideration of these issues.

I hope that my hon. Friend will accept my assurances that the Government remain committed to dispensing with the part VII powers as soon as it is safe to do so and will not press his amendments further.

7.15 pm

We reject the proposal in the Liberal Democrat new clause for the same reasons that we rejected it in Committee. Lord Lloyd concluded:

> once lasting peace has been established in Northern Ireland, there will continue to be a need for permanent counter-terrorist legislation to deal with the threat of international and domestic terrorism.

I referred in Committee, and I shall do so again today, to the extract from pages 4 to 5 of his report, in which he sets out the reasons—as clearly and eloquently as anyone has been able to do here. At paragraph 1.20, he states:

> From my interviews with the police, the Security Service and other counter-terrorism specialists in the UK and overseas, I am convinced it would be a mistake—indeed, that it would be folly—to assume that a few years of relative freedom from acts of international terrorism here meant that the threat had largely gone away. There are two reasons for that view.
>
> First, to measure the threat merely in terms of the number of planned attacks which have been carried out in the UK would be to ignore the substantial effort which goes on, largely in secret, to avert such incidents. Evidence which I have seen and heard, though I cannot set it out here, persuades me that, although the immediate threat is low, international terrorist groups continue to seek opportunities to carry out attacks against UK interests, at home and abroad.
>
> The second cause for caution is that developments in world politics and the changing nature of terrorism have made it difficult to predict what the future holds. Chapter 4 of Professor Wilkinson's report deals with some of these factors. Regional and national conflicts which have generated terrorism, or have the potential to do so, will continue throughout the foreseeable future. The complex problems in the Middle East and North Africa will remain the most important factor, not least because of the pronounced anti-Western position adopted by some of the parties involved. As the "weapon of the weak" terrorism is likely to remain an attractive option to those engaged in regional power struggles, facilitated by the ever-increasing international freedom of movement of people, goods and information. The UK, together with some other Western countries, is particularly liable to be caught up in these struggles because of the number of communities of foreign nationals who live, or seek sanctuary, here.

That is a powerful argument. It is why the Government have accepted this central recommendation of the report.

As we said in the consultation paper,

> the Government believes that there exists now a clear and present terrorist threat to the UK from a number of fronts and that a terrorist threat is likely to continue to exist for the foreseeable future even when a lasting peace in Northern Ireland is achieved.

[Mr. Clarke]

It gives me no pleasure to say that I believe that to be a frank assessment of the position on the basis of serious consideration and advice.

We have had so-called temporary provisions on the statute book for 25 years. The time has come to face the fact of terrorism and be ready to deal with it for the foreseeable future. We need to make the powers permanently available, although the fact that those powers are available does not mean that they have to be used.

The Bill removes some of the most extreme powers that have been used in the past, such as internment and exclusion orders, and introduces judicial extensions of detention.

The Human Rights Act 1998 will be fully implemented by the time that the Bill comes into force. That is an important new safeguard.We are providing Parliament with an annual report to allow for full consideration of these issues. I pay tribute to hon. Members on both sides of the House who asked for that provision. There is a full opportunity to discuss the issues in great detail. I am sure that that will continue, and on that basis I hope that my hon. Friend will withdraw his new clause.

Mr. McNamara: I accept what my hon. Friend said about part VII. It is only unfortunate that it does not apply to the rest of the Bill. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Motion and clause, by leave, withdrawn.

New Clause 4

RIGHT TO CONSULT SOLICITOR

'.—(1) All persons detained under section 40 of this Act shall be promptly informed of their right to consult privately with a solicitor and to have a solicitor present at all interviews to be conducted under this Act.

(2) All persons wishing to consult a solicitor must be permitted to do so as soon as is reasonably practicable.'.—*[Mr. McNamara.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

Mr. McNamara: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following: Amendment No. 173, in clause 40, page 18, line 34, at end insert—

'(3A) Where a person is detained under this section for more than 36 hours, a police officer shall state in writing the reasons for continuing to detain him.'

Government amendments Nos. 60 to 64 and 67 to 69.

Amendment No. 178, in schedule 7, page 109, line 9, at end insert—

'and, subject to paragraph 19, shall be completed and the decision notified to the detained person within four hours of his arrest.'

Government amendments Nos. 70 to 76, 96 to 99, 109 and 116.

Mr. McNamara: The question of legal access is interesting, and it appears to be missing from the Bill. I want to assert the right of detained persons to have access to legal advice promptly, before the questioning starts.

The situation in Northern Ireland is especially problematic, as those arrested in Britain under the Prevention of Terrorism Acts have, over the years, effectively been held under Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 conditions. One former head of the Met said that anybody who was arrested under the PTA in his area would always be held under PACE conditions.

The emergency provisions Act contains a provision allowing for deferral of access to a solicitor for up to 48 hours, which was used widely in Northern Ireland until the 1990s and is still occasionally used. Even when a suspect got access to a lawyer, the lawyer was not permitted to stay in the interview with the suspect, as is the case with PACE. There appears to have been no statutory basis for that exclusion, which resulted from Royal Ulster Constabulary policy and had not been subject to judicial review.

The only occasion when the matter arose was in Murray *v.* United Kingdom, a case in Strasbourg, in which the applicant argued that the exclusion of his lawyer from the interviews constituted a violation of article 6, which concerns the right to a fair trial. The court did not express an opinion on that point, having already found a violation on the basis of deferral of access to Murray's solicitor, combined with the drawing of inferences from his silence. Its attitude to the exclusion of a solicitor is not clear, but it said:

It is of paramount importance for the rights of the defence that an accused has access to a lawyer at the initial stages of police interrogation.

Mr. Bermingham: Does my hon. Friend agree that the current preferred thinking is that the refusal of access to a solicitor during an interview would be a breach of article 6.3 and that the court would rule against us, as it appears that the idea of a fair trial—equality of arms—is paramount and the right exists throughout the rest of the United Kingdom?

Mr. McNamara: If I understood my hon. Friend correctly, I agree.

Article 6.3, which should be enforced, does not appear in the legislation. I seek an undertaking that there will be access to a solicitor. That is implicit in the Bill, but not specific. I tabled the new clause in the hope that, when their Lordships in one place or another read our debates to see what was intended, a statement from the Front Bench will be on the record.

Mr. Harry Cohen (Leyton and Wanstead): I want to speak mainly to amendments Nos. 173 and 178, although I would also like to say a word about Government amendment No. 64.

Clause 40 concerns arrest without warrant. Liberty issued a briefing note for our Second Reading debate. It said:

The Government intends to retain the arrest powers of the PTA which entitle the police to arrest without warrant anyone who they have reasonable grounds for suspecting. Liberty has long been concerned about the existence and operation of this power and considers that it should not be retained for the following reasons:

it is unnecessary: there is no evidence that the PACE powers of arrest are inadequate.

it is too wide: it permits a police officer to arrest where the person is not suspected of committing any offence . . .

powers have been used in the past simply as an intelligence gathering device.

These points are particularly important in view of the widened definition of terrorism.

That is quite a critique of the power, on the use of which amendment No. 173 is designed to put only a small restraint.

I am concerned about people being held incommunicado. One of my first cases as a Member of Parliament, in the 1980s, was when a constituent came to my advice surgery and reported that she had been to the police because she thought that her son had disappeared and she wanted to report the fact and get their help to find him, but it later transpired that the police were holding him and had not informed her. That was a dreadful abuse of civil liberties.

The police have increasing powers to hold people, but the rights of both the person detained and the family are very important.

Dr. Godman: I remind my hon. Friend that he dealt with a case involving my nephew, Luke, who was detained for eight hours in a police station in his constituency. He will confirm that my nephew was innocent of any misdemeanour.

Mr. Cohen: I cannot remember all the cases that I have had in 17 years in Parliament, but I am happy that my hon. Friend has put that on the record and that I was able to help his nephew. I am happy to help all my constituents in such circumstances.

Lord Lloyd of Berwick's report on his inquiry into legislation against terrorism—Cm 3420—has been quoted a lot. Paragraph 9.26 on page 48 says:

In England and Wales, whether a person is arrested under PACE or under the PTA, he has the right to consult a solicitor and to have the solicitor present during interview. He is also entitled to have someone he knows informed of his arrest. These rights may be delayed on the authority of a superintendent if he reasonably believes that such communications might be detrimental to the investigation for one or more specified reasons. The maximum period during which a detainee may be held incommunicado corresponds with the length of time for which he may be detained without further authority. Thus, in non-terrorist cases the rights of access may be delayed up to 36 hours whereas a terrorist suspect may be held incommunicado for up to 48 hours. Furthermore, in terrorist cases an officer of Assistant Chief Constable rank or above may order that consultations with a solicitor are to take place within the sight and hearing of a uniformed officer of at least the rank of inspector.

That makes it clear that, in non-terrorist cases, the norm is 36 hours. If the period is to last longer than that, it is not unreasonable that the reason for the delay and denial of rights should be specified. A simple explanation would suffice, perhaps involving the suspicion of terrorism, but some concrete justification should be given and someone should not be kept an extra 12 hours and denied those rights without genuine suspicion. That would subvert PACE, because every case could be treated as a terrorist case and a person detained for an extra 12 hours without anybody being notified.

7.30 pm

Mr. Bermingham: Does my hon. Friend agree that, if those games of holding persons incommunicado—the purpose of which is to put pressure on prisoners—are played, those actions would be subject to subsequent inquiry by the court and, after 2 October, by the European Court of Human Rights? It is ludicrous that we should lose cases because of unnecessary provisions such as the ones before us.

Mr. Cohen: That is a good point. It would not be difficult to give a reason, because the Government's proposals in the legislation against terrorism consultation paper suggest that a written record should be kept of the outcome of the review of the case. Lord Lloyd also made it clear that delay had to be for specified reasons.

Lord Lloyd also pointed out that a survey of those detained under the PTA in Britain in 1989-90 found that legal advice was delayed in some 26 per cent. of cases and there was a delay in informing someone of a person's detention in 44 per cent. of cases. Those are high figures, and I hope that we will not see a return to such wholesale denial of rights. In a sense, the Bill would legalise those delays.

Other hon. Members have mentioned the European Court of Human Rights and its judgment in Murray *v.* United Kingdom. The court found that the denial of access to a lawyer, when combined with the trial court's right to draw adverse inferences from silence under questioning, violated the detainee's rights under article 6 of the European convention on human rights. Consequently, the circumstances that gave rise to the successful challenge in the Murray case could now arise throughout the United Kingdom. I would like an assurance that the Government have addressed that point so that we will not face similar judgments in future.

Amendment No. 178 seeks to ensure that a detained person has access to his or her family after four hours of detention and that the first review of the case should be completed by then. I admit that the figure of four hours has been plucked out of the air, but a review of the case could reasonably be completed within that time. It would be better than a long time without any proper review and the denial of rights of the person being held.

The amendment would amend the review process. I want to ensure that individual rights are maintained, although that is outside the review process. However, the amendment would build on the existing requirement for a review officer to inform the detained person of his rights as soon as continued detention has been authorised, by adding a requirement that the first review must be completed and the decision notified to the detained person within four hours of his arrest. At that point, the detained person would have to be notified of his rights, otherwise—as far as I can see—he would be left without having been notified of his rights for an indefinite period. The amendment would extend the civil liberties of the person involved.

I am concerned about the drafting of Government amendment No. 64, which is not as tight as I would have hoped. The Government may be able to reconsider in the other place. The amendment repeatedly mentions doing things

as soon as is reasonably practicable.

That is a bland requirement, and no explanation for undue delay need be given. No indication is given of how long that requirement could be. The amendment also states:

The person named must be . . . a friend of the detained person . . . a relative, or . . . a person who is known to the detained person who is likely to take an interest in his welfare.

[Mr. Cohen]

What if none of those categories applies? For example, people from abroad might have no one in those categories in this country. Much abuse is being heaped on beggars at the moment. If they were taken into a police station under these powers, they might have nobody in those categories available.

The amendment also states:

Where a detained person is transferred from one police station to another, he shall be entitled to exercise the right . . . in respect of the police station to which he is transferred.

Will that mean that he will be denied those rights at the first police station he is taken to, with the excuse that he will eventually be transferred, thus increasing the delay? It also states that a detained person may

consult a solicitor as soon as is reasonably practicable, privately and at any time.

However, that right is negated later in the amendment, when it provides that

a detained person . . . may consult a solicitor only in the sight and hearing of a qualified officer.

Bang goes the right to privacy.

Mr. Bermingham: Does my hon. Friend know why is it necessary to put such provisions in the Bill, which will open us up to litigation in the European Court after 2 October, because the European convention on human rights contains the right to private consultation?

Mr. Cohen: That is why we need an explanation of Government amendment No. 64. It also states that

an officer of at least the rank of superintendent may authorise a delay.

It gives a list of reasonable grounds for authorising a delay, but it does not say that an officer must specify the reason on which he relied. In my view, the reason should be put on the record formally and explained to the detained person.

The amendment also states that

the reason shall be recorded as soon as is reasonably practicable.

As I have already said, that is vague and provides no proper time limit.

Mr. Best: What does the term "reasonably practicable" mean in this context? Are reasons supposed to be provided there and then, or later? Is the term meant to carry a notion of fairness? It is an interesting idea.

Mr. Cohen: The phrase could be interpreted in all those ways. That is what is worrying. Given that the police are always busy with crimes, they could say that it was reasonable to delay making a decision on a case, with the result that the person detained could be held a lot longer.

The term is vague. I hope that the Government will at least put time limits on what they consider to be reasonably practicable.

Proposed new subsection (7) states that delays can take place

in the absence of a further authorisation under sub-paragraph (1).

That means that there could be repeated delays in granting rights to a detainee.

I acknowledge that the Government want to improve matters with amendment No. 64, but it is too loosely worded. It needs to be tightened up to ensure that civil liberties are protected.

Mr. Simon Hughes: We support new clause 4, and the amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr. Cohen) touches on some matters raised in Standing Committee. He alluded to the reasonable suspicion test, which we tried to amend in Committee.

This debate illustrates the main point of the previous debate. There is no great difference between the parties about the fact that permanent legislation may be needed, but what should it contain? The powers of detention, the period for which people can be held in detention, how long they can be held before they can talk to a solicitor, or before their families are told—all those matters must be reviewed in the light of experience. They appear again and again in the Lord Lloyd review and in the annual reviews held at present. There needs to be a more regular review system for the legislation.

The hon. Member for St. Helens, South (Mr. Bermingham) mentioned a matter that the Standing Committee touched on regularly. The law will be changed fundamentally when the Human Rights Act 1998 comes into force in October. Not many people outside the House are aware of it, although it may turn out to be one of this Administration's most important achievements. The fact that that Act is coming down the track should make us sensitive about passing legislation that recent case law suggests may be in breach of it, as the hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead said.

7.45 pm

The Secretary of State has asserted that the Bill is compatible with the European convention on human rights, but other legal advice states that parts of it are not compatible with the convention. Where case law warning bells ring about periods of detention, the right to see a solicitor and so on, we should err on the side of caution and legality. We should not give excessive power to the authorities, even if we have to revisit the provisions because they are not perfect.

Britain will not be well served, and Parliament's reputation will be spoiled even further among those people who dislike it already, if we are dragged back again to the European Court for breaches of the convention. We must not ignore those warning bells, which are ringing rather loudly.

Mr. McNamara: Is not one of the sad things that we have yet to see the evidence that the Government claim renders the Bill compatible with the convention, despite the number of challenges to that claim?

Mr. Hughes: In Committee, I offered to show the Minister of State my legal advice if he would show us his. I have not seen the Government's legal advice. I have mine with me, and the Minister is welcome to see it.

The hon. Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara) makes a good point. On issues such as this, the advice to Government must be placed in the public domain. However, the Government must heed the case law, the European convention on human rights and the Human Rights Act 1998. They must try to share the best advice and

err on the side of caution. Otherwise, they will have to return to the courts to defend this Bill, and what we have warned about today will come to pass in about a year.

Mr. Bermingham: I was not going to speak in this debate, but I wandered into the Chamber to listen to my hon. Friend the Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara) who, like me, has had a long involvement in Irish politics in one way or another.

I declare an interest. I am a practising lawyer, and I paid £175 to go on the Bar Council course on human rights legislation. The Human Rights Act 1998 brings the European convention into our domestic law, and is one of the most far-sighted pieces of legislation of my lifetime, and possibly of the previous century. It establishes, once and for all, a person's right to a fair trial. It also establishes equality of arms—as it is phrased—between the rights of an individual and those of the state.

That that has not always been true of our law was especially clear in the 1970s. I served on the Standing Committee that scrutinised the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984, when we examined a detained person's rights, and especially that person's right to legal advice and access. The so-called PACE code followed, and it has served us well. If I say that the Court of Appeal has sometimes sought to negate that legislation, and slim down the rights conferred by Parliament, I do so with my tongue in my cheek.

The 1984 Act was far-sighted. One of the cardinal principles of our law has always been the right to legal advice. If it is good enough for the man accused of murder, it is good enough for anybody else. Everybody who is arrested for a domestic crime, save in exceptional circumstances, has almost immediate access to a lawyer. That lawyer has a right to be present throughout the inquiries that are made; he has a right to advise his client whether to say something or not. The laws on the right to silence have changed over the years. Be that as it may, the right of access to a lawyer is at the very heart of our inquisitorial system, which is an accusatorial process when it comes before a court.

Mr. Cohen: My hon. Friend obviously has a lot of experience in this area. How does he feel about denial of privacy, given that the authorities can listen in to the conversation between the person detained and his lawyer?

Mr. Bermingham: My hon. Friend makes a good point, and I will come to it in a moment.

As I said, that right has always been absolute, and people have always been entitled to privacy and integrity. In police stations up and down the land, facilities are available to enable people to have private consultation. The telephones are meant to be secure—there has just been a ruling in a prison case, so the authorities cannot tap telephone calls. There is another case going before the House of Lords, and if that does not succeed before 2 October, it will inevitably go to Europe, where it will succeed. Listening in to telephone calls is an invasion of human rights, and interferes with the equality of arms.

The European Court of Human Rights is not just a court for the European Union. It is for the whole of Europe, and stretches across some 26 countries.

Mr. McNamara: Forty-one.

Mr. Bermingham: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that. The tests and standards are meant to be the same throughout.

Why should Northern Ireland be different? Why should there be a class of case in which there is not the right for a lawyer to be present at an interview? I do not want to vote on this; I just want the Minister of State to say, "Okay, we'll put it in." The Bill can be amended. What do we lose by including the new clause and making things clear? If we do not do it, it will be done for us.

The trouble with some of these cases, which people often forget, is that if we play games with legislation that is not clear, honest and obvious, we give people who may well be guilty of crime the opportunity to have their convictions quashed later on a technicality. Why on earth do we run the risk?

In some of the cases that went before the European Court, there was overwhelming evidence but, because our rules were not fair, convictions were quashed. Does that really serve justice? The answer is no. When we detain people and deny them access to lawyers, do we achieve anything in a judicial sense? What on earth is the purpose of keeping someone incommunicado? I can understand it while people are being arrested and there is a rolling round-up of villains. The classic example is the armed robbery: the police hold incommunicado those they have caught escaping from a bank. That is perfectly reasonable and proper, because the notice of their arrest may well alert people whom the police are seeking to trace and arrest. No one objects to that. Including such a provision in legislation on terrorism would be equally understandable and proper. The reasoning would be in front of us, and there would be no query about it.

The minute we go beyond being reasonable and do not write into the law the equivalent of the law in other fields, whether in terrorism or something else, we open ourselves up to subsequent actions in the European Court that can lead to the quashing of convictions. Under article 6, if we get it wrong, there is no second chance, no retrial—the conviction is quashed. That is what we saw in the Murray case, which never actually got to the point about legal advice. There were already enough grounds to quash it. The European Court does not necessarily take every point. It looks at the strongest points and rules on those. Murray was one case, and Davis and Johnson is another. Not getting public interest immunity inquiry cases right leads to the quashing of convictions.

So it goes on. In 1984, we wanted to avoid miscarriages of justice, and much legislation has been put in place since then. We have seen some pretty terrible cases, but we create cases of injustice when we do not have simple and fair laws. I ask the Minister of State just to look later at the new clause—that will be good enough for me. They tell me that this is a listening Government, and I hope that they will also listen to me about something else that I raised. I do not like voting against the Government. I try not to. If the Minister of State simply looks at the new clause, he will see the wisdom of ensuring that the law in

[Mr. Bermingham]

Northern Ireland is exactly the same as the law in England and Wales. If that is so, we ain't got a problem. Why can it not be like that?

Dr. Godman: I promise that I will be brief. I wish to seek clarification with regard to new clause 4 which, it has been suggested to me, excludes Scotland. Yet it refers to clause 40, subsection (3)(b) of which refers to someone being detained under schedule 6. In the table of designated ports in schedule 6, five of them are in Scotland—Ardrossan, Cairnryan, Campbeltown, Stranraer and Troon. If things go well over the next few months, Port Glasgow may have to be added to that list. Negotiations are taking place about a ferry service between Northern Ireland and Port Glasgow. I believe that a ferry terminal will be built there.

This is not a facetious point. We know that extremists on both sides of the divide have their supporters in Scotland. Recently, a person convicted of a terrorist crime was released and has applied to a Scottish university to read for a degree in political science.

The new clause states that all persons detained should have a solicitor present at all interviews to be conducted under this measure. The presence of a solicitor in such interviews is, I believe, standard practice in police and criminal procedures in England. That is not the case in Scotland, and that might present a difficulty if the new clause includes Scotland, as I think that it must, given what I have said about clause 40(3)(b).

Given the activities of some people in Scotland in relation to extremist organisations in Northern Ireland, do persons detained under the Bill have the same rights when being interviewed as apply elsewhere in the United Kingdom?

Mr. Bermingham: My hon. Friend makes a very good point about Scotland. Will he accept from me that the inquisitorial procedures in Scotland, with the role of the procurator fiscal, the way in which evidence in accumulated and served and the way in which interviewing take place are different from those of England? Whereas Scotland may well have problems in the future with the European Court, we should not allow Northern Ireland to have problems that can be avoided.

Dr. Godman: I have two comments in response to my hon. Friend's intervention. The Scottish legal system is now a devolved matter for the Scottish Parliament. However, there is a difference between the two systems concerning the right to a solicitor. Some years ago, when we were debating a Scottish criminal justice Bill in this place, I sought to amend it along those lines. I was defeated. My right hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Anniesland (Mr. Dewar), who then represented Glasgow, Garscadden and who is a lawyer, unfortunately argued against me. However, there is a distinction that has some bearing on the new clause.

8 pm

Mr. McNamara: I think that the new clause governs Scotland as well, as it refers to clause 40, which is in part V on counter-terrorist powers, not part VII, which is limited to Northern Ireland.

Dr. Godman: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who has greater knowledge of the law than I. In that case, we may have to amend Scots law, which would be a matter for the Scottish Parliament, even where this sort of legislation is concerned. At the very least, a concordat would have to be established between Ministers from the Home and Northern Ireland Offices and the Scottish Executive.

There are difficulties with the new clause where Scotland is concerned. Even though Scotland has not suffered from the outrages that have been inflicted on English communities—I think that the army general council of the Provisional IRA decided some years ago not to extend the campaign to Scotland—nevertheless senior police officers in the Pitt street headquarters of the Strathclyde police in Glasgow say that numerous supporters of outrageous terrorist activities and activists are based in Scotland.

I merely ask the Minister that persons detained under clause 40 should have the same protection as those detained elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

Mr. Lidington: Government amendment No. 64 is the central amendment in this group. It makes sense to relate the other amendments to the Government's proposal. The Government suggest that someone who is detained under the powers in clause 40 should have two rights: to inform a friend, relative or other person of their detention and to have access to a solicitor as soon as reasonably practicable, but subject to a number of exceptions, which are laid down in the Government's amendments to schedule 7.

Labour Members spoke in favour of their amendment. A detainee should have a right to consult his or her solicitor, but the right should be conditional to some extent and should not be left untrammelled. The hon. Member for St. Helens, South (Mr. Bermingham) said how, with a bank robbery, the police might be justified in holding incommunicado members of a gang whom they had captured while they attempted to extract information and get hold of the gang members who had evaded them.

The Government face a difficult balance between the desire to accord people legitimate civil rights and the demands of effective counter-terrorist policing. If someone is allowed unconditional access to a solicitor after detention, there will be a risk that other members of a terrorist organisation may be informed that an arrest has taken place or of a suspicion that an individual has informed the security forces, or that other information may be passed on that would help terrorists to perpetrate their crimes or put the police and security forces at risk.

Mr. Bermingham: I think that the hon. Gentleman misunderstood what I said. Under English law, one can hold someone incommunicado for serious arrestable offences. We understand that, it is acceptable and special rules apply. Also, at present one can hold those arrested for terrorist offences incommunicado and no one is suggesting that that should change. The Bill should make it clear that the powers that are being exercised in England and Wales are the powers that will be exercised in Northern Ireland. We are simply saying, "Same place, same powers."

Mr. Lidington: The Minister will defend the exact words of the amendment, but the list in sub-paragraphs (4)(a) to (g) is pretty comprehensive in setting out the risks that would legitimately justify withholding access to a solicitor during a counter-terrorist investigation.

I understood the intention of the hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr. Cohen), but it is a mistake to set a firm time limit for the review of detention. There is always a risk, in particular when one is dealing with officialdom in whatever shape or form, that a maximum time limit will become the minimum. The language of the Bill—that the review should take place as soon as is reasonably practical—offers a better safeguard. In most instances the police service will want to conduct the review and get it out of the way as quickly as possible.

I have three questions for the Minister about the Government amendments. If he cannot reply in detail now, I should be grateful if he would respond in writing in due course.

First, the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman) pursued the Scottish angle and schedule 7 seems to include a section that offers safeguards to people detained under clause 40 in Scotland. Amendment No. 64 would put in place comparable safeguards for detainees in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. However, the criteria for withholding access to a solicitor are different. The language of the Bill in page 108, where it relates to Scotland, is much less specific than the items laid down in amendment No. 64, which apply to England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Why is that the case? In practice, is there likely to be a substantial difference between the safeguards and categories of exemption available in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and those available to a detainee in Scotland? That might be an important distinction in an investigation that crosses boundaries within the United Kingdom, if there were indeed a difference of substance in the law that the Government propose.

Secondly, how will the police power to withhold access to a solicitor under certain defined conditions link with the power to seek from a judicial authority an extension of the detention period of up to seven days? Am I correct in my understanding that the Government propose that, provided the conditions in sub-paragraph (4) of amendment No. 64 are met, someone could be denied access to a solicitor for up to the full seven days of detention provided for in the Bill?

Thirdly, I have a question about the right of the detained person to have one named person informed of his detention as soon as reasonably practical. The amendment does not specify the way in which that information should be communicated. The Government clearly realise—in their proposals on legal advice—that there need to be safeguards in relation to the police and the conduct of counter-terrorist investigations. Do not those problems also arise as regards alerting a friend, relative or other person interested in the welfare of the detainee?

Is there a risk that exercising that right, which seems to be unconditional—according to my reading of amendment No. 64—would lead to information getting out that would put lives, or a terrorist investigation, at risk in the same way that the Government have accepted might happen if there were untrammelled access to a solicitor's advice? What is the Government's reason for making that difference between the two categories of right that they want to extend under the amendment?

I look forward to answers to those questions, but the Opposition are broadly content with the Government's proposals.

Mr. Charles Clarke: The discussion has been interesting. I welcome the opportunity to speak briefly on several of the issues raised.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara) referred to access to solicitors. I shall deal with the points that he made and with Government amendment No. 64, and the amendments grouped with it, in the same context. There is not much difference between my hon. Friend's position and that in the Government's substantive amendment No. 64 and the others. There is universal acknowledgement that prompt access to a solicitor should be the norm in any of the circumstances outlined in the provisions. However, there is a difference between us; I shall deal further with that when I have made the general case for the Government's substantive amendments.

The Government believe that in terrorist cases, as in ordinary cases under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984, it should be possible in very rare circumstances—I stress that point—on the authority of a senior officer, to delay access to a solicitor. As I understand my hon. Friend's new clause, he thinks that that should not be possible in any circumstances. That is a difference between us. As the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) noted, it is a matter on which a balance of judgment has to be made. I shall put some flesh on that point in a moment. Before doing so, I shall explain the effect of the Government amendments.

The Government amendments will add to the Bill the circumstances in which the right to advise someone of one's detention and/or to consult a solicitor may be deferred. When the Bill was introduced, that was achieved by amendments to sections 56 and 58 of PACE and the equivalent Northern Ireland PACE order, found in schedule 13. In the course of drafting those provisions, some technical deficiencies were identified and it was decided, for the ease of the reader, that rather than merely tidying them up by amendment, they should be included in the Bill. That is in line with the provisions for Scotland set out in paragraphs 12 to 16 of schedule 7. I hope that approach will be broadly welcomed.

My hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman) and the hon. Member for Aylesbury made some points about the situation in Scotland. The legal position in Scotland is addressed in paragraphs 12 to 16 of schedule 7. As my hon. Friend pointed out, Scotland has a separate criminal justice system, so matters are not dealt with in quite the same way.

In response to the point made by the hon. Member for Aylesbury, let me say that the criteria are slightly different, but as they are consistent we do not think that any substantial difference will emerge. We have considered the issue carefully. However, in the light of the points made in the debate, I am prepared to consider whether my assertion needs closer scrutiny. The hon. Gentleman made a fair point, but the reason why Scotland is dealt with separately is—as my hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde pointed out—that Scotland has a separate system.

8.15 pm

The amendments do not change our policy on the arrangements for those detained under the terrorism provisions; they ensure that such people usually have a

[Mr. Charles Clarke]

prompt means of communicating with a named person and/or can obtain access to a solicitor. The amendments continue to provide that those rights would usually be available as soon as practicable. They also provide that, under the Prevention of Terrorism Acts, as at present—I emphasise that that is the situation that exists as we speak—and as provided for when the Bill was introduced, those rights may be deferred in certain circumstances for up to 48 hours.

The circumstances in which the rights may be deferred are set out in paragraph 2C(4) of amendment No. 64. Seven alternatives are envisaged. The first four apply in all PACE cases; the last three are specific to terrorist cases. They include circumstances in which there is reasonable suspicion that access to a solicitor will have the effect of making it more difficult to prevent a terrorist act, or to apprehend someone involved in such an act, or to gather information about the commission, preparation or instigation of acts of terrorism.

That is the fundamental point with which I respond to the intervention made by my hon. Friend the Member for St. Helens, South (Mr. Bermingham). He asked what was different for Northern Ireland. The difference is that we are talking about terrorist legislation. That is what gives rise to the whole measure and to some of the issues that have been raised.

Mr. Bermingham: I am not against the idea of delaying the right of access; it is already acceptable in serious, arrestable offences. It is certainly acceptable in terrorist offences—because of the pursuit and arrest of other suspects and so on. The point on which I intervened is my grave concern about the presence of a solicitor during an interview. I can see no reason why that should ever be denied.

Mr. Clarke: I understand the point that my hon. Friend makes; I shall return to it in a moment.

We do not expect access to be deferred often. Records for England and Wales show that access has not been deferred in any terrorist cases during the past three years. In Northern Ireland, access was deferred in only 19 cases in 1999, in four cases in 1998, and in 33 cases in 1997. However, it is important to be able to defer access in exceptional cases. That brings me to the new clause tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Hull, North and the points that he made.

It would not be sensible to bind ourselves to a position in which it was never possible to defer access to a solicitor. If I understand my hon. Friend the Member for St. Helens, South, he appeared to acknowledge that in his intervention. That is not to suggest that the Government assume that some solicitors may have links with terrorism—any more than the fact that such provision exists under PACE for detention in non-terrorist cases suggests that we assume that solicitors might have links with organised crime. However, we must provide in law for the possibility that such a situation might occur. Otherwise, with the absolute right that the new clause provides, even if the police knew that a nominated solicitor was directly linked to a terrorist group, they would be powerless to defer access. However rare we might all believe such circumstances to be—I do not seek to impugn the reputation of solicitors either in Northern Ireland or Great Britain—it is surely our responsibility to ensure that such an eventuality could be dealt with if it arose.

Mr. McNamara: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. My new clause actually states that a person detained

> shall be promptly informed of their right to consult privately with a solicitor and to have a solicitor present at all interviews to be conducted under this Act.

We are arguing about being interviewed, not about the length of detention—although that might be another argument.

Mr. Clarke: It is precisely in response to the concerns expressed by my hon. Friend that a clear provision will be included in the Bill.

My hon. Friend and my hon. Friend the Member for St. Helens, South made some points about human rights. We believe that the Bill is entirely consistent with the European convention on human rights. We have considered the matter at great length and that is why the certificate is in the Bill.

I am perfectly well aware that lawyers may challenge that view, and the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) initiated an entertaining discussion on that in Committee. Indeed, the cynic would say that it is likely that the view will be challenged in law. We believe that the provisions specifically protect the processes that we have described against action in the European Court of Human Rights and under the Human Rights Act 1998.

It is in that context that I deal with the matter raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Hull, North. I am the first to acknowledge the sensitivities of interviewing a person without their having the benefit of a solicitor being present, and those sensitivities include the fact that there could be implications for the weight that may be placed in any subsequent court case on answers given in those circumstances.

Mr. Bermingham: My hon. Friend comes to the exact cause of my worry. The problem is the fact that one can draw inferences from the right to silence being exercised or from what is said during an interview. The presence of a lawyer protects the interviewer as well as the interviewee. If we have that in England in criminal and terrorist cases, why on earth are we not including it in the Bill?

Mr. Clarke: If my hon. Friend will permit me, I will come to the precise point that he has been raising throughout the discussion.

As I said, the sensitivities include the fact that there could be implications for the weight that may be placed in any subsequent court case on answers given in those circumstances. Sections 76 and 78 of PACE provide for the courts to exclude confessions or other evidence obtained unfairly, and of course it would be for the court to decide whether those provisions applied to evidence adduced in court which was obtained before a solicitor was present. That deals directly with my hon. Friend's point.

As I have said, we do not envisage access being denied other than in the most exceptional circumstances, and we have a responsibility to ensure that those detained under

the terrorism provisions, as under PACE, are properly looked after, and that includes having appropriate access to legal advice. Equally, we have a responsibility to prevent acts of terrorism and to apprehend those involved in such acts. That is the balance of judgment that we have made.

I have tried to set out the Government's thinking in response to the points that have been made, and I am prepared to consider whether any of the matters raised need to be addressed. However, what we have said is clear and straightforward.

Dr. Godman: I am extremely grateful for the courteous and comprehensive way in which my hon. Friend responded to my concerns about Scotland. On a minor point, in the table of designated ports on page 103, Campbeltown is misspelt.

Mr. Clarke: I shall certainly draw that misspelling to the attention of the parliamentary draftsmen.

I turn now to the points raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr. Cohen). Amendment No. 173 is unnecessary. Paragraph 25 of schedule 7 provides that a review officer must make a written record of the outcome of all reviews and that the record must include the grounds on which continued detention is authorised. That is fundamental to the issues raised by my hon. Friend.

Paragraph 18 provides that the first review of detention must be as soon as practicable after arrest, and reviews must take place thereafter at 12-hour intervals, so although there may not be a review at exactly the 36-hour point specified in the amendment, there will be a review between 36 and 48 hours. As with all reviews, a written record will be made of the outcome, including the reasons for continued detention, and that addresses my hon. Friend's specific point.

Amendment No. 178 in the name of my hon. Friend would require the first detention review to be done within four hours of arrest. In most cases it would not be realistic to have a fixed requirement, and I could not advise the House to accept the amendment. My hon. Friend acknowledged that the figure of four hours was plucked out of the air. I do not suggest that as any criticism of his amendment, but that is essentially the problem in choosing a period, whether it is two hours, four hours or six hours—there is an arbitrary nature to that choice. That is why the wording—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I appeal to the House to come to order. There are too many private conversations going on, and the Minister is replying to the points made by hon. Members.

Mr. Clarke: I am sorry for going on for slightly longer than I had hoped. Many technical points were made during interventions and I thought that it was courteous to respond to them as fully as possible, even though I am aware that this may not be the height of rhetoric and may not grip everybody in the way that every parliamentarian would wish.

We hold to the phrase

as soon as is reasonably practicable

precisely because fixing a particular time would not be effective.

Mr. Cohen: I am gripped by interest in the Minister's response, and I accept that my period of four hours before the first review and subsequent report is arbitrary, although it is meant to be a maximum period. My hon. Friend's formula is for the review and report to be done

as soon as is reasonably practicable.

Would he expect that to be within four hours?

Mr. Clarke: I am certainly prepared to say that the courts would view the period suggested by my hon. Friend as reasonable, but that is a judgment not for me but for the courts, which have to consider situations in the round. Delays can happen for realistic, technical reasons, and they need to be dealt with.

I have tried to deal as fully as I can with the points made by hon. Members, even down to the spelling of important Scottish towns, critical as that is. I hope that, on consideration, my hon. Friend the Member for Hull, North will withdraw his new clause and we will not have a Division.

I am conscious of the time and hon. Members' desire to move on, so I have not spent a great deal of time explaining Government amendments Nos. 60 to 63, which have not been addressed in the debate. I hope that they will be accepted.

Mr. McNamara: In view of what the Minister has said and his willingness to look at the points again, presumably before the Bill goes to the other place, and in view of amendment No. 64, which goes some way to meeting our concerns about what was missing from the Bill, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Motion and clause, by leave, withdrawn.

New Clause 8

EXPIRY AND REVIVAL (NO. 2)

'(1) This Act shall (subject to subsection (2)) cease to have effect at the end of the period of five years beginning with the day on which the Act is brought into force.

(2) The Secretary of State may by order provide—

(a) that a provision of this Act which is in force (whether or not by virtue of this subsection) shall continue in force for a specific period not exceeding five years;

(b) that a provision of this Act shall cease to have effect;

(c) that a provision of this Act which is not in force (whether or not by virtue of this subsection) shall come into force and remain in force for a specified period not exceeding five years.

(3) An order under subsection (2) shall be made by statutory instrument; and no such order shall be made unless a draft of the statutory instrument containing the order has been laid before, and approved by a resolution of, each House of Parliament.'.—*[Mr. Simon Hughes.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

Motion made, and Question put, That the clause be read a Second time:—

The House divided: Ayes 47, Noes 281.

Division No. 109] **[8.28 pm**

AYES

Allan, Richard	Beith, Rt Hon A J
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy	Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Baker, Norman	Breed, Colin
Ballard, Jackie	Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*

Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Chidgey, David
Cotter, Brian
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Fearn, Ronnie
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Livsey, Richard
Llwyd, Elfyn
McDonnell, John
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McNamara, Kevin
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Oaten, Mark
Rendel, David
Sanders, Adrian
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Stunell, Andrew
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tyler, Paul
Wallace, James
Webb, Steve
Willis, Phil
Wise, Audrey

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Tom Brake and
Mr. Bob Russell.

NOES

Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Battle, John
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dawson, Hilton
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Ennis, Jeff
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Forsythe, Clifford
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hope, Phil
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Rt Hon Adam
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Linton, Martin
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
McFall, John
McIsaac, Shona
Mackinlay, Andrew
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Maginnis, Ken
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Ross, William *(E Lond'y)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Shipley, Ms Debra
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Snape, Peter
Southworth, Ms Helen
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin

Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Rt Hon John D *(Strangford)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thompson, William
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
[illegible] Stephen *(Enfield)*
[illegible], Bill
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
White, Brian
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mrs. Anne McGuire and Mr. Graham Allen.

Question accordingly negatived.

Clause 1

TERRORISM: INTERPRETATION

Mr. McNamara: I beg to move amendment No. 122, in page 1, line 7, leave out from "means" to end of line 8 and insert—

'the commission of, or the threat to commit, any criminal act with the intention of—

(a) putting the public or any section of the public in fear, or

(b) coercing the institutions of democratic government,

provided that the act'.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): With this, it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 190, in page 1, line 7, leave out from "use" to end of line 12 and insert—

'of serious violence against a person or persons, or the threat to use such violence, to intimidate or coerce a government, one or more political bodies or organisations, the public or any section of the public for political ends, and which—

(a) endangers the life of any person; or

(b) creates a serious risk to the health or safety of the public or a section of the public.'.

No. 194, in page 1, line 7, leave out from "threat" to "of" in line 8 and insert "for political ends,".

No. 192, in page 1, leave out line 8 and insert—

'coercing, influencing or intimidating government, one or more political bodies, groups or organisations, the public or any section of the public, of actions which—'.

No. 146, in page 1, leave out line 9 and insert—

'(a) involves violence against any person or serious violence against property'.'.

No. 193, in page 1, line 9, leave out "or property".

No. 123, in page 1, line 10,, after "(b)", insert "seriously".

No. 195, in page 1, line 14, leave out from "Kingdom" to "and" in line 16.

Mr. McNamara: Amendment No. 122 would alter the definition of terrorism. It would remove the phrase

the use or threat, for the purpose of advancing a political, religious or ideological cause, of action.

Amendment No. 123, which I also tabled, would insert "seriously" before "endangers" in subsection (1)(b).

The amendment is a straight response to the kind invitation that the Minister issued in Committee on 8 February. He said:

if a better definition of terrorism emerges, we are prepared to consider it.—[*Official Report, Standing Committee D*, 8 February 2000; c. 325.]

The definition of terrorism took up the time of the House and the Committee. Hon. Members were worried that the definition in the Bill was too wide, based on wrong principles, and could catch in its net people who simply opposed genetically modified foods.

The Government's attitude to those who oppose GM foods has altered since Second Reading. Someone who might once have been considered an eco-terrorist is now regarded merely as a person who has serious misgivings about the adequacy of the provision for GM plants and their long-term effect.

The amendment arises from discussions that I held with the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, which was worried about the wide scope and subjective nature of the definition. The amendment that the commission proposed has four main elements. First, it deals with the motivational basis. The commission suggests that the provision for

advancing a political, religious or ideological cause

should be removed.

Secondly, the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission insisted that the action should be contrary to the criminal law. Thirdly, it proposed that the prohibited action should put the public in fear, or coerce the institutions of democratic government.

The commission believes that the Bill should not provide for differential police powers that depend on the motive behind the relevant actions. It believes that triggering the special powers should depend on the nature of the intended consequences of the action. In its view, the two most undesirable consequences are

putting the public or any section of the public in fear

and

coercing the institutions of democratic government.

Motivation is not the issue and should not be criminalised, although it would probably be appropriate to tackle it at the sentencing stage if someone was found guilty of an offence. As my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary said on 14 December:

If people are killed or injured, the fact that the bombs, the shrapnel and the glass carry a label marked "Animal rights" or the name of some foreign country is immaterial to those who suffer.—[*Official Report*, 14 December 1999; Vol. 341, c. 165.]

Motivation is extremely hard to prove and the categories are not susceptible to clear delineation. The Bill's approach makes the development of a two-tier justice system more likely. Under it, some people will be afforded lesser rights on the basis of the motivation for their crimes.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): I am not opposed to the hon. Gentleman's objective, but does he realise that the amendment would make acts by, for example, hunt saboteurs, capable of falling within the

[Mr. Douglas Hogg]

definition of terrorism? I do not suppose that the hon. Gentleman wants that, but the amendment would achieve that effect.

8.45 pm

Mr. McNamara: I understand the right hon. and learned Gentleman's point and I would be prepared to take a verbal amendment to exclude hunt saboteurs. However, even though clause 1 is one of the most controversial in the Bill—he is probably aware of that as he took part in the exchanges on Second Reading—I do not intend to push the amendment to the vote. That shows the degree to which the House is searching for a satisfactory solution to this difficult problem that gets away from advancing a political, religious or ideological issue and achieves a better way of dealing with it.

Amendment No. 123, which would put the word "seriously" in front of the word "endangers", would meet the problems raised by the right hon. and learned Gentleman's hunt saboteur to some extent, but the essential point is that a criminal act should be committed, which would not necessarily make such an offence a terrorist offence. The problem is that, if we retain motivation in the definition, we will have a two-tier approach and certain people will be afforded lesser rights on the basis of the motivation for their crimes.

The inclusion of political, religious or ideological cause results in a definition of terrorism that is both too wide and too narrow. It is too wide because many of the problems with extending the definition in the manner proposed, which we discussed on Second Reading, show people's discomfort with the range of organisations and activities that we believe might be caught by the clause.

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary gave the assurance that prosecutions would not ensue in many of the examples cited by colleagues from all parts of the House—for example, undertaking activities and fund raising on behalf of solidarity groups committed to major political changes in other countries—essentially on the basis that the Director of Public Prosecutions would use good sense in these matters. That is not in any way sufficient to allay the concerns expressed. Indeed, some decisions by the DPP to proceed with prosecutions, particularly under the Official Secrets Acts, make one wonder about whether that good sense is always proper and always accurate in these matters. Furthermore, a person's right to freedom of expression and of association cannot be contingent on the discretion of one person. The Bill should not be drawn wider than the threat justifies.

In addition, one of the principles underlying the European convention is that precision and certainty in the law is a key precept. A person is entitled to know whether the activities in which he or she wishes to engage or the right that he or she wishes to assert have been prescribed or limited by law. The Bill's definition is far too wide in terms of what a person may or may not say or express.

The definition is also too narrow because the clause excludes many organisations that use terror tactics—gangs involved in organised crime, racketeering or drug running, for example, which are not covered by a definition based on motivation. It is not certain that the Bill's definition would cover the Mafia. Surely, therefore, one should remember that the Bill's impact on society is what will be assessed and gaps in the existing criminal law for dealing with such infrastructure errors or failures should be closed. The commission's first point, therefore, is that—specifically and directly—the question of motivation is dangerous. Far better to be specific in terms of attitude and say that a criminal offence should have been committed. It is that to which I now turn my attention.

The Bill's definition leaves open the possibility that some actions could be classified as terrorist although they were not criminal offences, and I do not consider that acceptable. The objective of this element of the commission's proposed definition is to exclude certain activities that would be covered by the definition, but that most people would not regard as terrorist—for example, activities involved in industrial action. Many trade unions could be accused of endangering the lives and/or the health and safety of a section of the public in such circumstances. That would apply to electricity workers, firefighters, ambulance workers or nurses. Under the Bill as it stands, such actions could potentially be classed as terrorism. A requirement for the legislation to be otherwise—to be criminal—would exclude, for example, legitimate industrial action. Hunger strikes or suicide attempts would likewise be excluded by the criminality requirement in my proposed new definition.

The next requirement in the amendment is that the action involved should put the public "in fear". International human rights standards make it clear that the essence of terrorism lies in the effect that it would have on the public. For example, the first protocol of the Geneva convention of 1949 refers, in sub-paragraph 2 of article 51, to

> acts or threats of violence the primary purpose of which is to spread terror among the civilian population.

Article 5 of the 1998 United Nations convention on the suppression of terrorist bombings states:

> Each State Party shall adopt such measures as may be necessary, including, where appropriate, domestic legislation, to ensure that criminal acts within the scope of this Convention, in particular, where they are intended or calculated to provoke a state of terror in the general public or in a group of persons or particular persons.

Interestingly, Lord Lloyd recommended a similar approach—that the definition should include the element of intimidating or coercing the public or any section of the public. His proposed definition was the use of serious violence against persons or property, or the threat to use such violence to intimidate or coerce a Government, the public or any section of the public in order to promote political, social or ideological objectives.

That is the whole definition. Although the commission does not accept the words

> in order to promote political, social or ideological objectives,

it takes a similar approach to the European convention on human rights, the first protocol of the Geneva convention and the suppression of bombing convention.

The commission also considered the prohibition of action to coerce institutions of democratic government. The Minister of State, Home Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), said in Committee:

> The fundamental thrust of what we should be trying to achieve is a definition of terrorism as an attempt to undermine democratic processes by the use of violence.—[*Official Report, Standing Committee D*, 18 January 2000; c.18.]

We are trying to meet my hon. Friend's request, while meeting the spirit of Lord Lloyd's recommendation. That is the Government's intention, but it is not included in their definition.

The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission proposes an alternative to

putting the public or any section of the public in fear.

The use of a car bomb to put pressure on a totalitarian regime would be covered, as would the threat to coerce a democratic Government that did not put the public or any section of it in fear.

We have grounds for discussion about the possibility of improving the Government's definition, and getting away from their ideological, political or religious approach. Nevertheless, the amendment aims to achieve what the Government and, I believe, the whole House want to achieve: to get away from a definition that is hugely subjective, wide in some aspects and dangerous, placing individuals in a position where they do not know whether what they are doing is right or wrong in the eyes of the law.

Mr. Hogg: Again, I entirely respect the hon. Gentleman's motives, but his amendment is enlarging the class of activities that might be treated as terrorist, not restricting them. If the Bill removed the purpose test and included the test of putting the public, or any section of it, in fear, hunt saboteurs, for example, would be brought within its scope. I dislike hunt saboteurs, but they are not in any ordinary sense terrorists. However, that is what the amendment would achieve.

Mr. McNamara: With the greatest respect, let me say that, if one inserts the word "seriously" before "endangers" in line 10 of clause 1, that will ensure that the risk that would trigger the powers is a serious one. If that is there, it will meet the right hon. and learned Gentleman's point. When he makes his speech, as I am sure that he will, because the question of definition has engaged and worried us all, we will hear what he proposes.

It is not my intention to force the matter to a vote, but, because of the concerns expressed here, there should perhaps be an opportunity for those in the other place who are learned in the law to apply their minds to the matter, which is causing considerable difficulties among lawyers, who are concerned about the sweep of that definition. It has caused Lord Lloyd of Berwick some concern. As the legislation is based on many of his opinions, it is proper that we consider his concerns carefully, but I make the point: a person should be guilty of a specific criminal act. That should be what is judged, not whether it is politically, religiously or ideologically motivated, although that point could be taken into account in sentencing.

Mr. Mark Fisher (Stoke-on-Trent, Central): My hon. Friend says that a person should be guilty of a specific act, but, from my reading of his amendment, it still encompasses the concept of threat. That is one of the things that I find most baffling and disturbing about the Government's wording in the Bill: the threat of serious violence against property constitutes terrorism. As I read their wording; a letter threatening to burn a field of GM crops would constitute an act of terrorism. I sympathise with much of what he says, but, by maintaining the idea of threat, is his amendment not perpetuating the problem that I have with the Government's wording?

Mr. McNamara: We all have that problem on the question of threat. I put it in a way that my hon. Friend might appreciate. If I seek to carry out an act and threaten to do it, but that threat is not carried out, for whatever reason—a bomb does not go off or something of that nature—that would still be a threat. The amendments talks about seriously endangering life. That would meet that point. On the point about GM crops and similar matters, that is why I am seeking to get rid of motivation, which would then become a question on sentencing. There is a world of difference between the motivation of a person who is seeking to blow up a building and the motivation of a person who wants to destroy a field of GM crops. That is the point at which the question arises of whether an act is criminal.

9 pm

Mr. Simon Hughes: The hon. Gentleman has shown what difficult territory we are in. Those of us who served on the Standing Committee left it with the same definition with which we had begun. We are a long way from having an adequate and precise definition of terrorism. We must get that definition right, even in this slightly odd forum—the best that we have—because "terrorism" is the word on which the structure of the Bill depends. Once we define something as being terrorist, much else follows.

For example, proscription of an organisation may follow. That cannot happen unless, under clause 3, the Secretary of State believes that the organisation involved "is concerned in terrorism". A whole set of offences follows from a definition of terrorism, and the burden of proof or the nature of the defence will change. Those offences include fundraising for a terrorist organisation or failing to co-operate with the police in relation to a terrorist organisation. Much more happens. The powers of the police are greater if they say that they are dealing with terrorism. A person can be detained for longer, or large areas may be cordoned off. The powers of the Bill are based on the point that someone is involved in what is defined as terrorism.

Like the hon. Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara) and the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg), I felt concern that we were going too far. To a lesser extent, the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) felt it, and it was certainly felt by the hon. Members for Fermanagh and South Tyrone (Mr. Maginnis) and—if I may say so in his absence; I know that he intends to come back after a constituency party meeting—for Basingstoke (Mr. Hunter).

I shall set out where the consensus lay. As the Minister appreciates, it is important to note that there was consensus to some extent over the need for a change to the definition. The hon. Gentleman has not yet signed up to that need, but there was a broad view across part of the Committee, as there is across the House—it includes people of such differing political perspectives as the hon. Members for Basingstoke and for Fermanagh and South Tyrone and hon. Members on the Labour and Liberal Democrat Benches—that a Bill that allows us to define as terrorism something that targets any organisation in the world goes too far.

Mr. Charles Clarke: This is a perfectly legitimate debate, just as it was in Committee, but the hon.

[Mr. Charles Clarke]

Gentleman takes too much on himself in seeking to speak for all members of that Committee. He should allow hon. Members to speak for themselves.

Mr. Hughes: They will. I merely put it to the Minister that a widespread view was expressed on Second Reading—and to a lesser extent by the somewhat more restricted membership of the Committee—that the definition is too wide. Although we may not yet have a form of wording that unites the hon. Member for Hull, North with the hon. Members for Fermanagh and South Tyrone and for Basingstoke, the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham and me, some common elements in the direction that all of us seek to follow would take us away from the definition given by the Minister and the Government. We want a better, tighter, more specific definition.

Mr. Gapes: Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that, although we had a discussion on the matter in Committee, the Committee did not accept his position on it—as we did not accept other positions on it? I shall certainly speak for myself later in the debate. The hon. Gentleman used the word "consensus", but there was not a consensus on the matter—there are different points of view on it. Those views are held by hon. Members from different parties—none of whom, I suspect, would necessarily agree with one another on the matter.

Mr. Hughes: I do not want to misrepresent the situation—nor do I want the hon. Gentleman to misrepresent me. I did not say that there was a consensus in the House—

Mr. Maginnis: A large body of opinion.

Mr. Hughes: Yes. There was a large body of dissatisfaction about the matter, and there is a large body of agreement on it between those whom I identified. I was not including everyone in that. I was not including the hon. Member for Ilford, South (Mr. Gapes), his colleagues in Committee who supported the Government when we voted on the provision, or the Minister. However, there is a consensus among a wide body of opinion in the House—that body; not everybody—that we should amend the legislation.

Mr. Clarke: The only reason that I am intervening—I had not intended to do so; I am very happy to listen to the hon. Gentleman's arguments—is that I must object to the proposition that he is speaking on behalf of some cross-party consensus in the Committee or in the House. He is speaking for himself, as he should.

Mr. Hughes: I do not want to be distracted by this issue. I shall make the point even more bluntly. The definition is not acceptable to many hon. Members on both sides of the House. I hope that the Minister understands that, and that the Government will amend the definition. The Liberal Democrats will seek to divide the House on amendment No. 192—unless, as I hope, Ministers have said by then that they will move in our direction.

I am not too bothered about whether the Government move in the direction that we propose, or in the direction proposed by the hon. Member for Hull, North or the hon. Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone, as long as we move away from the breadth of the Government's definition—which will cover all sorts of activities which, until now, no one, not even Lord Lloyd, has argued should be defined as terrorism. We shall be stretching the definition of terrorism beyond any definition previously accepted in the United Kingdom, including that in the dictionary and that in common parlance. We should not do it.

Mr. Hogg: There is general unease about the Bill's definition of terrorism, which I share and will be expressing in my own words—if I have the good fortune to catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker. One of the conclusions to which we may well come is that we cannot define terrorism in acceptable terms in clause 1 if we are properly to balance that definition with civil liberties. If that is right, the Bill itself is inherently flawed, both in part I and in consequential parts, and by seeking further and other definitions, we are simply thrashing about.

Mr. Hughes: That is certainly a theoretical conclusion to the debate, and it may even be the practical conclusion. In a moment, I shall try to deal with the Minister's objections to the proposed alternative definitions that we have included in some of our amendments.

Amendment No. 122, which was tabled by the hon. Member for Hull, North, seems to deal well with the point that, if we include motivation in the definition, we shall begin to be in trouble. If we start saying that we have to read someone's mind to determine whether their motivation is political, religious or ideological, huge numbers of people may be covered. I gave an example in Committee. In terms of motivation, someone who hears voices telling them that they must stalk serial adulterers will be considered to be ideologically driven. Such a person would potentially come within the definition of terrorism, provided that he or she fulfilled the other criteria. Someone who believed that he or she had a duty to be an environmentalist and therefore decided to attack property as a way of protesting against a particular development would also come within the definition in the Bill.

Until now, nobody has argued that that is terrorism. The dictionary definition of terrorism—we looked it up in Committee—makes no such reference. The Bill stretches the English language too far. We should not do that because we have the criminal law: it is not as if we do not have the rest of the law. If someone set off a bomb for no reason that anyone could divine—we do not know the conclusion of the case, but let us say that nobody ever discovered why those terrible nail bombs were set off in London—that would be covered by the explosive substances legislation. It is perfectly good criminal law. If someone attacks a field of corn, there is perfectly good legislation dealing with criminal damage and damage to property. The Bill is not meant to cover any of that; it is meant to provide for cases that are not already covered by the law, and we should provide only for cases that are not already covered.

Mr. Hogg: That is not right. The purpose of the Bill is not to tackle a range of activities that are not yet subject

to the criminal law but to attach to those individuals and organisations the full weight of the other powers to which the hon. Gentleman has referred, such as the restrictions on the right to finance.

Mr. Hughes: The right hon. Gentleman is correct. The law already exists, but the Bill will ratchet it up and suddenly apply the criminal law and a whole range of other powers. As the hon. Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone knows—and he has had more practical experience of such legislation than most of us—it will then sweep into the legislation cases that no one wants swept in.

Amendments Nos. 190, 194 and 192 seek to direct the Bill at those who threaten political targets. The hon. Members for Fermanagh and South Tyrone and for Basingstoke and I—among others—believe that we should try to limit it in that way. The Minister will recall that in Committee we debated whether the Bill should be directed only at those who wanted to attack Government. We concluded that that would not do, as it would make it illegal to attack a Government who were not legal, or another political organisation. In Northern Ireland, if one political organisation attacked another political organisation, neither of which were in government, that would be understood as terrorism. We understood that we had to widen the definition of terrorism to include attacks on political organisations. That is why amendment No. 190 includes the phrase

to intimidate or coerce a government, one or more political bodies or organisations, the public or any section of the public . . .

The amendments also seek to remove the ideological and religious definitions because they are dangerously wide. They allow the crazed, deluded individual who is mentally ill or has a personality disorder to be swept in. We should not seek to do that. Such people are not terrorists just because they have an ideological fixation.

We also tried to make sure that the Bill did not include attacks on property where there was no risk to the public. In amendments Nos.193 and 195 we seek to remove the provisions in relation to property. To take the example of London, it would be callous to attack Canary Wharf or a building in docklands because people might be killed, but if someone decided to attack an empty building in the middle of a field and their the only intention was to attack the building—

Mr. Gapes: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

9.15 pm

Mr. Hughes: No, not at the moment.

An attack on an empty building would not normally be regarded as in the same league as acts that involve serious violence against persons or endanger their health or create a serious risk to their safety.

I agree with the hon. Member for Hull, North that we must avoid legislation that would make the nurse who took political action in the course of his or her duty potentially guilty of terrorism, with all the panoply of consequences. That is disgraceful nonsense. Lord Lloyd may have come to nearly the same conclusion, but the Government have gone further than him and further than their own consultation paper.

The Government may say that there are various safeguards and that the Director of Public Prosecutions will not order prosecutions, but legislation should not do what it is not intended to do. The Bill creates a whole set of new powers against the individual. That is bad legislation, as it neither defends the liberty of the subject nor helps make credible the argument for legislating against terrorism.

We have not found a solution that has the consensus of the whole House, but we have tabled amendments that would considerably improve the Bill. In due course, I will ask colleagues to support us in a vote on amendment No. 192.

The Home Office was shown one of many proposed amendments—the Human Rights Commission and Liberty have done some very good work, and I pay tribute to them—and said:

Whilst acknowledging the sensitivities surrounding violence against property alone, we do not think the answer can be to make all such violence "off limits".

We are not arguing that; we are arguing that violence that has only a property implication and can have no other should not be included.

The Government's only other objection was to ask about a bomb or threat in connection with the Grand National or a laboratory where experiments on animals take place. If that carries no risk to any member of the public and has nothing to do with threatening the institutions of the state, it should not be considered a terrorist activity and should be dealt with by the criminal law in the normal way.

Mr. Clarke: As I understand it, amendment No. 192 would have no impact whatever on the question of property. Is that right?

Mr. Hughes: Amendment No. 192 has to be read with the consequential amendments, Nos. 193 and 195. If they were made, property would disappear from the Bill unless the attack on property had a consequence for individuals. The amendments go together, with one narrowing the group affected and the others removing acts with property-only implications, although as a matter of practicality we do not seek to divide the House on every amendment on the list.

Mr. Gapes: Amendment No. 195 would, as I understand it, delete reference to activities that take place outside the United Kingdom. If the amendment were adopted, would the legislation apply only within the United Kingdom?

Mr. Hughes: The answer is no. I can show the hon. Gentleman the relevant wording later, but the problem is that we are considering seven or eight different amendments that are intended to deal only with property outside and inside the UK. They do not address the issue that we should have the power to deal here with activities that may arise abroad, subject to the qualification—which is always raised by the hon. Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone—that they should be political activities.

Mr. Gapes: If somebody in this country planned a terrorist action to destroy property in another country, would it be subject to this legislation?

Mr. Hughes: It would be subject to the legislation if it posed a threat to an individual or group of individuals and

[Mr. Hughes]

if it had a political aim. If no person were at risk, the activity would be excluded, because there are provisions in the criminal law to deal with such issues.

The European convention does not define terrorism as including property-only offences. The precedent is that terrorism is defined by threats and damage to individuals, not property. I hope that the Government have received the clear message that their definition is dangerously wide and should be changed.

Mr. Alan Simpson: I support amendments Nos. 122 and 123, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara). I also support amendments to the definition in the Bill. I was sad that my new clause 7 was not selected for debate, but I shall try to address the principal issues that it covered.

I feel considerable disquiet about the Government's definition and, yesterday, I discussed it with my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, at the Home Office. As I was waiting to be allowed in, I saw on the Lobby notice board that the security status was black. I asked what that meant and was told that it meant that there was no threat. It is important to realise that we are having this debate at a time when there is at least the prospect of being able to step back from the rigid, brittle frontiers of terrorist legislation that have blighted much of the democratic debates that the House has had on the issue in recent years.

Members of Parliament can go about their normal business without being surrounded by a House security system on high alert. That is something that we should celebrate. As a caveat to that, I can reveal that my meeting with my right hon. Friend carried a certain amount of risk to me. The Home Secretary was delayed unavoidably at a meeting in Downing street, and a Division was due in the House. I received a pager message telling me that the vote was imminent and I had to notify my right hon. Friend's staff that, if he did not arrive in time, I would have to race out of Queen Anne's gate to reach the House in time for the Division. The Division was called, and I bade a fast farewell, was escorted to the lift and began legging it for all I was worth along the road to try to get back here. Unfortunately, I almost collided with a vehicle as I crossed the road. It turned out to be my right hon. Friend's vehicle. He made excuses for me to the Whips, but I pointed out to him that we were likely to face threats from the Whips—in my case because I had missed the vote and in his case because he had missed me. That was about the level of the risk that we faced.

However, the Bill's definition of terrorism spreads the notion of threat and risk in a way that raises serious questions about the Bill's credibility and about the erosion of civil liberties in our society. I am certain that this definitional clause, which is pivotal to the Bill, must be re-examined. Sadly, the Government declined to do so on Second Reading and in Committee.

The definition is far too wide. The concept of terrorism that it advances is fundamentally flawed. It is deeply damaging to the openness of our society, to the primacy of civil and criminal law in our society, and to the respect in which that law is held.

On Second Reading, I urged the Government to look again at the definition of terrorism contained in the Reinsurance (Acts of Terrorism) Act 1993, which is currently in force. That Act defines acts of terrorism as the acts of

> persons acting on behalf of, or in connection with, any organisation which carries out activities directed towards the overthrowing or influencing, by force or violence, of Her Majesty's government in the United Kingdom or any other government de jure or de facto.

I accept that that definition is probably insufficient, as it talks of threats to the Government rather than to governance. We must acknowledge that terrorist threats can be directed against all parties in a Parliament, not just the Government. We must also accept that terrorist threats can seek to disrupt civil society to coerce or undermine the functioning of governance.

I would have had no qualms if the Government had returned with a definition that had been expanded in those terms. I understand that the definition proposed by my hon. Friend the Member for Hull, North is based on suggestions from the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission. My attempt is based on the wording used in the Australian criminal code, and I am sure that Liberty has offered advice on the wording used in the Liberal Democrat version. However, any of those alternatives would be a welcome departure from the broad-brush definition in the Bill.

The definitions proposed in the amendments would help the House to avoid the sophistry or the confusion involved in redefining terrorism in terms of threats to person or property, rather than to the prospects of governance and to civil society. Briefly, my preference would be that terrorist acts would be defined as acts that create public fear in order to coerce or undermine institutions of democratic governance.

The important point is that terrorist acts threaten the functioning of society and state, not the security of individuals and property within that society. That is adequately covered in our framework of civil and criminal law—as it should be—but it is wrong for the House to be confused about the reach of anti-terrorist legislation and the reliability of criminal and civil legislation. By failing to grasp this point, the Government have produced a definition that must be amended if we are to avoid the horrendous social division and wretched undermining of civil rights that would follow from it.

9.30 pm

I should like to illustrate some of the catch-all consequences of not amending the definition. Clause 1 refers to serious violence against any person or property as part of

> advancing a political, religious or ideological cause.

We need to take stock of where that leads. Almost all Labour Members would have to list a long catalogue of causes with which they have been directly associated, in their careers in Parliament and outside, and which would be caught under the new rubric of the definition of terrorism.

People participating in the miners' strike and Grunwick were responsible for serious damage to property. Their motivation was undoubtedly political or ideological. Regardless of whether they were dealt with well or badly, they were properly dealt with under the framework of

industrial and criminal law. It would be wrong for us simply to presume that what was missing at the time was the ability of the Government of the day to redefine those activities as acts of terrorism.

Mr. Hogg: The hon. Gentleman is looking back on his youth, when he was no doubt a participant in some of the anti-Vietnam demonstrations. In his middle years, he may well have been a participant in the community charge demonstrations in Trafalgar square. Will he reflect on the fact that both those activities undoubtedly fall within the scope of clause 1 and are therefore potentially terrorist acts?

Mr. Simpson: I accept the right hon. and learned Gentleman's propositions. I will try and list the other charges that I would like to be taken into account.

Mr. John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington): There is no time for that.

Mr. Simpson: The causes with which Labour Members have identified and which would be caught under the definition would include activities at Greenham common and those of the women at Menwith Hill, who regularly take down the fencing at the American spy base. They would include the activities of the women involved in the Trident Ploughshares campaign and those who broke in and damaged the Hawk aircraft. They would include the activities of animal rights protesters, activists who knowingly destroy fields of genetically modified crops and those who oppose live animal exports. From a different political perspective, they would also include the activities of anti-abortion campaigners.

It is not a matter of whether I agree with those campaigns. If people commit breaches of the criminal law, they should be dealt with under that criminal law. But it is quite wrong for us to give the Government the power to redefine whole tranches of social protest movements as though they were acts of terrorism. The implications for society are horrendous.

Mr. Robert Marshall-Andrews (Medway): Will my hon. Friend reflect on an example that he has not given? I refer to support for the African National Congress during the course of the apartheid struggle. It is a singular problem for one of our distinguished Ministers of State in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office that last week he would have lost his right to jury trial in respect of the bank theft with which he was unjustly charged, and this week he would be prosecuted under clause 1 for his activities regarding the ANC. As the same can be said for most of us, it would have been a happy band of brothers in the dock.

Mr. Simpson: I thank my hon. and learned Friend for those comments. As usual, he is several steps ahead of where I intended to go, but he is right.

Where would those caught in the net of the new definition of terrorism find themselves? Clause 1(1)(c) refers to terrorism if there is

> a serious risk to the health or safety of the public.

Again, such terrorism could be driven by support for a political or ideological cause. Where would that place the threat of strikes within essential public services—the national health service or the fire service—or by air traffic control and power workers? Could many of those workers find themselves not in breach of employment law, but being charged with terrorist offences?

The decision warrants much more serious thought and reflection, rather than calling on an in-built majority, which may be used in pursuit of an act of folly.

People who are so charged would face a number of consequences, which are defined in later clauses. They would certainly be exposed to the prospect of arrest without warrant, which is defined in clause 40. They might also be guilty by association. Clauses 15 to 18 define the framework within which groups of people will be committing terrorist offences if they raise funds for such causes and organisations or encourage others to do so. If they are found guilty of those charges, they will face a prison sentence of up to 14 years.

Clause 19 almost provides for guilt by suspicion. If one suspects that a person—perhaps a relation, someone who lives next door or whom one works alongside—supports one of the proscribed causes, but one fails to notify a constable, one is also guilty of an offence, for which one could be imprisoned for up to five years. Many hon. Members who were not directly involved in some of the campaigns that I listed would certainly have attended meetings and fund-raising events in support of those self same causes.

Mr. Norman Baker (Lewes): The hon. Gentleman's case is persuasive. He has set out the huge implications for civil liberties if the clause is not amended. That case could have been made by any principled Labour or Liberal Democrat Member in the past 20 years. Can he explain why the Government are failing to hear his logic or that of my hon. Friend the Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes)?

Mr. Simpson: I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman will have to wait a long time for such an explanation. I cannot come up with one for myself, let alone for anyone else. It is utterly perplexing that we should, apparently be wedded to a definition that threatens to undermine so sweepingly civil liberties and the credibility of governance itself. I cannot fathom why we should feel propelled to charge down such a catastrophic path.

However, it does not end there. As my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Medway (Mr. Marshall-Andrews) pointed out, clause 1(2)(c), which sets the provision in an international context, means that large numbers of us who actively supported the anti-apartheid campaign, the case for freeing Nelson Mandela, and the African National Congress, would clearly have been in breach of this Bill. It would be a wonderful way to get shot of a Labour majority at a stroke—it might even clear our Benches entirely. That would be the electoral aspiration of most of the Opposition parties. However, such heroic acts of self-sacrifice are not to be recommended to the Government—certainly not from within the Labour party.

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): My hon. Friend has made much of the past in South Africa. Is he aware that, at present, in many countries, even wholly peaceful opposition forces to military dictatorships are routinely labelled as terrorist organisations by their Governments? Under the Bill, someone from a country that is deemed to have an independent judicial service—

[Mr. Jeremy Corbyn]

however doubtful some of us might be about that definition—could be prosecuted in this country for being part of a peaceful, exiled opposition to the Government of such a country.

Mr. Simpson: I realise that. It is important to make the serious point that the international dimension is not only reminiscence; it relates to conditions in today's world. The definition would apply not only to conflict with a Government; it could apply equally to the Ogoni people's conflict with Shell and Shell's property. It could apply to the conflict between Amazonian Indians and the logging corporations that would destroy their natural habitat, their lives and livelihood. The reach of this definitional clause is frightening in its implications.

Moreover, there is a serious prospect that the international roles played by organisations such as Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, Christian Aid or War on Want could be defined as collusively involved in active terrorism, because those organisations support actions that confront the power of corporations and may damage their property. We have made a fundamental misjudgment of what a relevant and appropriate definition of terrorism should be in the Bill.

In the world in which we are trying to function and of which we are trying to make sense, one of the strong motive forces is power and pressure from global corporations. They want terrorist legislation to protect their property. They want us to put the protection of corporate fiefdoms at the head of civil societies. By including the property reference in our definition, we would be doing precisely that.

Global organisations are already conducting a battle of language through much of the campaign literature that they produce. They refer to environmental protesters as "environmental terrorists". They want us to describe those who protest against the building of roads, dams and oil extraction plants and against forest exploitation not as eco-protesters, but as eco-terrorists. That is what the Bill would do. It would give a facade of protection to corporate fiefdoms through repressive legislation.

Mr. McNamara: Does my hon. Friend agree that many corporate organisations are themselves arming dissidents to protect their property?

Mr. Simpson: Indeed. The one solace that I might have drawn from the measure would have been if it gave the House the power to prosecute those corporations under terrorism provisions, rather than to prosecute those who protest against the corporations. Sadly, the opposite will be true; the exploitation of people and the planet will not be reined in by the Bill.

If the House is to understand anti-terrorism legislation, that legislation must address extraordinary circumstances. It is not legislation for all seasons and, because it addresses extraordinary circumstances, it must have extraordinary clarity. The definitional clause does not offer that. On the contrary, it offers confusion and a potential threat to the security and stability of civil society, which is in excess of any threat that it could claim to remove or to offer protection from. That is why I ask the House, and the Government, to support the amendment.

The existing definition will be as counter-productive as it is repressive. What begins by putting society in chains will end by putting the Government on trial. If we do not amend the definition, the House will be found wanting.

9.45 pm

Mr. Hogg: I find myself in considerable sympathy with the points made by the hon. Member for Nottingham, South (Mr. Simpson), and I broadly support what he said.

We need to understand that this debate is right at the heart of the Bill because the definition of terrorism is the Bill's essential focus for the reason advanced by the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), which is that if an activity falls within the definition, the whole weight of the Bill falls on the individuals and institutions concerned. He cited some of those consequences, which include restrictions on the power to raise money, the rights of entry of the police and the right to require answers to questions. They are all detailed in the Bill.

The question that we must all ask about any activity is not whether it should be criminal, but whether the additional consequences contained in the Bill should fall on the individuals and institutions involved. In my view, there are many activities that are manifestly criminal but that should not in any circumstances be deemed terrorist. I think of two groups who perform activities that I particularly dislike. The first is hunt saboteurs. The second is GM protesters, of whom I do not think very much. However, I ask myself whether their activities should be deemed terrorist. The hon. Member for Nottingham, South mentioned many activities, and some of them should be criminal and some should not, but none of them should be deemed terrorist.

Those who demonstrated in Trafalgar square against the community charge committed serious offences against the criminal law, but I ask myself whether that was intrinsically a terrorist activity. I think back to the days of the anti-apartheid demonstrations, which the hon. and learned Member for Medway (Mr. Marshall-Andrews) cited. The great majority of hon. Members, whether or not they approved of the demonstrations and what happened in them, would agree that in no sense should they be classed as terrorist. An example from my youth is the anti-Vietnam demonstrations. To be honest, I do not like demonstrations of any kind because they almost always involve violence and their character is often criminal, but in no sense should they be deemed terrorist.

Once one starts from the proposition that that range of activities should not be classed as terrorist, one goes to the Bill and, I regret to say, the amendments, and starts by considering the Government's definition of terrorism. I am sure that Ministers will forgive me for saying that the definition means that all the activities to which I have referred run the risk of falling within the category of a terrorist activity, which is not to say that they would always fall within that category. That risk cannot be right.

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman reflect on the fact that these proceedings in the House are intrinsically linked to last week's proceedings? The truth is that if many of those offences were charged as terrorism, a jury would have no problem in throwing out such nonsense. The offences would plainly fall within the definition of terrorism,

but no jury would have any of it. However, taken with the erosion of the right to jury trial, these two parallel moves are deeply worrying.

Mr. Hogg: I agree only in part with the hon. and learned Gentleman. He and I have agreed in many ways for 30 years, even though we come from different political traditions; we have known and worked with each other for many years. I shall not digress far, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but he and I stood together against the legislation that restricted trial by jury, because we both disagreed with the proposals that it contained. One of the reasons was that juries act as the public conscience: sometimes, when the elements of an offence are made out, the consequences appear so absurd that the jury as the public conscience recognises the absurdity and refuses to convict. The point on which I disagree with him is that he appears to be affected by a slight misconception. Clause 1 does not create new offences; it triggers consequences and attracts penalties and sanctions to those individuals who are doing things that are classified as terrorist. Therefore, his point is not quite the same as mine, although it is very nearly the same.

Mr. McDonnell: The right hon. and learned Gentleman will agree that clause 1 also confers new powers, specifically in respect of the police. If the clause had been in force, the poll tax demonstration could have been prevented—he might think that would have been a good thing—as could any demonstration on the say so of one constable saying that a terrorism investigation was under way.

Mr. Hogg: The hon. Gentleman is wholly right, and that point lies at the core of my objections.

I hear mutterings from the Treasury Bench, so I shall face their source. Ministers say that clause 1 does not have the wide effect that we say that it does; well, let us examine clause 1 and see whether two activities—those I especially dislike: the actions of hunt saboteurs, and the anti-poll tax demonstration—fall within the class of clause 1 terrorist activity.

The clause states:

"terrorism" means the use or threat, for the purpose of advancing a political, religious or ideological cause, of action.

Let us start with the purpose test. Hunt saboteurs are certainly advancing an ideological cause—they would say so and, as a matter of law, they would be right; so would the police, and they would be right too. The community charge demonstrators in Trafalgar square were certainly advancing a political cause and, for that matter, an ideological cause. Therefore, the purpose test is made out.

Of course, such activities are not "terrorist" unless they fall foul of subsections (1)(a), (b) and (c). Subsection (1)(a) speaks of action that

involves serious violence against any person or property.

In Trafalgar square, there was serious violence against both persons and property. In many demonstrations against fox hunting, serious violence is committed against persons and property. The clause continues, referring to action that

endangers the life of any person.

In Trafalgar square, the police were very much at risk and they said so at the time. Subsection (1)(c) refers to action that

creates a serious risk to the health or safety of the public or a section of the public.

Fox hunters consider themselves to be at serious risk, and the Trafalgar square rioters certainly put the public at serious risk.

There is absolutely no doubt that the classes of activity that I have described fall within the scope of clause 1. It is misleading for Ministers to deny that.

Mr. Fisher: The right hon. and learned Gentleman lays great emphasis on the word "action", but is not clause 1 more complicated, and its implications worse, than he has said, in that the threat of action triggers the same consequences as action itself? Therefore a letter to a newspaper threatening to commit such action, or an interview on a local radio station in which a person announces his intention, or hope, of burning a field of GM crops, would bring all the consequences triggered under clause 1. Does not the definition used in the clause throw our definition of terrorism far too wide?

Mr. Hogg: I was focusing on the most graphic examples, but the hon. Gentleman is wholly right. The threat is sufficient to constitute the activity as potentially terrorist. The House would agree a wrong thing if it accepted the clause.

There have been attempts to address the problem in several amendments, my own included. The hon. Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara) produced one set of amendments, the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey another. I modestly produced a third—amendment No. 200, which was not selected.

I hope that the hon. Gentlemen will forgive me if I say that they have not resolved the problem. If they ask themselves the rhetorical question—I shall not take them through the detail, as I have already done so—"Would the fox hunting saboteurs be caught by their amendments?", the answer is yes.

I see the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey looking at his amendment No. 190. In the purpose section, it states:

to intimidate or coerce a government, one or more political bodies or organisations, the public or—

this is what I underline—

any section of the public for political ends.

Let us consider the last set of phrases and ask ourselves whether hunt saboteurs fall within that group. They certainly create a serious risk to the health or safety of the public—that is, fox hunters—with the purpose of coercing those who go fox hunting. I am using the example of fox hunting because I must use an example, but the same applies to the demonstrators in Trafalgar square, and I can perform exactly the same exercise with exactly the same consequences to the amendment moved by the hon. Member for Hull, North.

We must come to a conclusion. I believe that none of the amendments sufficiently addresses the problem that I have identified. I tried to do so through amendment No. 200, which narrows the definition of "violence" so that violence constitutes only threats to life. Even that is imperfect. The truth, I suspect, is that we cannot properly

[Mr. Hogg]

reconcile what the Government seek to do—I accept their good motives—with the aims of those of us who want to defend civil liberties and political freedoms.

My belief is that the difficulties associated with the definition are so great as to mean that the Bill is fatally flawed. That is the conclusion to which I think I come. It may be that others cleverer than I, here or in another place, can so define "terrorism" that it does not have the objectionable consequences which I believe that the present definition has. However, they have not done so yet. They have tried, but I suspect that they will not succeed. If that is indeed the case, the clause and most of the Bill should be rejected.

Mr. Gapes: I shall try to be brief. I speak as someone who supported the African National Congress, opposed the Vietnam war and supported non-violent direct action. The past hour has been a litany of scare stories and worst-case scenarios such as I have seldom heard.

My constituents and most people in the United Kingdom want to be able to travel on international aircraft without threat of being blown up. They want to be able to have a meal in McDonald's, as two of my close friends were doing when damage to the ceiling was caused by the Canary wharf bombing. They want to be able to go about their lives without the threat of internationally motivated, funded and organised terrorism. That is the essence of the Bill.

My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, South (Mr. Simpson) said that there was no threat. I do not know which world he is living in. The world contains well-organised, well-funded international terrorist organisations which operate in one country, plan their activities in a second country, have members who live in a third country, and get their finance from a fourth country. The Bill is trying to provide for effective anti-terrorism legislation. We can debate definitions of terrorism, and I accept that there are difficulties. However, we should not put ourselves in a position where, because of arguments about definition—

It being Ten o'clock, the debate stood adjourned.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 15 (Exempted business),

That, at this day's sitting, the Terrorism Bill may be proceeded with, though opposed, until any hour.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

The House divided: Ayes 279, Noes 40.

Division No. 110] **[10 pm**

AYES

Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Battle, John
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beggs, Roy
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Browne, Desmond
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dawson, Hilton
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fisher, Mark
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Forsythe, Clifford
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Gapes, Mike
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hope, Phil
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Rt Hon Adam
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Linton, Martin
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Maginnis, Ken
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura

Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Shipley, Ms Debra
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Rt Hon John D *(Strangford)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thompson, William
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
White, Brian
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. David Jamieson and
Mr. Clive Betts.

NOES

Allan, Richard
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Ballard, Jackie
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Breed, Colin
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Chidgey, David
Cotter, Brian
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Fearn, Ronnie
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Livsey, Richard
Llwyd, Elfyn
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Oaten, Mark
Rendel, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Stunell, Andrew
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tyler, Paul
Wallace, James
Webb, Steve
Willis, Phil

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Tom Brake and
Mr. Norman Baker.

Question accordingly agreed to.

As amended in the Standing Committee, again considered.

Question again proposed, That the amendment be made.

Mr. Gapes: As I was saying, the legislation is important in enabling the country to play its role in the international fight against terrorism. We were told by earlier speakers that, for some reason the definition should be changed to exclude—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am sorry to interrupt, but we are in the middle of a serious debate, and the hon. Member for Ilford, South (Mr. Gapes) is entitled to a reasonable hearing.

Mr. Gapes: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

The Liberal Democrats have told us that they want to exclude reference to property. I want to raise two issues which I think show the error of their position.

First, let us suppose that a terrorist organisation decided to blow up the Eros statue, Nelson's column or the Palace of Westminster, having, in the latter case, given considerable notice allowing the evacuation of the Houses of Parliament. Presumably, according to the Liberal Democrats' definition, those perpetrating the crime would not be subject to a charge of terrorism.

Secondly, there is the problem of the intentions of those who commit crimes. Presumably, at least according to the Liberal Democrats' barristers, if a person attacked a building or monument with the intention of not injuring human life, but if someone happened to be in the building or was passing it, that person's defence would be that he had had no intention of endangering life, and he would therefore be acquitted.

Mr. Hogg: The hon. Gentleman is making a fundamental error. Those involved in his two examples could be charged with other substantive offences under the criminal law, but the Bill does not create an offence of terrorism.

Mr. Gapes: I refer the right hon. and learned Gentleman to the definition in clause 1, which states that

"terrorism" means the use or threat, for the purpose of advancing a political, religious or ideological cause, of action which . . . involves serious violence . . . endangers . . . life . . . or . . . creates a serious risk to . . . health or safety.

My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, South implied that the word "which" did not appear in the definition. His argument was based on the assumption that the first sentence in itself would make a person guilty of terrorism—that someone who was committed to an ideological cause would be, by definition, a terrorist. That is absurd.

10.15 pm

I do not believe that, under the Bill, Nelson Mandela could ever have been put on trial. He certainly could not

[Mr. Gapes]

have been convicted in any court under it. Any Crown Prosecution Service prosecutor who decided to go through that process would not have put him on trial under the Bill. It is palpably absurd to think that there would ever be a conviction.

Similarly, we could use criminal damage or some other legislation, but we could not use terrorism legislation when people destroy crops in fields—one of the scare stories that we have heard. It is fanciful. It is based on worst-case, scare-story scenarios that are designed to frighten people off from introducing effective legislation to combat terrorism.

This country needs legislation, so that it is not a safe haven for people who plan crimes in one country and seek refuge in another. We have had examples of that. We know that the people who perpetrated the fascist bombing in Bologna have been living in Brighton for many years. They planned it, organised it and have been running neo-Nazi book shops in Brighton. It is time that we had effective measures to combat international terrorism, whatever the source.

I hope that the Liberal Democrats will think carefully about their position. This country must be at the forefront of international co-operation. That is what internationalism is about. The Liberal Democrats do themselves and their internationalist ideals a disservice by not being prepared to take internationally effective action to combat terrorism.

Mr. Maginnis: I am sorry that the hon. Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara) is not in the Chamber on this unique occasion: for the first time in 17 years, he and I have the same objective. That objective is to define terrorism. However, in case he takes what I say too seriously, may I allude to amendment No. 122, which suggests that we insert

the commission of, or the threat to commit, any criminal act with the intention of

(a) putting the public or any section of the public in fear.

That is such a flawed amendment. It shows the difficulty that we have with the definition of terrorism.

It is a criminal act for a young hooligan to throw fireworks through the letter box of a pensioner and thus endanger that person's life. Under the amendment, that would be not a criminal act, which can be dealt with under normal legislation, but a terrorist offence. That would be folly.

While I am talking about folly, I am rather puzzled by amendment No. 123, which wants to change the phrase

endangers the life of any person

to

seriously endangers the life of any person.

I wonder what the difference is. If the hon. Gentleman endangered my life, I might end up dead. I presume that he means that, if he seriously endangered it, I would end up very dead.

Dr. Godman: Seriously dead.

Mr. Maginnis: Indeed.

At the same time, I have serious concerns about the definition of terrorism in the Bill. I would delete virtually all of clause 1. It is a catch-all, but it does not adequately define what we mean by terrorism.

My definition of terrorism is that it is a conspiracy by three or more persons to use or threaten violence against society and/or property for the purpose of undermining or destroying institutions of the state. In Committee, the Minister displayed commodities that have become rarer during the 17 years that I have been in the House—considerable patience and courtesy. I hope that he will take what I say about the Bill in the spirit in which I intend it.

The Minister inherited an absolute mish-mash. We should have two Bills—one to deal with national terrorism against this democratic state, and another to deal with international terrorism being carried out from within this state against another. That would enable us clearly and meaningfully to define terrorism for, dare I say, the selfish, introverted needs of our own nation.

The problems of legislation on terrorism were highlighted by earlier mentions of that which followed the Omagh bombing. Whatever the good intentions behind it, it has proved unnecessary and has not been used. The Terrorism Bill also contains elements that will never be used because they are impracticable and do not relate to activities that endanger or undermine institutions of the state.

We have a democratic system, and we know what we mean by the institutions of state. The amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) is too explicit, listing political parties, groups and organisations, all of which are part of the institutions of state, as we understand that phrase. The Minister may be unable to deal with this point now, but when the Bill moves on to another place, I ask him seriously to consider the possibility of defining terrorism in terms of needs within this state and in terms of what can be implemented understandably.

I have nothing more to say. We need two Bills, not one. We need a simple definition of terrorism, based on violence or the threat of violence intended to undermine the institutions of this democratic state.

Mr. Fisher: It is a privilege to follow the hon. Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone (Mr. Maginnis), who has had to live under the shadow of terrorism as hon. Members from English or Welsh constituencies have not had to do. I listened carefully to his comments and to all of the debate. I was not a Committee member, and therefore was not party to the detailed speculation on the various definitions of terrorism in use in international conventions, in the United Nations and in other countries.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ilford, South (Mr. Gapes), who was on the Committee, seems confused about the Bill. As the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) said, the Bill does not create an offence of terrorism. The offences created by the Bill are in clauses 11, 12 and 13—which deal with belonging to a proscribed organisation, supporting that organisation and wearing the uniform of that organisation. Clause 1 defines terrorism and, by doing so, triggers the very serious and sombre treatment of someone who is so defined. It is essential—not because we are creating an offence of terrorism, which we are not

doing, but because we are creating a sequence of treatment—that we get that definition right. The definition in the Bill is totally baffling and incorrect.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ilford, South is the only person who has spoken in support of the Bill's definition. However, with due respect to him, he did not support the Bill's definition; he supported its aims—to be tough on terrorism. Not a single hon. Member or other person in the United Kingdom has any time for terrorism at all. My hon. Friend therefore chose the wrong subject. We are all with him and the Government in seeking to eliminate terrorism from society. However, in clause 1, we are doing something completely different—we are redefining what we mean by terrorism. Therefore, the wording of clause 1 is crucial.

It is no good my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford, South simply saying that we need not pay attention to worst-case scenarios or to hysterical thinking. If the Bill defines terrorism in such and such a manner, that would become the legal definition of terrorism. However, the Bill's definition of terrorism makes no sense whatsoever.

The crucial words in clause 1 are, first, "use" and "threat"; secondly, "political, religious and ideological" causes; and, thirdly,

serious violence against any person or property.

If we put those three things together, all the possibilities described by my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, South (Mr. Simpson), the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham and the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) would become real.

A threat is a part of the Bill's definition of terrorism. Therefore, a statement in an interview on a radio station or in a letter to a newspaper that "I intend to burn a crop of GM food" would become part of a terrorist activity. Subsequently, the terrorist activity would be compounded if there were violence, such as burning a crop. If the violence were directed against property—such as a crop—it would also fall within the definition, especially if the violence were being done to serve an ideological purpose, such as pursuing a vendetta against GM crops.

It does not matter whether the purpose of the activity is good or bad. The consequence of the Bill's definition is that it would be a terrorist activity to write a letter saying that one will burn a crop of GM corn. There is no way of getting around that. I do not think that my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford, South would consider that to be a worst-case scenario, but that is what the Bill would entail.

I agree with the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham. I am not very keen on hunt saboteurs or some of the actions of people who are against animal experiments. They may have virtuous intent, but their actions are often pretty unpleasant. However, it is nonsense to propose that such people should be defined by our society as terrorists, yet the Bill would do just that.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, South said, certainly Labour Members—I suspect Liberal Democrats too—have all been guilty of these things. Certainly during the miners' strike we all pushed down fences and gates. I did it at the Hem Heath colliery, the Florence colliery and elsewhere—

10.30 pm

Mr. Hogg: Surely not.

Mr. Fisher: I certainly did and I would do it again as it was in a good cause. The idea that I was committing an act of terrorism is absolute nonsense. I believe that would be generally accepted. As my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Medway (Mr. Marshall-Andrews) who is no longer in his place said, a jury would probably acquit one, but that misses the point of the Bill. It is not about whether or not one would be convicted of terrorism; it is about what is in the Bill. The Bill redefines terrorism in a totally nonsensical way.

Mr. Frank Cook (Stockton, North): Will my hon. Friend comment on the case of an individual who sought my help? He was in custody on suspicion of robbing a post office but, for the sake of avoiding the restrictions in criminal law, he had been detained under the PTA. If that can happen under the existing system, what prospect is there of protecting people under the system that is about to be introduced?

Mr. Fisher: I do not know that case, which is an interesting inversion of the proposal we are discussing. I should have thought that the criminal law gave the police and the prosecuting authorities perfectly adequate means of dealing with a person who had committed a criminal offence. As the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham, who knows the law better than most of us, has said several times, the criminal law can deal with actions against property and against the person. I cannot think of anything that the criminal law does not cover. That requires us to be much more detailed and specific about what we mean by an act of terrorism that is distinct from normal criminal activity. I was interested in what the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey said about the debate in Committee and the various speculations. I am sorry that I was not party to that discussion. It is extremely difficult to establish a definition, and we are not doing so by any of the proposed amendments, well intentioned though they are.

In amendment No. 122, my hon. Friend the Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara) concentrates on motivation. I sympathise with the intention behind the amendment, but the criticisms that have been made are valid. Motivation rather misses the point.

Mr. McNamara: My amendment proposes that motivation should not be taken into consideration, but that it should be concentrated on as the cause.

Mr. Fisher: I beg my hon. Friend's indulgence. I am sorry if I misled the House as I would not want to misinterpret his speech.

I sympathise with the thrust of amendment No. 190, but as it retains the words "violence against the person" and the word "threat", it does not overcome some of my objections.

Mr. Simon Hughes: We are all seeking a way forward. Between us, at least we have proposed a way of getting rid of some of the mischief. For example, amendment No. 193 would exclude violence to property with no risk to the public or individuals. I am sure that the hon.

[Mr. Simon Hughes]

Gentleman realises that to make the Bill perfect may require a combination of factors, but after tonight at least it will be better—and narrower—than it was when it first came to the House.

Mr. Fisher: I do not want to go too far down that path, because the House wants to make progress, but I think that the amendments are all designed to pare away certain elements rather than identifying what is specific about terrorism. Surely a threat to the security of the state is at the heart of what most of us mean by terrorism as well as of most dictionary and legal definitions. None of the amendments quite achieves the aim.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey says that we are doing our best, but now that we are launched on the path of legislation we have to get it right, in another place if not here. I feel that we are very far from an adequate definition that would not be too wide for anybody with any flicker of libertarianism. As a libertarian, I am offended and deeply worried by the definition in the Bill. I will not vote for any of the amendments, but I cannot do what I presume the Government will ask and vote against them, because by so doing I would be implicitly supporting the definition in the Bill, which is dangerous, misguided and inadequate. I do not understand what led the Government to it. It is totally baffling.

If the Government are simply sending a message that they are tough on terrorism and tough on the causes of terrorism, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford, South said, we would all say yea to that, but the definition goes much wider than that, and it is tough on many things that many of us would feel are totally outwith the ambit of terrorism.

The fact that we have so many Government amendments says something about the inadequacy of resources for parliamentary drafting in recent years, but on so crucial a matter I do not believe that bad drafting can be blamed. I wait to hear what the Minister and the Government are seeking to do, but I am perfectly convinced that the definition in the Bill simply will not do.

Mr. Lidington: The thrust of the amendments is to limit the scope of the definition of terrorism in clause 1. Some of them are designed to define terrorism more closely in terms of people with political rather than other objectives and others to delete references to attacks on property or to actions affecting persons and property overseas.

I want to put my party's approach on the record. We accept that, as the Minister has acknowledged at all previous stages of our proceedings, there is a difficult balancing act to strike between effective counter-terrorism law and civil liberties. It is right that, throughout the Bill's passage through both Houses of Parliament, the detail of the definition of terrorism should be kept under review.

I firmly believe that we need to have on the statute book powers for the police and the Executive against terrorist organisations. We need powers to search, to restrict fundraising and to detain. Those conclusions are shared not only by Conservative Members but by independent examiners of the legislation, including Lord Lloyd of Berwick and Professor Wilkinson, who were appointed by the Government to carry out a thorough-going review of the law on terrorism.

I believe, too, that it is right that this legislation should cover acts in respect of property. We surely cannot put ourselves in the lunatic situation in which an attack by the Provisional IRA on an empty office block, a railway junction, an airport building or Westminster Hall should somehow fall outwith the scope of anti-terrorism legislation because it had taken care to ensure that no human being would be at risk. If we adopted that approach, we would be saying to the police, "You may know from your intelligence that the Provisional IRA is responsible for that act of terrorism but, because of the way that we have drafted the definition, you are not allowed to use the powers of detention, stop and search and arrest that we have provided for you and other agencies in this legislation."

In amendment No. 146, I have sought to address the worries that have been expressed that the Bill allows too wide a scope for actions against property alone to be brought within the law, and I welcome the Minister's comments on that in due course.

Dr. Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak): I take the hon. Gentleman's point that the Bill should apply to the IRA in the circumstances that he has described, but surely it should be possible to word the clause that would catch such action. For example, the action against property could be coupled with the endangering of life, because the blowing up of such a large piece of property would be certain to endanger human life.

Mr. Lidington: As regards property, it is right that the Bill should contain a general provision of the kind that the Government suggest. We can argue about the exact words that we would prefer but, given the ruthlessness and dedication of terrorist organisations, we need to include attacks against property, because they can be used to disrupt life in this country and other democratic societies as a means of intimidating the population and their Governments.

Mr. Hogg: I do not think that many people would disagree with some parts of what my hon. Friend has said, but he needs to answer this question—if the result of drafting clauses that catch the IRA in the way that he has described is that they also catch many other organisations that are not trying to subvert the state, is it right to follow the course that he advocates?

Mr. Lidington: It was made clear in Committee when the Minister responded to the concerns that had been expressed by several hon. Members about the matter that the Government envisaged that, in the normal course of events, most criminal offences would continue to be dealt with under the normal procedures of the criminal law. My right hon. and learned Friend is obviously worried that to trust in the judgment of the police and the courts is inadequate and that a new definition needs to be written into the law. However, I feel that we would fail in our duty if we narrowed the definition to such an extent that it failed to provide adequate protection against terrorist groups that have shown repeatedly that they are utterly careless of human life and well-being.

It is also right that the Bill should cover domestic terrorism and more than purely political objectives. We have seen the example of the Aum sect in Tokyo and the havoc that it wrought against innocent civilians. Some of the extreme, well-organised animal rights groups might also properly be treated as terrorist, because they are organised and have in the past used car bombs and like measures to harm men and women who are not politicians but research scientists or otherwise connected with a company whose policies on experimentation the groups seek to influence.

It is right that the Bill should cover action overseas as well as in the United Kingdom, but I retain some reservations about that and I hope that the Government will reflect on the definition that they have applied. Given the attack on the United States embassy in Kenya, the outrages in the middle east and the assassination of democratic leaders such as Rajiv Gandhi, it seems right that our anti-terrorist legislation should catch the perpetrators of such crimes.

10.45 pm

Genuine unease has been expressed about whether the safeguards suggested by the Bill are adequate. One man's terrorist is another's freedom fighter: how does one deal with that problem? How does one deal with the difficulty caused when a group of people in the United Kingdom call for the overthrow by force of a tyrant in another country? The examples of Saddam Hussein and others were mentioned frequently earlier.

Hon. Members have been right to draw such matters to the Minister's attention. I hope that the Government will continue to reflect on them as the Bill continues its passage through Parliament.

Mr. Charles Clarke: From the outset, the Government have been keen to emphasise the difficulty of defining this important matter. We have said, clearly and explicitly, that a balance must be drawn between the need to fight international terrorism—many reports confirm that that is a real threat in the modern world, which we must combat if we are to protect our citizens—and the need to protect individual liberties. That is a very hard question of judgment.

On Second Reading on 14 December—three months and one day ago—my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and I both stated that we were ready to consider other, better wordings and definitions to deal with these matters. We said that we were prepared to look at better forms of definition, and I repeated that commitment more than once in Committee. Much of this evening's debate has centred on questions of wording.

I want to take this opportunity to thank Liberty and the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission. Both organisations have made serious efforts to draft alternative clauses in response to the invitation from me and my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary. Their work is to be commended. Although I do not agree with every word that they offered, I accept that they took on the challenge, acknowledged the importance of addressing the problem of international terrorism, and sought a better definition than the one offered by the Government.

It would be churlish not to acknowledge those two pieces of work, which underlie the amendments tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara) and by the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes).

The Government started from the viewpoint that the definitions in the prevention of terrorism and emergency provisions legislation had operated effectively and that changes should be made only where they could be justified. We were also firmly of the view that it was no longer defensible to confine the legislation to Irish and international terrorism, and to exclude the application of the definition to acts connected solely to the affairs of the United Kingdom.

It is striking that, although there is much debate about what actions constitute so-called domestic terrorism, it appears to be generally agreed that the time has come to accept that some such actions should be caught. In deciding on a definition to put before the House, we also considered carefully the advice of Lord Lloyd. I shall not rehearse earlier debates, but we took very careful account of what he had to say.

Finally, and most importantly, we bore in mind the purpose of the new definition as we worked it up. As I have stressed many times, there is no linked offence of terrorism. As is the case now, most terrorists will continue to be charged with offences under the ordinary criminal law. That is the essence of what we are talking about. The definition is in the Bill to trigger the availability, primarily to the police, of certain additional powers and specific offences that we believe are needed to disrupt and investigate terrorism in all its aspects. Although I acknowledge that it would be wrong to make these additional powers available too widely—that is one reason for raising the threshold to "serious violence" and tightening the definition that appears in previous prevention of terrorism Acts—it would be a massive mistake if we constructed a definition of terrorism that was too narrow and constrained the law enforcement agencies in their critical responsibility to fight terrorism.

Mr. Baker: We heard earlier a litany of examples of what could be caught by the definition, from the Trafalgar square poll tax riots to pulling up GM crops. Is it the Minister's view that those activities would be caught by the definition and, if so, is it a price worth paying?

Mr. Clarke: No, it is not my view, but I will be dealing at some length with the points that have been made in this discussion, and I will deal with that point then.

We have consulted the police closely, and discussed the various acts with them. We believe that this definition will assist the law enforcement agencies. Should we go for a definition broad enough to catch the range of activities that we believe terrorists may undertake but that could potentially catch other activities? Or should we go for a narrow definition that limits the chances of catching actions some believe to be non-terrorist but which, by definition, involve serious violence or the like, but would fail to catch all the terrorist activity of which we are aware? That is the balance that the House must judge and that we have been trying to judge in the three months and a day since Second Reading.

I come now to the amendments before us. Let me deal first with some of the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Hull, North. Amendment No. 122 refers to putting the public in fear. The proposition that any seriously violent act carried out to put the public in fear should be caught by the definition of terrorism could lead to an unacceptably wide definition—even wider than the one in the Bill.

[Mr. Clarke]

The right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) referred to hunt saboteurs, but other examples are equally controversial. The Yorkshire Ripper certainly put the public in fear—would that be categorised as a terrorist act? I do not think that it could be described as terrorist behaviour, but it would certainly have put the public in fear and would have been caught by the proposed definition. Apart from controversial activities such as demonstrations and hunt saboteurs, very serious crimes would, quite inappropriately, be caught by that definition.

I agree that the notion of fear of terrorism is key to the concept of terrorism, but it is an over-simplification to suggest that all actions carried out to put the public in fear are acts of terrorism or could be so defined. They clearly are not. I believe that we need a different or additional filter, which is why we believe that the motivational approach which my hon. Friend does not like and seeks to remove by his amendment—that the act was carried out to advance a political, religious or ideological cause—is the right one. The motivation is what distinguishes other actions that put the public in fear from acts of terrorism.

Mr. John Cryer (Hornchurch): Would the definition in the Bill have caught the striking miners of 15 years ago and/or the people who supported the anti-apartheid movement during the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s?

Mr. Clarke: As I said on Second Reading and thereafter, I believe that the answer to both questions is no.

Mr. Hogg: The hon. Gentleman has just conceded that hunt saboteurs, beastly though they are, should not be treated as terrorists. Will he accept that they are carrying out an act that falls within the scope of an act that is capable of being defined as terrorism under clause 1?

Mr. Clarke: I do not accept that. That is the burden of what I will say when I come to the specific points that have been made. If I accepted the right hon. and learned Gentleman's point, I would accept some of the comments that have been made in the debate, but I do not accept it.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Clarke: No, I will not. I wish to make more progress.

Several hon. Members mentioned property. The Government stand by their view that violence against property can be terrorism—it is not necessarily, but it can be. The hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) gave some examples. The Canary wharf bombing is the most striking example in our recent history.

What about a bomb, such as the one at Canary wharf, for which a lengthy and accurate warning is given and which destroys buildings? It does not seem logical that empty targets could be bombed and livelihoods and communities destroyed as a result, but that the police would not have at their disposal the powers and offences triggered by the definition of terrorism. The serious violence against property limb must be retained to deal with those far from fanciful examples.

Mr. Hughes: The definition of terrorism is that it has to have a motivation—it could apply to property—that, in the Government's wording, is "political, religious or ideological". In reality, anyone could define what they do in such a context. To be honest, that definition does not take anyone any further. Someone could say, "For me, this is an ideological matter. It is subjective; it is incapable of objective analysis by the court."

Mr. Clarke: It is capable of objective analysis. The Bill establishes a massive process whereby the courts and the House will consider the definitions. We will all make our judgments, as will the courts. The Bill sets the context.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): I have no difficulty with the international terrorism provisions and I said so in an intervention on Second Reading. The powers are essential. However, I have many reservations about the matters raised by my hon. Friends the Members for Stoke-on-Trent, Central (Mr. Fisher) and for Hornchurch (Mr. Cryer). Although the Minister dismissed the possibility, I am concerned, for example, that the miners' strike of 15 years ago and other actions—industrial or otherwise—could be included in the definition of terrorism. As someone who believes strongly in civil liberties, the right to demonstrate and the rest, I remain concerned about those aspects.

Mr. Clarke: I hear my hon. Friend's comments and I appreciate the support that he offered on Second Reading and subsequently on other matters. I will deal with them.

In Committee and today, the hon. Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone (Mr. Maginnis) openly argued for two Bills. First, I understand his arguments but, whether we have two Bills or one, we will not avoid having the definition. In either or both of the Bills, the issue would have to be dealt with. That could be done in the same way in both Bills, or in different ways, which would cause difficulties.

Secondly, the hon. Gentleman said that some legislation was not used. In Committee, he argued forcefully for the principle of deterrence that is used in much anti-terrorism legislation—to dissuade people from becoming involved in any way with terrorist activity. The fact that aspects of legislation have not been used is not a convincing argument.

The right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham and my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, South (Mr. Simpson) gave much the same speeches today as on Second Reading, although they were more lengthy and—to be frank—a little less coherent today. The logic of their argument is that we cannot find a definition. The right hon. and learned Gentleman clearly suggested that, although I am not sure whether my hon. Friend would say the same.

The logic of the right hon. and learned Gentleman's position would be to vote against Third Reading because we should not have the Bill. In the balance that he weighs between the need to fight international terrorism and the need to protect individual liberties, he comes to the view that we should not use more legislation—I was going to say that we should forget the fight against international terrorism, but I do not mean that quite so pejoratively. He thinks that the liberties would be so challenged that we should forget the idea of taking extra powers. I see the logic of that position. However, it is not the same position as that of those who argue that our definition is amendable.

My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, South gave a long list of examples and other hon. Members gave similar examples on Second Reading and at other times. I repeat what I said on those occasions: the legislation will give rise to no fears about the domestic political and industrial relations activities and so on that have been described during the debate. Part of the debate has been fanciful. A string of arguments have been pushed out that bear no relationship to the facts or to the potential of the Bill.

11 pm

Mr. Winnick: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for allowing me to intervene again. Will he give us a further explanation as to why we should not be worried about the domestic position? He said that those activities would not be covered by the Bill. Why should they not be? I apologise to the House because I was not in the Chamber for some of the earlier speeches, but I heard the powerful speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central—as did the Minister. Much concern and worry were expressed that certain activities would be defined as terrorism when in my view, and that of some of my hon. Friends, they should not be.

Mr. Clarke: None of us thinks that the activities about which my hon. Friend is concerned should be defined as terrorism—no one in the whole House believes that.

Mr. Tony Benn (Chesterfield) *rose—*

Mr. Frank Cook *rose—*

Mr. Clarke: I shall not give way to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) who was not in the Chamber for the debate. I give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook).

Mr. Cook: I refer my hon. Friend to the example I gave earlier this evening. An individual was detained on suspicion of robbing a post office. Under the PTA provisions, he was detained without charge for an extraordinarily long period. His wife and his two sons were detained under the same provisions and subsequently released without charge. He was tried, sentenced and served his time. If that is permissible at present, what redress would people have against such abuse in the future?

Mr. Clarke: I know nothing of the detail of the case, apart from what my hon. Friend said in his earlier intervention. Based on his description, it would seem to be an abuse of current law and would thus be an abuse of future law. No doubt, my hon. Friend will take up the case in the proper way.

Mr. McDonnell *rose—*

Mr. McNamara *rose—*

Mr. Clarke: I give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Hull, North.

Mr. McNamara: My hon. Friend said categorically that offences such as those listed by many hon. Members would not be caught by the legislation. Why?

Mr. Clarke: As I said earlier, under the definition in clause 1, it is clear that the cause of the actions in the demonstrations that have been mentioned would not have been to endanger people's lives, nor to engage in serious violence and so on. That is why—

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Clarke: I shall not continue to give way, but I give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (Mr. McDonnell).

Mr. McDonnell: I am grateful to the Minister. I hope that, if I were to come up before a court on such matters, he would be sitting on the bench. The miners' strike has been mentioned several times. That was an ideological cause. There is no doubt that the general secretary of the miners union at that time was pursuing a socialist cause in that strike. Furthermore, the strike involved serious violence against persons and property. Indeed, some of the Members who spoke in the debate admitted to that. The strike endangered life; it created a serious risk to the health and safety of the public. With the greatest respect to my hon. Friend, it is not up to him to decide on the definitions; a judge would do so—on that basis, we should be guilty.

Mr. Clarke: My hon. Friend is right to say that, at the end of the day, it would be for a judge to decide. However, I was asked for my view as to whether the miners' strike and various other actions could be caught by the legislation. I do not believe that they would. I said that on Second Reading, and have continued to say so all through the Bill's proceedings.

Dr. Lynne Jones *rose—*

Mr. Clarke: I shall not give way again except to the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey because I want to make a point about the Liberal Democrat position that he may need to address.

I have tried to point out that the issue in the balance is whether we have such legislation at all. The right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham has concluded that we should not.

If one takes the view that there ought to be such legislation, the consequence is that one must have a definition of terrorism. I acknowledge the difficulty in drafting that definition, as I have done throughout the proceedings, and I have invited proposals for reaching a better definition. I have explained why we are not in a position to accept any of the amendments. They would not provide a better definition that the one offered in the Bill.

When the Liberal Democrats decide whether to proceed with amendments Nos. 192 or 193—they are not consequential amendments but independent and separate amendments operating in different ways—they must consider what types of terrorist activity might not be covered if either of their amendments were to be carried. Would, for example, the Tokyo sarin attack be covered if amendment No. 192 were accepted? I suspect that it might not. There might well be other activities that would not be covered. The hon. Gentleman and his party will make a judgment on that, but there is a genuine issue of balance that has to be resolved.

Mr. Simon Hughes: The Minister knows that my position has consistently been to seek a definition that

[Mr. Simon Hughes]

achieved widespread support; I have never renounced the idea of a definition. On that basis, will the Minister undertake to convene, before the Bill goes to the other place, a round table of all parties, legal advisers and interested groups? Will he undertake to get and place in the Library a legal opinion on whether the questions asked in the House about the implications—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. The hon. Gentleman is not the only Member who has been guilty of making long interventions. I appeal to hon. Members to keep their interventions brief.

Mr. Clarke: I will not convene a round table meeting. I have allowed three months and a day for people to make positive propositions. I have congratulated those organisations that have genuinely worked to that end and sought to analyse their ideas. Even at this late stage, I say again that, if there are further propositions, I will be happy to consider them before the Bill goes to the other place. However, I have not yet seen alternative definitions that are better than the one offered by the Government. On that basis, I hope that the amendment will be withdrawn or defeated.

Mr. McNamara: I said at the start of the debate that I did not intend to divide the House on the amendment because I thought that there might be time for further thought. I have listened carefully to my hon. Friend's reply to the questions that were raised. I am extremely disappointed by what he has said and by his attitude. This is a difficult matter, and it has caused grave concern in the House. Because of that, and because I do not believe that my hon. Friend has advanced sufficient reason for rejecting the amendment, I intend to divide the House, if I get the support of my colleagues.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 15, Noes 235.

Division No. 111] **[11.8 pm**

AYES

Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Flynn, Paul
Hancock, Mike
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
McNamara, Kevin
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Wise, Audrey

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. John McDonnell and
Mr. Jeremy Corbyn.

NOES

Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Ennis, Jeff
Flint, Caroline
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Gapes, Mike
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hope, Phil
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Rt Hon Adam
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lidington, David
Linton, Martin
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McDonagh, Siobhain
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Mackinlay, Andrew
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill

Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Singh, Marsha
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Soley, Clive
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
White, Brian
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Mike Hall and
Mr. David Jamieson.

Question accordingly negatived.

Amendment proposed: No. 193, in page 1, line 9, leave out 'or property'.—*[Mr. Simon Hughes.]*

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 41, Noes 249.

Division No. 112] **[11.19 pm**

AYES

Allan, Richard
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Breed, Colin
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Chidgey, David
Cotter, Brian
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Fearn, Ronnie
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Livsey, Richard
Llwyd, Elfyn
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Oaten, Mark
Öpik, Lembit
Rendel, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Stunell, Andrew
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tyler, Paul
Wallace, James
Webb, Steve
Willis, Phil
Wise, Audrey

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Adrian Sanders and
Mr. Tom Brake.

NOES

Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Beggs, Roy
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clelland, David
Clifton–Brown, Geoffrey
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Dawson, Hilton
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Drew, David
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Ennis, Jeff
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Forsythe, Clifford
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Gapes, Mike
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hope, Phil
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Rt Hon Adam
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Linton, Martin
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
Luff, Peter
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McDonagh, Siobhain
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Mackinlay, Andrew
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
Maginnis, Ken
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali

Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Ross, William *(E Lond'y)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Singh, Marsha
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Soley, Clive
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thompson, William
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
White, Brian
Wilkinson, John
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wilshire, David
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Jim Dowd and
Mr. David Jamieson.

Question accordingly negatived.

Clause 3

PROSCRIPTION

11.30 pm

Mr. Simon Hughes: I beg to move amendment No. 186, in page 2, line 19, at end insert—

'(ii) he has satisfied a judicial authority that there are reasonable grounds for believing that it is concerned in terrorism; and

(iii) that the judicial authority has issued a declaration that there are reasonable grounds for the exercise of the Secretary of State's power'.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to discuss the following: Amendment No. 187, in page 2, line 19, at end insert—

'(4A) In this section "judicial authority" means—

(a) in England and Wales, the Lord Chief Justice or his designated appointee

(b) in Northern Ireland, the Lord Chief Justice of Northern Ireland or his designated appointee

(c) and in Scotland, the Lord Advocate or his designated appointee.'.

Government amendments Nos. 1 to 5 and 9.

Amendment No. 162, in schedule 3, page 62, line 9, after "Chancellor", insert—

'after consulting the Chairman of the Intelligence and Security Committee'.

Amendment No. 163, in page 62, line 33, after "may", insert—

', after consulting the Chairman of the Intelligence and Security Committee,'.

Government amendments Nos. 48 to 57, 95, 115 and 119.

Mr. Hughes: One of the consequences of the definition of terrorism that we were debating on the last group of amendments is that, if an organisation is regarded as being concerned with terrorism, it can be proscribed. Under the present legislation there are 14 proscribed organisations, which are listed in a schedule to the current Bill and included in the existing emergency powers legislation. The list has remained the same for some time.

The Bill will allow proscription in relation to United Kingdom and international organisations. In Committee, the Government implied that they would expect Northern Ireland or Irish organisations to remain proscribed and did not expect in the immediate future to add any United Kingdom-based organisations, but they did not preclude the possibility of adding non-UK organisations. I hope that I have represented them correctly. A political group in the middle east, for example, could be proscribed here, and could then be within the remit of the legislation. The same could apply to a political group in Africa or one in Pakistan.

In Committee, we spent some time debating how Parliament regulates a decision to proscribe an organisation, and what then happens. The Bill allows the initiative to be taken by the Government; requires the Government to come to Parliament; and requires Parliament to approve the proscription of the organisation by a simple vote in both Houses. Then, and only then, can any organisation that thinks that it should not have been proscribed because its members are not terrorists start a process to undo the proscription.

One of the arguments that struck us as central was that there should be a process, independent of the politicians, for adjudication on whether the criteria for proscription had been met before proscription had taken place.

Mr. Hogg: The hon. Gentleman spoke of starting a process to undo the proscription. He was, of course, referring to the appeal procedure mentioned in clauses 4 and 5. As he will know, the criteria in clause 5 are the judicial review criteria. The decision to proscribe will not be reviewed on merit; rather, it will be asked whether it was an irrational decision. That is a quite different test.

Mr. Hughes: With respect, I was about to deal with the fact that the procedure thereafter is only partial—and the right hon. and learned Gentleman put very well the way in which it is only partial.

This is the process: the Secretary of State decides that an organisation ought to be proscribed; he presents an order to Parliament; there is a debate lasting an hour and

a half in both Houses, following which the Government would normally expect to whip their majority through the Lobby. Proscription then takes place immediately. Thereafter, there is a non-judicial process, starting with clause 4. Either the organisation concerned or anyone affected by the proscription, under regulations that have not yet been seen or approved, will apply to a proscribed organisations appeals commission.

We had a big debate about whether what was appropriate was a commission—another body that would do only that job in the United Kingdom and that would be specially appointed. At no stage other than on a point of law and later can there be any legal review. From the discussions in Committee, it seems that an application can take place only on the basis of a failure of process—some technical deficiency—or on the basis of the court saying that the Secretary of State and Parliament could not reasonably have come to that decision. As colleagues will know, effectively, no opportunity is allowed for a judicial overturning of the decision.

Mr. Winnick: Is there not a possibility that the amendment, although it might seem reasonable, would weaken the Government's powers to deal with some notorious organisations from abroad that are involved in terrorism and want to campaign on the most subversive grounds in this country? One or two organisations in the UK have been banned in countries in the middle east, yet operate freely here, intimidating students, in the main, from countries in the middle east, which is totally unacceptable.

Mr. Hughes: I hope that I can persuade the hon. Gentleman that, while I accept what he has said, he can support the amendment. I accept his premise. There are such organisations. They do work here. They do have an effect on students and people who are nationals of the same country as their members who are now here, and who work in a way that we would not condone. We are clear that it is our policy and position that there should be a UK-wide legislative framework and that, in theory, it should be able to deal—it does not happen yet—with international or national organisations from abroad, so I am with him.

Mr. McNamara: The hon. Gentleman rightly says that judicial review is not sufficient because it is hard to see a case being overturned by that means. But when the gays in the military case went to the European Court of Human Rights, it ruled that judicial review was not sufficient and that a case could be examined on its merits.

Mr. Hughes: That is correct, for the reason that we discussed earlier. As of 2 October, everything in the Bill will be reviewable under the European convention in domestic courts in the UK. In the case to which the hon. Gentleman alludes, the convention was used to hold that fair process had not been provided, so the hon. Gentleman is right to say that there is a qualification to the rather limited review process.

There is in the Bill a process for undoing proscription. In later clauses in the same part, there is a provision whereby the Secretary of State can come before the House to de-proscribe. That happens in a similar way.

My hon. Friends and I are asking the House to agree to a proposition that says that it should not be for the Secretary of State alone—of whatever party, in whatever Administration—to make a decision without someone other than politicians having a view that there is evidence sufficient to get across the threshold. I take the point of the hon. Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick). If he thinks about it, if Ministers wanted, on the basis of intelligence advice that they had received, to proscribe an organisation from the middle east, Northern Ireland or Ireland, they might not wish, or be in a position in the interests of security, to come to the House with the information. For understandable reasons, they might not be able to tell us all their reasons for wanting to proscribe an organisation. It has long been agreed that security matters are not discussed in the House. Answers from Prime Ministers have indicated that during every Administration since I have been a Member.

That means that the most serious decisions could be taken about organisations of which we knew little. The organisation and everyone in it could be proscribed. There would be a remote chance of overturning proscription if an application were made in this country, although the organisation might not be based here, but the Minister who sought Parliament's approval on trust on the information that he had been given would be the only authority for its proscription.

I do not mean to undermine the role of both Houses in questioning such decisions. On security matters, however, we know to our cost—although we have members of the Security and Intelligence Committee—that there are many things about which we are not told, and certainly things about which we are not told until long after the event. We seek to provide an external adjudicator who can consider the evidence to see whether a reasonable test has been passed. It would be bizarre not to do that.

The Bill, which many of us consider draconian in many respects, requires police constables seeking certain things and those who request special powers to go to court to ask for them. It would be unusual if a move as draconian as proscription did not require a Minister to go to some authority independent of the state and the Executive before the event to say that evidence supported it.

Amendment No. 186 makes a simple proposition. The Minister should satisfy a judicial authority that there are reasonable grounds for believing that an organisation is concerned in terrorism, and the judicial authority should issue a declaration that there are reasonable grounds for the exercise of the Secretary of State's power. That simple process of seeking a declaration is used every week in the courts under administrative law. A judge could hear the case in camera, and the Minister could come to the House with the authority of a declaration.

11.45 pm

Dr. Godman: I was going to ask the hon. Gentleman what he meant by a judicial authority, but he has told us that he means a judge who would deliver a formal opinion. May I point out that the Lord Advocate, who is referred to in proposed new section 4A(c), is a Law Officer and therefore a member of the Government? The hon. Gentleman may think the point technical, but he should refer—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman may wish to make a speech, but his intervention is too long.

Mr. Hughes: Judicial authorities are defined for other purposes elsewhere in the Bill. Sometimes the authority

[Mr. Hughes]

is a senior magistrate. In this sort of case, according to the advice that I took—I do not pretend that it was the highest in the land—in England and Wales and in Northern Ireland, the authority should be the Lord Chief Justice, who deals most with criminal matters. In Scotland, the position is slightly confused—I mean no criticism—by a recent ruling of the European Court of Human Rights about when judicial appointees may have political roles. I am willing to be corrected: another senior judge may be more appropriate in Scotland. I shall not press amendment No. 187 to the vote because there may be better suggestions. However, the principle is that, in each of the three jurisdictions, a senior judge should be the person who issues a declaration that there is evidence for proscription.

Dr. Godman: The Lord Advocate is not a judge but a Law Officer, and hence a member of the Government.

Mr. Hughes: I know that. Nevertheless, the advice was given that he might be the appropriate person. The point that I was trying to make was that, because of a recent ruling—which the hon. Gentleman, as a Scottish Member, will know as well as if not better than I do—in Scotland, the issue of re-defining appointments is being considered. It has been ruled that in certain cases involving sheriffs, and in other matters that are not irrelevant to the issue that we are debating, there is a conflict.

Mr. Fisher: Will the hon. Gentleman explain to the House how the scrutiny of the judicial body would be more rigorous than the scrutiny of the House? He made the valid and justifiable point that the House might not have in its possession all the material necessary to scrutinise a case, but would not that apply also to the judicial body?

Mr. Hughes: The answer to the hon. Gentleman's perfectly good question is that there is much precedent establishing the courts' ability to see in camera—effectively, in private—the Minister's evidence for proceeding with a case, although that evidence could not be provided to Parliament. Quite often, courts decide cases on the basis of papers that are given to them, and on which they form a view. I am not criticising the fact that Ministers could not give that material to Parliament. Ministers would give Parliament an assessment and some information, and offer a view on the case. However, at that stage, we would not necessarily be able either to question the assessment or to elicit necessary information.

As the hon. Member for Walsall, North said, decisions sometimes have to be made quickly. If there were information about an imminent terrorist attack in this country by a foreign organisation—or about an attack abroad by an organisation based in the United Kingdom—action would have to be taken speedily. That does not mean that there should not be some way of our stopping that action being taken, to the severe detriment of individuals and organisations.

We are trying to balance measures affecting the individual's liberty with security. Individuals could wake up one morning to discover that an organisation to which they belonged had been proscribed although they would have had no say at all in that decision, and no opportunity to argue or resist the designation with all its consequences. We also have to consider the practical difficulties of overturning such a decision.

The question is whether we should give powers only to the state, the Government and Parliament, or allow a body that is independent of politicians to make an adjudication. I hope that the House will feel that it is appropriate to provide for judicial oversight; that such oversight adds something; and that it will provide great protection, should severe action—proscribing an organisation—be taken. The United Kingdom has never taken such action against a non-Irish organisation.

Mr. McNamara: I listened with increasing confusion to the speech of the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes). I have a gut feeling against any type of secret court, but he seemed to be describing precisely the type of situation—against which the European Court of Human Rights ruled in the gays in the military case—in which there is no opportunity to examine the case's merits.

The hon. Gentleman has not thought the matter through. Although he rightly criticised the procedure proposed in the Bill, he has not stated clearly whether we should follow that procedure, accept the drawbacks of judicial review or accept the Strasbourg Court's action to overcome those drawbacks. Indeed, I thought that he slightly—but unintentionally—misled the House when he said that courts issue declarations every day. They do, but they give their reasons for doing so. They do not simply state, "On the evidence that I have seen—therefore . . . "

Ever since the Scott inquiry, the courts have been scrupulous about issuing declarations such as public interest immunity certificates. Governments have to demonstrate whether issues are relevant to a specific decision, and whether material should be disclosed to the parties. I cannot envisage that the courts would want to find themselves subject to all sorts of criticism on the basis of their reaching decisions, when the people involved in the case know nothing about those decisions.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey is looking at the purpose of proscription somewhat wrongly. I am not certain about the value of proscription, but I believe that its main purpose is to show society that to belong to or to support particular organisations is not desirable for a whole host of reasons—because they shoot people and do other nasty things seeking to subvert the state. The state must give reasons for proscription.

It is worth arguing whether proscription is a good or bad idea, but reasons must at least be given for proscribing an organisation. If no reasons were given, one would want to know why an organisation was proscribed. The list of proscribed organisations shows that, at one time or another, they were associated with actions that, under the old legislation, would have been considered to be acts of terrorism.

I object to the amendment on two grounds. First, the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey has not thought it through and, secondly, he has completely misinterpreted the role and purpose of proscription.

Mr. Hogg: I shall be brief. This debate flows from the fact that we have a wide definition of terrorism. What is troubling the hon. Member for Southwark, North and

Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) is that Ministers will come to the House seeking an affirmative resolution and have within their knowledge material that they cannot disclose to the House, so there will be a judicial filter. I have some sympathy with that approach, but it is probably not a judicial exercise. I do not think that the Lord Chief Justice or anyone else would want to exercise it.

The problem goes a little further, however. The power to proscribe can be exercised under clause 3 if the organisation to be proscribed is engaged in terrorist activity, but that test should not be sufficient. For reasons that we have demonstrated in previous debates, many organisations pursue activities that are capable of constituting terrorist activities, but their activities are not such that the House would think it proper, right, appropriate or in the public interest to proscribe them. Thus the real question that the House ought to consider is not a judicial filter, but whether the proscribing power should be extended so that, first, the organisation has to be committing acts of terrorism and, secondly, it is in the public interest to proscribe them. Unless the second test is written in, it will be possible to proscribe simply because an organisation is pursuing activities that fall within the definition of terrorism.

That takes us back to the miners, demonstrators and hunt saboteurs who pursue activities as defined, but nobody wants them proscribed, however beastly they may be. We should, therefore, build into clause 3 a further test that addresses the public interest.

Mr. Lidington: I shall speak to amendments Nos. 162 and 163, which stand in my name, and then comment briefly on the amendments moved by the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes).

Amendments Nos. 162 and 163 would require the Lord Chancellor to consult the chairman of the Intelligence and Security Committee about appointments to the proscribed organisations appeal commission and about the rules under which that commission should operate.

I do not want to labour the point, as the subject was alluded to earlier. I tabled amendments Nos. 162 and 163 because it is important to find a way in which to involve the Intelligence and Security Committee, and the Select Committee system more generally, in overseeing the work that the Bill will set in hand.

We are in the course of establishing a range of commissions, authorities and commissioners, whose duty will be to oversee Ministers' work in respect of various aspects of security and intelligence, and it is time to give serious thought to how best to involve parliamentarians in appropriate scrutiny and oversight of that work.

I am dubious about amendments Nos. 186 and 187. The decisions that the Bill requires of the Secretary of State in respect of proscription are exactly the sort of responsibility that Secretaries of State are there to carry out. If we ask a judge to look at acutely sensitive security material—perhaps details of informants—we are putting that judge in an invidious position, as it would be normal judicial practice to look at both sides of the argument and, if possible, to allow either party to make representations about the other's evidence.

Under the amendments, we would be asking the Lord Chief Justice and others to take on what is properly a role for the Executive. It is right that Parliament should hold the Secretary of State to account for such important decisions. If Parliament does not have confidence in the persuasiveness of a Secretary of State's argument, it has the right and the responsibility to refuse the order and leave the organisation unproscribed. That is proper parliamentary accountability and the better way to proceed.

Mr. Charles Clarke: Amendment No. 1 and the other Government amendments are technical amendments concerning proscription, and I will not go into the detail of them.

On amendment No. 186, I agree with the points made by the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington): the decision is for the Executive. The issues that have to be taken into account include the nature and scale of the activity, the specific threat posed to the United Kingdom and to UK citizens abroad, the extent of the organisation's presence in the UK, the need to support other members of the international community in the global fight against terrorism and the importance of deterrence.

The Home Secretary and the Executive are the right people to take those decisions, with accountability to Parliament in the way that the hon. Member for Aylesbury described. I hope that the House will reject the amendment if it is pressed to a vote, but I urge the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) to withdraw it.

I understand the motive behind amendments Nos. 162 and 163. It is a perfectly reasonable proposition that we should find a better way of binding the parliamentary process into the procedures. As I wrote to Committee members following this discussion in Committee, the role of the Intelligence and Security Committee is defined in section 10 of the Intelligence Services Act 1994. It is

> to examine the expenditure, administration and policy of—
>
> (a) the Security Service;
>
> (b) the Intelligence Service; and
>
> (c) GCHQ.

It seems unlikely that the ISC's remit as currently established would allow for the role and responsibility that the hon. Member for Aylesbury has suggested, although I appreciate his motives and I am happy to consider other proposals that he may have for more effective integration.

I hope that the House will support the Government amendments and that the others will not be pressed to a vote.

12 midnight

Mr. Simon Hughes: I am grateful for the other contributions to this debate. Good and valid points were made by the hon. Members for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara) and for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman), as well as by the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg). I do not agree with the view of the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) that there may not be an appropriate forum for other people to have a say in the process. If there is a method that would command greater support in terms of the public interest test, rather than a traditional court proceeding, we could reasonably consider it. On that basis, I shall seek the leave of the House to withdraw the amendment and I shall talk to my colleagues

[Mr. Simon Hughes]

to see whether we can increase citizens' powers and reduce the state's power slightly. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 6

FURTHER APPEAL

Amendments made: No. 1, in page 3, line 26, leave out "leave" and insert "permission".

No. 2, in page 3, line 28, leave out "leave" and insert "permission".—*[Mr. Charles Clarke.]*

Clause 8

SECTION 7: SCOTLAND AND NORTHERN IRELAND

Amendments made: No. 3, in page 4, line 34, leave out from "Scotland" to end of line 8 on page 5 and insert "—

(a) for every reference to the Court of Appeal or the Crown Court substitute a reference to the High Court of Justiciary,

(b) in subsection (2)(b), at the end insert "and quash the conviction",

(c) in subsection (4)—

(i) in paragraph (a), for "28 days" substitute "two weeks", and

(ii) in paragraph (b), for "section 1 of the Criminal Appeal Act 1968" substitute "section 106 of the Criminal Procedure (Scotland) Act 1995",

(d) in subsection (5)—

(i) for "by a magistrates' court" substitute "in summary proceedings", and

(ii) in paragraph (b), at the end insert "and quash the conviction",

(e) in subsection (6), paragraph (c) is omitted,

(f) in subsection (7)—

(i) in paragraph (a) for "21 days" substitute "two weeks", and

(ii) for paragraph (b) substitute—

"(b) shall be by note of appeal, which shall state the ground of appeal,

(c) shall not require leave under any provision of Part X of the Criminal Procedure (Scotland) Act 1995, and

(d) shall be in accordance with such procedure as the High Court of Justiciary may, by Act of Adjournal, determine.".'

No. 4, in page 5, line 14, after "court,", insert—

'( ) the reference in subsection (6) to section 111 of the Magistrates' Courts Act 1980 shall be taken as a reference to Article 146 of the Magistrates' Courts (Northern Ireland) Order 1981,'.—*[Mr. Charles Clarke.]*

Clause 9

HUMAN RIGHTS ACT 1998

Amendment made: No. 5, in page 5, line 29, leave out—

'(but not paragraph 5(1)(a) or (3)(e))'.—*[Mr. Charles Clarke.]*

Clause 29

FORFEITURE: APPEAL

Mr. Charles Clarke: I beg to move amendment No. 6, in page 14, line 22, leave out "by a magistrates' court".

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): With this it will be convenient to discuss Government amendments Nos. 7, 8 and 10 to 13.

Mr. Clarke: The purpose of this group of amendments is to ensure that the provision for England, Wales and Northern Ireland set out in amendment No. 9 will also apply to Scotland. I hope that they are uncontroversial and can be agreed by the House.

Amendment agreed to.

Amendments made: No. 7, in page 14, line 25, after "Court," insert—

'() where the order is made by the sheriff in Scotland, to the Court of Session,'.

No. 8, in page 14, line 32, after "court" insert "or the sheriff".

No. 9, in page 14, line 42, at end insert—

'(5A) Subsection (5B) applies where a successful application for a forfeiture order relies (in whole or in part) on the fact that an organisation is proscribed, and—

(a) a deproscription appeal under section 5 is allowed in respect of the organisation,

(b) an order is made under section 3(3)(b) in respect of the organisation in accordance with an order of the Proscribed Organisations Appeal Commission under section 5(4) (and, if the order is made in reliance on section 121(4), a resolution is passed by each House of Parliament under section 121(4)(b)), and

(c) the forfeited cash was seized under section 25 on or after the date of the refusal to deproscribe against which the appeal under section 5 was brought.

(5B) Where this subsection applies an appeal under subsection (1) may be brought at any time before the end of the period of 30 days beginning with the date on which the order under section 3(3)(b) comes into force.'.

No. 10, in page 14, line 43, leave out subsection (6).—*[Mr. Charles Clarke.]*

Clause 30

TREATMENT OF FORFEITED CASH

Amendments made: No. 11, in page 15, line 4, leave out "or (6)".

No. 12, in page 15, line 5, leave out "or (6)".—*[Mr. Charles Clarke.]*

Clause 31

RULES OF COURT

Amendment made: No. 13, in page 15, line 14, leave out paragraph (c).—*[Mr. Charles Clarke.]*

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Clause 39

TERRORIST: INTERPRETATION

Mr. Charles Clarke: I beg to move amendment No. 14, in page 18, line 16, leave out "57" and insert "62".

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss Government amendments Nos. 22 to 24 and 30.

Mr. Clarke: Amendment No. 14 extends the list of offences under the Bill in respect of which a clause 40 arrest may be made. Amendments Nos. 22 and 24 ensure that the police will be able to cross from one part of the United Kingdom to another to exercise the powers under clauses 40 and 42 to arrest or search a person suspected of being a terrorist. Amendment No. 23 gives the police explicit power to seize and retain things that may constitute evidence that a person searched under the clause 42 search powers is a terrorist. Amendment No. 30, in line with section 221 of PACE, provides that things may be retained as long as necessary in all the circumstances.

Amendment agreed to.

Clause 40

ARREST WITHOUT WARRANT

Mr. Charles Clarke: I beg to move amendment No. 15, in page 18, line 37, after "detained", insert—

'in accordance with subsection (5) or (6) or'.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following: Government amendments Nos. 16 to 21.

Amendment No. 164, in schedule 7, page 111, line 37, leave out "a judicial authority" and insert "the Secretary of State".

Amendment No. 137, in page 111, line 44, leave out "seven" and insert "four".

Amendment No. 179, in page 111, line 44, leave out "seven" and insert "five".

Amendment No. 165, in page 112, line 1, leave out subparagraph (4).

Government amendments Nos. 77 to 81.

Amendment No. 166, in page 112, line 23, leave out "A judicial authority", and insert "The Secretary of State".

Amendment No. 167, in page 112, line 39, leave out "judicial authority", and insert "Secretary of State".

Amendment No. 168, in page 112, line 39, leave out from "application" to end of line 4 on page 113.

Government amendment No. 82.

Amendment No. 169, in page 113, line 7, leave out "judicial authority" and insert "Secretary of State".

Amendment No. 170, in page 113, line 11, leave out "A judicial authority" and insert "The Secretary of State".

Amendment No. 171, in page 113, line 26, leave out subparagraph (3).

Government amendment No. 83.

Amendment No. 172, in page 113, line 31, leave out "a judicial authority", and insert "the Secretary of State".

Government amendments Nos. 84 to 89.

Mr. Clarke: The Government amendments are minor and are intended to allow the judicial authority to adjourn proceedings and to define the point at which the application is made.

Mr. Lidington: Several of the amendments in this group were tabled by my right hon. and hon. Friends and me. I had a good go at the subject in Committee, so I shall not detain the House overlong. This is an important subject, as both sides of the Committee recognised. The Government propose to substitute for the authority of the Secretary of State the authority of a judicial authority to determine applications by the police for the extension of detention permitted under clause 40 and schedule 7.

When the Brogan case was originally judged by the European Court of Human Rights, the United Kingdom decided to derogate from the human rights convention in respect of terrorist offences to do with Northern Ireland. The reasons for that decision were important. I understand that the present Government approach the subject from a different perspective and that they have long been committed to the principle of substituting judicial authority for ministerial authority, but I still have concerns that I want to air in the House.

We have just debated the question of proscriptions and deproscriptions. The Minister and I agreed that it was properly the responsibility of a Minister and not of a judge to examine sensitive security and intelligence and to come to an informed conclusion about whether a recommendation should be made to Parliament for the proscription of a terrorist organisation. An analogy can be drawn between that and the proposals in this group of amendments.

The amendments cause us to consider what should happen when a senior police officer is in receipt of sensitive security and intelligence information about the activities or plans of a terrorist suspect. Let us assume that that officer decides that it is necessary, for the furtherance of his terrorist investigation, to apply for an extended period of detention for the individual involved. Should scrutiny of that sensitive information be the responsibility of a Minister, or should it be the responsibility of the sort of judicial authority that the Government propose to establish? Strong arguments can be made that such scrutiny should be performed by the Executive, and not by any judicial authority.

When the previous Government considered this matter, two arguments above all influenced the decision that Ministers took. The first was the general argument that the responsibility was to form a decision on the basis of sensitive information, and that that was not analogous to judicial involvement in public interest immunity hearings or in extensions of detention under PACE.

Under the PACE procedures, the defendant is told the nature of the evidence on which he has been arrested. He is also told the reasons why his continued detention is necessary. In contrast, the procedural safeguards that the Government propose for extended detention under the counter-terrorism arrangements offer fewer safeguards to suspects, because of the sensitivity of the information in question.

Secondly, the previous Government were influenced by concern for the position of the Northern Ireland judiciary. That judiciary has few members, and consists of people

[Mr. Lidington]

who have often been the subject of terrorist threats and attacks. It also includes people who have the great responsibility of deciding serious criminal cases without benefit of a jury because of fears of witness intimidation by terrorist gangs.

In those circumstances, the previous Government thought it right that responsibility for extensions of detention should remain with the Secretary of State. I believe that, in the aftermath of the Brogan case, the Northern Ireland judiciary was very reluctant to take on that responsibility.

I ask the Minister, when he responds, to take account of the arguments that I have adduced. Is he confident that the judiciary of Northern Ireland in particular is ready and willing to take on the extra responsibilities that the Government propose to impose on them?

Mr. McNamara: Schedule 7 is interesting, dealing, as it does, with the provisions under clause 40. Paragraph 26 deals with the extension of detention for up to seven days. I welcome—because I have campaigned for it in the past—the introduction of the judicial element into the procedure when applications are made for extensions of detention. However, I am not certain about the procedures that are being followed in this case.

In the past, we were told that the fact that every case went to the Secretary of State acted as a safeguard in preventing an extension of detention. An examination of the statistics, however, suggests that in every case that went before the Secretary of State—or nearly every case—the extension was almost automatically granted. Therefore, the procedure's justification as an additional safeguard for the person being detained was not such a safeguard. That is not surprising, because one arm of the Executive was asking another arm of the Executive to carry out a certain function.

A person who is detained will now be able to make an application to the resident magistrate or to the county court to deal with his or her case. The main fault with that procedure is that the suspect, or his lawyer, or both, may be exempted from the court proceedings and therefore will not see, hear or know the grounds upon which the decision is being made. While judicial intervention is to be welcomed, deciding such cases will place an onerous duty on the Northern Ireland judiciary, particularly if cases take place in the absence of the person detained or of his or her legal representative. They will need to bear that in mind, and not follow what seemed to be the practice of previous Secretaries of State.

Under the current system, an application must be made to extend a period of detention from 48 hours up to five days, and then a further application must be made for a further two-day period, up to a maximum of seven days. Under the new procedure, however, it appears that the judicial authority will be able to order an extension for a full five days. If that is the case, the provision may fall short of the desires and wishes of the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, which seemed to indicate that four days was a sufficient period in which a person could be detained without being brought before a judicial authority for a second occasion.

I believe that the period in which people can be detained under such provisions should be a maximum of four days. In providing a way in which detention can be increased to five days, I believe that the Government may again fall foul of the European court. I shall not divide the House on these matters, but we are continuously finding, as we go through the Bill, provisions that seem contrary to the spirit and precise provisions of the European convention on human rights and of the decisions of the court.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Two points arise. Following the speech of the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) on the Conservative amendments in the group, may I say that I understand the particular Northern Ireland circumstances of the judiciary that make the argument? However, the House would find it inconsistent if, having asked for judicial oversight of applications in the previous group of amendments, I suddenly supported him in seeking to move it from the judiciary to Ministers.

Mr. Lidington: We are consistent.

12.15 am

Mr. Hughes: The hon. Gentleman is right. I argue that we should keep the provision. Therefore, on the first issue I support the Government's position.

However, on the second issue, I am more concerned—as is the hon. Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara)—about the time limits. We went around this circuit once in Committee, as members of that Committee will remember. I draw hon. Members' attention to the fact that, unusually, on this occasion the Government are going beyond what was recommended by the independent review. Lord Lloyd's review considered how much extra detention should be allowed if a warrant was obtained. The answer was four days in total. That matter was picked up in page 36 of the Government's consultation paper, paragraph 8.21 of which states:

> While Lord Lloyd acknowledges that there have been occasions on which the police might have found it more difficult to bring charges had they not been able to detain the suspect for longer than 4 days, he suggests that—

of course, this is a qualification and it is a phrase that comes up regularly—

> once there is a lasting peace in Northern Ireland, it ought to be possible to reduce the maximum period for which a suspect could be detained under the new legislation to a total of 4 days—ie. 2 days on the authority of the police plus 2 days with judicial authorisation before charge or release. His views may well have been influenced by the fact that the practice has been that extensions in international terrorist cases have not exceeded a total of 4 days.

Three paragraphs of Government justification follow, considering the consultation paper and arguing that the public should be asked to consider seven days. I hope that I am not misrepresenting the Government when I say that they think that, given the growing threat of international terrorism, they need the maximum possible power. This is one of those occasions on which the Government seem to be going further than they need—and further than recommended—for no good reason other than the prospect that terrorism is growing throughout the world, so they may need more power. That is the wrong precedent to set in a Bill that we are going to lock into our future history.

If we could not come back to the Bill, we would have to legislate for the worst-case scenario in five, 10 or 20 years. There will be an annual report, but we will not necessarily have an opportunity to reconsider the

legislation, as we will do later with the motion to approve the continuance of the emergency powers legislation—if we get that far.

I caution the House, and ask the Minister to justify why we should go beyond the recommendation made by the Government's adviser by nearly doubling the period that he recommended, not on the basis of clear evidence that four days has not been adequate, but on the theoretical basis that seven days would be more advantageous to the authorities. The latter is self-evident.

We must resist Governments gaining power, in particular where they have not made a case for doing so that is based on past practice. This is one of those cases.

Mr. Charles Clarke: First, I will deal with the amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara). We had a broadly similar argument in Committee. The purpose of the amendment is to reduce the time that a person may be kept in detention from seven to four days. It is likely that the amendment is inspired by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, which, reasonably, submitted evidence on the subject. It argues that detention for more than four days and six hours, as identified in the Brogan case, might be a breach of the European convention on human rights. The Brogan case centred on the time in detention without judicial sanction. The judgment in that case is not relevant to the time that is permissible with judicial approval.

I fully recognise that Lord Lloyd recommended four days' detention in total, even with judicial involvement, but he did not recommend such a reduction in the circumstances that prevailed at the time of writing his report. He was satisfied that there were occasions when the police might have found it more difficult to bring charges if detention were limited to four days. The Government continue to believe that there may be occasions when the police need more than four days and we are introducing judicial authorisation, which is a major departure. As I said in Committee, the judicial authority will have to be satisfied as to the police need for further detention; the Bill requires him also to be satisfied that the investigation is being conducted diligently and expeditiously.

Seven-day detention will remain a rare occurrence, but the provision is needed none the less. I repeat the figures that I quoted in Committee on that matter. The figures for PTA detentions in Northern Ireland from 1 July to 30 September show that four persons were detained in the three to four-day period; two were charged and two were released. In the four to five-day period, two persons were detained; one was charged and the other released. In that quarter, no individuals were detained for more than five days.

I do not accept that seven-day detention breaches the Brogan judgment, which found that detention for four days and six hours was a breach of the convention. The judgment centred on the lack of judicial involvement in the detention process—not on the precise time. Nor do I accept that the judicial authority will grant five-day detentions as a matter of course. The Bill provides for further extension to be granted; that reflects the current position where extensions are granted incrementally.

However, I do not favour placing a statutory limit on the time that can be granted per application. That will be a matter for the judicial authority based on the evidence before him. The ECHR demands that the authority hear both sides; the Bill delivers that. I hope that my hon. Friend will consider withdrawing his amendment.

As for the amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington), I agree with him that the issue is extremely important, and, as he acknowledged, we debated it in Committee. The effect of the amendment would be to remove the judicial authority from the process. We would revert to the current position in which extended detention is a matter for the Secretary of State. On Second Reading, the official Opposition suggested that that was a proper role for the Executive—even though it would require continued derogation from the convention. The point was expanded in Committee where the hon. Gentleman suggested that the role was not a proper one for the judiciary—as he has also done this evening.

There is a fundamental difference in the approaches taken by the Opposition and by the Government. It is a perfectly reasonable difference of principle of which I make no criticism. However, the amendments miss the opportunity to place decisions about the liberty of the individual in the hands of those who are best placed to make such a judgment—the judiciary. To take that opportunity would meet our ECHR obligations and, happily, from our perspective, would enable the UK's derogation from the convention to be withdrawn.

Since May 1997, an important aspect of Government policy has been that we should end the UK's derogation from the ECHR. One of the effects of our approach in this matter would be to achieve that.

I fully acknowledge that there is more than one way to approach an issue. In this case, the official Opposition elect to retain executive authority, while the Government believe that it is right to follow the judicial route. For the reasons I have given, I hope that the Opposition amendments will not be pressed to a vote.

I commend the Government amendments to the House.

Amendment agreed to.

Amendments made: No. 16, in page 18, line 38, leave out "apply" and insert "make an application".

No. 17, in page 18, line 38, leave out—

'Part III of that Schedule'

and insert—

'paragraph 26 of Schedule 7'.

No. 18, in page 18, line 41, leave out "is being made or".

No. 19, in page 18, line 41, leave out from "under" to second "a" in line 42 and insert—

'paragraph 26 or 32 of Schedule 7 in respect of'.

No. 20, in page 19, line 1, leave out from "Where" to "in" and insert—

'an application under paragraph 26 or 32 of Schedule 7 is granted'.

No. 21, in page 19, line 3, at end insert—

'( ) The refusal of an application in respect of a person's detention under paragraph 26 or 32 of Schedule 7 shall not prevent his continued detention in accordance with this section.'.

No. 22, in page 19, line 3, at end insert—

'() A person who has the powers of a constable in one Part of the United Kingdom may exercise the power under subsection (1) in any Part of the United Kingdom.'.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Clause 42

SEARCH OF PERSONS.

Amendments made: No. 23, in page 19, line 23, at end insert—

'( ) A constable may seize and retain anything which he discovers in the course of a search of a person under subsection (1) or (2) and which he reasonably suspects may constitute evidence that the person is a terrorist.'.

No. 24, in page 19, line 23, at end insert—

'( ) A person who has the powers of a constable in one Part of the United Kingdom may exercise a power under this section in any Part of the United Kingdom.'.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Clause 44

EXERCISE OF POWER.

Mr. Charles Clarke: I beg to move amendment No. 25, in page 20, line 18, after "seize", insert "and retain".

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss Government amendments Nos. 26, 59, 94, 100 to 108, 112 to 114, 117, 118 and 121.

Mr. Clarke: The amendments provide consistency throughout the Bill regarding the seizure and retention of things. Amendment No. 59 specifies more precisely those whom a pilot of a not-for-reward flight may notify of his intention to arrive or depart at a non-designated airport. The other amendments in the group are technical and consequential, and repeals.

Amendment agreed to.

Clause 56

POSSESSION FOR TERRORIST PURPOSES.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I beg to move amendment No. 182, in page 25, leave out lines 4 to 11.

I hope the House will agree that the amendment is important. This is the only opportunity that we shall have to discuss two matters that were central to previous debates. The first is whether the Bill, as drafted, is compatible with the European convention on human rights. The second is whether it is right that there should be powers to create what is sometimes described as the reverse burden of proof—whereby people have to prove that something is not the case, rather than the prosecution having to prove that it is the case.

The amendment applies to clause 56, which creates the offence of possession for terrorist purposes. The clause says:

> A person commits an offence if he possesses an article in circumstances which give rise to a reasonable suspicion that his possession is for a purpose connected with the commission, preparation or instigation of an act of terrorism.

If those circumstances give rise to a reasonable suspicion, it is a defence for the person charged with the offence to prove that his possession was not for a purpose connected with that act. He has a statutory defence if he can show that the inference is wrong.

The following subsection is particularly dangerous, and the amendment will remove it if the House agrees with us. It says:

> In proceedings for an offence under this section, if it is proved that an article . . . was on any premises at the same time as the accused, or . . . was on premises of which the accused was the occupier or which he habitually used other than as a member of the public, the court may assume that the accused possessed the article, unless he proves that he did not know of its presence on the premises or that he had no control over it.

I hope that by simply reading the clause, without any argument, I begin to make the case that this is, in the words of my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler), a "guilty until you prove yourself innocent" clause rather than an "innocent until you prove yourself guilty" clause. There are significant reasons from case law for believing that the provision falls foul of the convention. I have been given clear legal advice that the provision breaches the convention.

Mr. Bermingham: It is a total breach of the convention.

Mr. Hughes: The hon. Gentleman, who is a practising member of the Bar, confirms that. He may want to contribute to the debate.

I shall not reiterate all the points made in Committee, but I refer colleagues to the debate on 1 February in the seventh sitting which begins in column 244 of *Hansard*. The arguments about clauses 55 and 56 were subject to the same criticism, and this is only one of many examples in the Bill of a reverse provision where one has to prove that one did not know about something. Self-evidently, that is an extremely difficult thing to do.

I draw the attention of the House to the breadth of the provision. First, any article can render one guilty; it does not have to be a firearm, ammunition, Semtex or a knife. The Bill says:

> A person commits an offence if he possesses an article in circumstances which give rise to a reasonable suspicion.

The second issue concerns possession. I have not yet said that being found guilty of the offence means that one would be liable to 10 years' imprisonment, so we are talking not about a minor criminal offence, but abut a serious one punishable by a significant period of imprisonment. One can be assumed to be guilty of possession simply because the article is found on the premises at the same time as one is there.

12.30 am

That need not be one's own house, caravan, land or car; it can be the house of a person with whom one is staying, of a person whom one is visiting, of a member of one's family, or of a work colleague; it can be the farm house if one is a farm worker, or a barn on the farm if one is the farm owner. The fact of an article being found on any and all of those premises is sufficient to reverse the burden of proof.

The clause does not apply to public buildings, such as pubs or shops, but it does apply to any premises of which one is an occupier, or which one habitually uses, or in which one was present at the same time as the article in question. That means that one would be guilty even if the article was on those premises when one was not there, because one was the occupier of those premises.

The legislation does not apply solely to Northern Ireland; these events could occur in London, Belfast, Birmingham or Glasgow. I am the occupier of my house, so if an article now in my house were to be found there, I could be presumed to be guilty of an offence. It will be apparent to the House that we are entering a realm of culpability extending beyond any previous provisions applicable to this country.

The third objection is the presumption of guilt and the reversal of proof. The House understands that criticism perfectly well, and the reasons for it. I am not being mischievous or partisan, I just want to put on record the fact that people who are now members of the Government argued against such provisions only a few years ago, when they were in opposition. The Attorney-General—this country's senior Law Officer—has argued against such provisions and made the case. In similar cases, involving exactly such provisions, we as a country have been found to be in breach of the convention.

There is case law, which I shall not detail as people can easily find the relevant references. One does not even have to prove a prima facie case to pass the reasonable suspicion test; extremely thin evidence may be considered sufficient to establish a subjective reasonable suspicion. A case from the highest legal authority, the Privy Council, confirms that, as do several others.

The fourth argument rests on the fact that the Bill is not applicable solely to Northern Ireland. It could apply to international organisations based abroad and to premises abroad that one occupies, such as a holiday villa or flat, or a rental property. There are all sorts of ramifications extending beyond this country.

If the Government want to persuade us that such legislation is required, the burden of proving that rests with them. That is putting it gently. If Ministers want us to agree to the provision, which is repeated throughout the Bill, they must persuade us that it is both justified and a good thing.

It is true that, in this matter, on the balance of judgment, Lord Lloyd was on the Government's side. The argument rests on how far we want anti-terrorism legislation to go. It is also true that there have only ever been two prosecutions in respect of legislation such as this. Even so, it strikes me that the more important issue is that of the clear legal advice, based on case law, that I have received. The question is whether we want to fly so flagrantly in the face of such strong authority.

The Minister has said, and I believe him, that the legal advice that he has received is that the provision is compatible with the convention. I tried to be as open as I could and asked to see it. Obviously, lawyers may disagree and there may well be two legal opinions, but at least let us examine the arguments which suggest that the provision is compatible with the European convention. That advice has not been forthcoming. I understand that even if we had the most wonderful freedom of information legislation, such advice to the Government would probably not be required to be produced.

Unless the Government can produce such independent authority against the backdrop of the case law, they are not passing the test of showing the case to the House. I shall not detain the House further. We shall press the amendment to a Division.

The Home Secretary sold the Bill to us on the basis that it would be UK-wide legislation. It will not be for part of the United Kingdom, but for all of it. It will not be for people only in the United Kingdom, but for people beyond it. It will not be for a limited period, but indefinitely.

We cannot legislate in a way that is compatible with our legal obligations and the rights of our citizens if we put such legislation on the statute book. I hope that people will realise that the good British legal tradition that a person is innocent until proven guilty should remain, unless the Government can advance an overwhelming argument for it to be changed. They have not made that case.

Mr. Corbyn: I shall be brief, as the hour is late. I endorse what the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) said in support of his amendment.

The basic principle of all law must be that a person is innocent until proven guilty. The clause appears to go in the opposite direction. It would indict someone who has been regularly on the premises where it is believed that some material that could be used for terrorist activities is held. It would also require a person to prove his lack of knowledge—in other words, to prove his innocence, rather than the prosecution proving a case against that person.

On a number of occasions, people have been arrested under the existing PTA and subsequently convicted and imprisoned, or arrested under other legislation, and have subsequently proved to be innocent. I am thinking of the case of Danny MacNamee, who spent many years in prison and was finally acquitted. He was charged with possession. It was later proved that he could not have done what he was supposed to have done with the material that he had.

Draconian legislation is proposed. I endorse the comment of the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey that the Bill is different from other Bills. It is a permanent, not a temporary provision. Someone could be convicted on the basis that, because of regular visits to a place, it could be claimed that he had knowledge of what was going on there. In those circumstances, it would be difficult for the person to prove otherwise.

I fear that, if the Bill is enacted in its present form, we will return to the miscarriages of justice of yesteryear, which we hoped to have left behind us, with the changes in attitude and legislation following the release of the Birmingham Six, the Guildford Four and others. We may want to deal with the problems of people who place bombs that kill innocent people, but this is not the way to do it. We are being urged to convict the innocent along with the guilty. That prejudices the entire judicial process.

I ask the Minister to explain the justification for stating in the Bill that one must prove a lack of knowledge of something. It is virtually impossible to do that. The onus should be on the prosecution, rather than on the defence, to prove that. The provision goes against the principle that the burden of proof should lie with the prosecution. It states that the burden of proof must lie with the defence. That cannot be right. It is contrary to the basic principles of our law.

Mr. McNamara: I shall not detain the House long. The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) and my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn) have made most of the points. I shall make two observations.

[Mr. McNamara]

When the Bill was first published, it contained the fiat from the Home Secretary that nothing in it was contrary to the human rights convention. The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey read out the clause, so I do not intend to do that. However, I shall repeat article 6 of the European convention on human rights. Article 6.2 states:

> Everyone charged with a criminal offence shall be presumed innocent until proved guilty according to the law.

It is incumbent on the Government not merely to claim that, on best advice, their actions are compatible with the convention, but to produce evidence of that. That reverses the burden of proof, and puts the onus on the Government to prove their case and their innocence.

Mr. Lidington: As I understand the report of Lord Lloyd of Berwick, the comparable provision in the emergency provisions Act led to no fewer than 24 convictions since the power was first introduced in 1991. We should therefore pause before we accept the dilution of the law that the amendment would allow.

According to my interpretation of clause 56, the prosecution has to prove that an article found during an investigation is incriminating of likely terrorist activity. That is an unqualified burden on the prosecution when the case comes to court. The reversal of the burden of proof applies only when the defendant wants to argue that, although the article was present and was found in circumstances that created a reasonable suspicion that it was connected with terrorist activity, he did not possess it and was not aware of its presence. That proposal is not as unreasonable as the hon. Members for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) and for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn) suggest.

I agree with Lord Lloyd of Berwick, who argued that if,

> during a search of premises occupied by a suspected terrorist, the police . . . find materials such as timers or chemicals in highly incriminating circumstances without also finding explosives or other prohibited materials—

possession of which would count as an offence—the relevant person should

> be required to account to the court for his possession of the articles.

That is reasonable. For that reason, I do not support the amendment.

Mr. Charles Clarke: The debate was rehearsed in Committee in columns 252-53. The general question of whether the clause constituted a reversal of the burden of proof has also been considered at length.

First, let me refer to the report of Lord Lloyd of Berwick. The possession offence for which clause 56 provides is useful and effective. Lord Lloyd sets it out clearly. The hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) provided some details. The provision reflects the prevention of terrorism Act. We are satisfied on the basis of the Lords ruling in Kebilene that the provision is not incompatible with the European convention on human rights.

Mr. Bermingham: Does the Minister agree that the comments of the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) were sheer rubbish? If one finds timers, explosives and so on, they are per se objects of terrorism. We are arguing about whether the reverse burden is applicable. It is not applicable in view of article 6 of the European convention on human rights.

Mr. Clarke: I do not agree with the analysis of my hon. Friend. For the purpose of clarity, I shall go through clause 56. Subsection (1) states:

> A person commits an offence if he possesses an article in circumstances which give rise to a reasonable suspicion that his possession is for a purpose connected with the commission, preparation or instigation of an act of terrorism.

That condition, which is not trivial, must be fulfilled.

Subsection (2) states:

> It is a defence for a person charged with an offence under this section to prove that his possession of the article was not for a purpose connected with the commission, preparation or instigation of an act of terrorism.

There is therefore a statutory defence. It is not the only defence, but, statutorily, it is a defence to demonstrate that possession was not for a purpose connected with terrorism. Again, that approach runs through the Bill in a number of different aspects. It stands up absolutely and is a statutory defence that can protect innocent people.

12.45 am

Subsection (3) is specifically addressed by the amendment. Again, the point is clear: the court may assume that the accused possessed the article unless he proves that he did not know of its presence on the premises or that he had no control over it.

A series of hurdles would have to be overcome by the prosecution to get to an offence in this particular area. We are dealing with serious issues, as set out in Lord Lloyd's report. I hope that the House agrees that the amendment should be defeated if put to the vote, but I also hope that the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey will withdraw it, as he did in Committee.

Mr. Simon Hughes: We went round the course once in Committee and then considered the components of the clause in the clause stand part debate. I expressly reserved our position at that stage, as the Minister fairly recognises, and sought to amend the clause—which I thought would be of practical value—in a significant and material way that we think would correct the balance. This is a symbolic effort because there are similar clauses, but rather than test it ad nauseam through the evening, we think it right to put our amendment to the vote. I shall not withdraw it because even if, with draconian powers, some success would be achieved, it is at least unwise to provide a balance that is so weighted and so unusual—in more than one way, there is a double balance in favour of the prosecution—when there is clear controversy and specific advice that the measure falls foul of the European convention.

In the very year in which we are introducing the convention into British law—the hon. Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara) referred to it—putting the Bill on the statute book permanently does not send the right signals either to Northern Ireland, where people are seeking to re-establish normal criminal justice, or to the rest of the country, where we are seeking to uphold our traditions well. We do not want the Bill to be permanent and I regret greatly the inclusion of such provisions. Of course the prosecution will be more likely to succeed if the burden of proof is reversed. That is self-evident. If there were no defence rights, there would be more convictions. That, too, is self-evident. The fewer rights there are, the more likely that the defence will have difficulties.

We cannot afford to risk the miscarriages of justice that such provisions will enable and it is important that the House, with as much support as possible, either defeats the Government and amends the clause or at least signals its clear view that the other place should reconsider the matter.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 35, Noes 239.

Division No. 113] **[12.48 am**

AYES

Allan, Richard
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Breed, Colin
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Chidgey, David
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cotter, Brian
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Fearn, Ronnie
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
McDonnell, John
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McNamara, Kevin
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Rendel, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Stunell, Andrew
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tyler, Paul
Webb, Steve
Willis, Phil

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Tom Brake and
Sir Robert Smith.

NOES

Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Browne, Desmond
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clelland, David
Clifton–Brown, Geoffrey
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Collins, Tim
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Dawson, Hilton
Day, Stephen
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Dowd, Jim
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Ennis, Jeff
Fisher, Mark
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Gapes, Mike
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heathcoat–Amory, Rt Hon David
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hinchliffe, David
Hope, Phil
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Rt Hon Adam
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Linton, Martin
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
Luff, Peter
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McDonagh, Siobhain
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
Mackinlay, Andrew
McLoughlin, Patrick
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Merron, Gillian
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Mountford, Kali
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*

Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
White, Brian
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe and Mr. Clive Betts.

Question accordingly negatived.

Clause 81

ARREST AND SEIZURE: CONSTABLES

Amendment made: No. 26, in page 39, line 28, after "seize", insert "and retain".—*[Mr. Jamieson.]*

Clause 100

CODES OF PRACTICE: SUPPLEMENTARY

Mr. Charles Clarke: I beg to move amendment No. 27, in page 48, line 9, leave out "(with appropriate modifications)".

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss Government amendments Nos. 28, 91 to 93, 110, 111 and 120.

Mr. Clarke: Amendments Nos. 27, 28 and 91 to 93 tidy up the position on how to deal with modifying codes of practice. Amendments Nos. 110, 111 and 120 remove the bar in the Police and Criminal Evidence (Northern Ireland) Order 1988 on applying the PACE codes to the detention of terrorist suspects in Northern Ireland. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Could we have some order in the House?

Amendment agreed to.

1 am

Amendment made: No. 28, in page 48, line 10, leave out—

'the first issue of a'

and insert "an original".—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Clause 111

EXPIRY AND REVIVAL

Mr. Ingram: I beg to move amendment No. 29, in page 52, line 15, leave out subsection (5) and insert—

'(5) The following provisions shall be treated for the purposes of this section as forming part of this Part of this Act—

(a) paragraphs 35 and 36 of Schedule 4, and

(b) paragraphs 18A to 18C of Schedule 5.'.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss Government amendments Nos. 31 to 34, 41, 42 and 58.

Mr. Ingram: The amendments are intended to carry forward for Northern Ireland the provisions that appear in paragraph 8 of schedule 7 to the Prevention of Terrorism Act. I commend them to the House.

Amendment agreed to.

Clause 113

POLICE POWERS

Amendment made: No. 30, in page 53, line 16, at end insert—

'( ) Where anything is seized by a constable under a power conferred by virtue of this Act, it may (unless the contrary intention appears) be retained for so long as is necessary in all the circumstances.'.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Clause 118

EVIDENCE

Amendments made: No. 31, in page 54, line 17, after "given", insert "or order made".

No. 32, in page 54, line 21, after "given", insert "or made".

No. 33, in page 54, line 24, after "given", insert "or order made".

No. 34, in page 54, line 27, at end insert—

'( ) In subsections (1) and (2) a reference to an order does not include a reference to an order made by statutory instrument.'.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Clause 121

ORDERS AND REGULATIONS

Amendment proposed: No. 35, in page 56, line 20, leave out "and".—*[Mr. Ingram.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following: Government amendment No. 36.

Amendment No. 148, in page 56, leave out line 25.

Amendment No. 150, in page 56, leave out line 27.

Amendment No. 154, in page 56, leave out line 28.

Amendment No. 152, in page 56, leave out line 29.

Amendment No. 156, in page 56, line 30, leave out "or (3)".

Amendment No. 158, in page 56, leave out line 31.

Amendment No. 160, in page 56, leave out line 36.

Amendment No. 149, in page 56, line 40, at end insert "( ) section 4(3)".

Amendment No. 151, in page 56, line 42, at end insert "( ) section 71".

Amendment No. 155, in page 56, line 42, at end insert "( ) section 78(5)".

Amendment No. 153, in page 56, line 42, at end insert "( ) section 79(9)".

Amendment No. 157, in page 56, line 43, at end insert "( ) section 96(3)".

Amendment No. 159, in page 56, line 43, at end insert "( ) section 99(1)(b)".

Amendment No. 161, in page 57, line 2, at end insert—

'( ) paragraph 16 of Schedule 7'.

Mr. Lidington: The non-Government amendments relate to whether order-making powers given to the Secretary of State should be handled in Parliament by the negative resolution procedure, as the Government propose, or whether they should more properly be

[Mr. Lidington]

subjected to parliamentary scrutiny and approval under the affirmative resolution procedure before they come into force.

I do not wish to detain the House for long, but it is important to describe the order-making powers in respect of which I suggest that we change the proposed procedure. Amendments Nos. 148 and 149 refer to clause 4(3), which deals with procedure for applications for de-proscription. The Bill states that regulations will specify the minimum time set for determination by the Secretary of State, and therefore the time that he would have to consider evidence in support of, or against, an application. Regulations will also define the grounds on which an application could be made to the Secretary of State.

I cannot see why such regulations should have to be made urgently or at short notice. They would presumably apply generically to any application for de-proscription. It seems logical to bring them before Parliament for proper scrutiny and approval before they come into force.

Amendments Nos. 150 and 151 deal with clause 71. The regulations in clause 71 are to set time limits for preliminary proceedings on scheduled offences. Those regulations would specify matters such as the maximum time allowed for the prosecution, the maximum period during which a suspect might be held in custody, bail provisions for a suspect, and provisions for the handling of non-scheduled offences that would appear on the charge sheet with a scheduled offence in a particular case.

Those items seem to raise quite significant issues on the handling of a prosecution case and the liberty of an individual suspect. Again, I should have thought that the type of regulation governing those arrangements would more properly be dealt with using the affirmative resolution procedure.

Amendments Nos. 154, 155, 152 and 153 refer to different aspects of remission for custodial sentences. Amendments Nos. 154 and 155 deal with clause 78(5). In clause 78, remission under prison rules for Northern Ireland for scheduled offences is set at a maximum of one third of the term for a sentence of five years or more. In clause 78(5), the Secretary of State is given the power by order to substitute a different length of sentence for the five years, and a different period of remission from the one third that is mentioned in clause 78(1).

In clause 79(9), there is comparable provision for young offenders, and that issue is addressed in amendments Nos. 152 and 153. Those regulations deal with a slightly different matter—the circumstances in which a court should sentence a young offender who has been released on remission, but who then commits a scheduled offence during that remission. Specifically, they deal with the circumstances in which the court should sentence the young offender to serve the unexpired part of his original sentence, as well as the new custodial sentence that the court would have imposed on him for the scheduled offence committed while he was free on remission.

Each of those categories of regulation deal with some very important issues, such as the Government's power to vary remission arrangements for people who have been convicted of extremely serious violent and public order offences. I should have thought—especially given the degree of public concern in Northern Ireland and on this side of the water about the Government's handling of prisoner releases in recent months—that amendments Nos. 154, 155, 152 and 153 dealt with subjects that really should merit full parliamentary scrutiny and debate, and a parliamentary decision before the Secretary of State is allowed to vary the remission arrangements as the relevant provisions currently suggest.

Amendments Nos. 156 and 157 refer to clause 96(3), which allows the Secretary of State by order to make provision, including by modifying or supplementing schedule 6, about entering or leaving Northern Ireland by land. Although this group is not as important as the previous group, on remission arrangements, I should be interested to know how the Government envisage that power being used. Why is that rule-making power in the Bill?

Amendments Nos. 158 and 159 deal with clause 99(1)(b), on an order-making power for the Secretary of State to require a silent video recording of interviews, in accordance with the Government's code of practice. Again, I am really seeking in the Minister's reply—or in writing, if he cannot reply today—some explanation of how the Government intend that power to be used. In what circumstances do they intend that those regulations might be applied?

Amendments Nos.160 and 161 relate to paragraph 16 to schedule 7, which covers the power of the Secretary of State to specify circumstances and set conditions in which a detainee should or should not be permitted to consult a solicitor or whether a solicitor can be present at a suspect's interview. In view of the concerns that have been expressed by Liberal Democrat and Labour Members this evening about the civil rights of terrorist suspects, I should have thought that there would be considerable support in the House for requiring regulations under schedule 7(16) to be subject to the affirmative resolution procedure in order to ensure fuller and more effective parliamentary scrutiny.

Although the amendments relate to the detail of the Bill, we are debating some important subjects—in particular the remission arrangements—and powers that Ministers should not be permitted to exercise without adequate parliamentary scrutiny. The amendments provide for that parliamentary scrutiny.

Mr. Ingram: As the hon. Gentleman said, the Opposition amendments seek to change the parliamentary procedure from the negative to the affirmative in respect of certain, but not all, delegated powers. I shall make three general points before dealing with the hon. Gentleman's point about remission.

First, the delegated powers in part VII, on which many of the amendments are focused, are subject to the same procedure that would apply to the current provision under the EPA. That is not to say that the parliamentary procedure for those provisions must remain the same under the Bill, but it is surely the right starting point. In respect of the new powers that the Opposition seek to amend, we had to take a view, and we think that we have got it right.

Secondly, the negative resolution procedure is a significant procedure in its own right. Hon. Members have the opportunity to scrutinise carefully and pray against orders and regulations that are subject to the negative resolution procedure. Clearly if there were concerns about

what was happening, the hon. Gentleman would have the opportunity to raise specific points, including those that he made tonight about remission arrangements—and I take on board his points about remission.

That brings me to my third point. It is my judgment that the delegated powers in the Bill are subject to the appropriate scrutiny. Hon Members will no doubt be aware that before the Bill reaches the other place, the delegated powers will be subject to detailed scrutiny, and should it be felt that any of the procedures are inappropriate, we shall of course have regard to that.

We shall take account of the points that have been made this evening. If I have omitted to deal with any of the details, I shall write to the hon. Gentleman setting out the precise way in which the powers will operate and hopefully set his mind at rest.

If all the issues were dealt with under the affirmative procedure, we should have to deal with a wide range of orders. We consider an enormous amount of Northern Ireland business on important issues. The amendments seek to extend that in an unlimited way. I am not sure whether my hon. Friends—or indeed Opposition Members—would welcome that.

Mr. Lidington: I am grateful to the Minister. I am sure that there is scope—but not tonight—for a full debate about statutory instruments and parliamentary scrutiny of secondary legislation. There is a serious problem about the amount and the importance of legislation that is passed via statutory instruments. The examples in the amendments illustrate that argument.

The Minister's argument about the precedent set by the Prevention of Terrorism Acts is not conclusive. It is a reasonable point for him to make, but it is equally reasonable for Parliament to review from time to time how it scrutinises legislation, and we suggested an appropriate vehicle this evening.

1.15 am

I am grateful for the assurance that the matters will be considered further, especially in the light of comments that may be made in another place, so I will not press our amendments to a vote.

Amendment agreed to.

Amendment made: No. 36, in page 56, line 21, at end insert—

', and

( ) may make different provision for different purposes.'.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Mr. Charles Clarke: I beg to move amendment No. 37, in page 56, line 35, after "9", insert "(1)(b)".

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following: Government amendments Nos. 40 and 65.

Amendment No. 174, in schedule 7, page 106, line 41, after "audio" insert "and video".

Amendment No. 175, in page 106, line 43, leave out "constable" and insert "police officer".

Amendment No. 176, in page 106, line 44, leave out "constable" and insert "police officer".

Amendment No. 177, in page 106, line 47, after "audio" insert "and video".

Government amendments Nos. 66 and 90.

Amendment No. 180, in schedule 13, page 130, line 15, after "audio" insert "and video".

Mr. Clarke: The amendments add an enabling power subject to the affirmative resolution procedure, so that the Secretary of State may require the video recording of interviews with terrorist suspects at police stations, in accordance with the code of practice.

This is an example of the Government's broadchurch, inclusive approach in practice. The amendments take account of proposals made by the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) in Committee. I agreed to consider his suggestions, and the amendments are the result. He described his irritation with lawyers when he was a Home Office Minister, and this was an example of our all working together against the lawyers' party.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I am sorry to rise to the bait, but I am going to make it even worse by telling the Minister that I agree with him, so he cannot even claim that this is the non-lawyers against the lawyers.

It was always my view that we should try generally, and not only in police stations dealing with suspected terrorists, to have both audio and video recording. When I went to Northern Ireland recently, I asked, as I have in police stations elsewhere, whether people thought that that would save time and work well, and the general view, not only in RUC headquarters in Belfast but at Bessbrook and other police stations, was that it would make life easier and make for less controversy and dispute.

The initiative is welcome. Would that more initiatives came from the more liberal wing of people in the Committee and the House, but we cannot have everything—or at least not every night.

Amendment agreed to.

Mr. Ingram: I beg to move amendment No. 38, in page 57, line 1, at end insert—

'( ) paragraph 1(2)(b) of Schedule 1;'.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following: Government amendments Nos. 43 to 47.

Amendment No. 147, in schedule 1, page 60, leave out lines 36 to 38.

Mr. Ingram: The amendments were tabled in response to the helpful debate in Committee and to the points made by the hon. Members for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) and for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes). I have looked again at the arrangements relating to the transitional provisions and decided to provide reassurance in the Bill that, if for any reason the bringing into force of the legislation is delayed, the transitional provisions will remain subject to annual renewal by affirmative resolution, as is the traditional way of dealing with the matter. I commend the Government amendments to the House.

Mr. Lidington: I welcome the Government amendments, which follow a constructive discussion in

[Mr. Lidington]

Committee. The ground covered by amendment No. 147 was addressed in Committee, so I shall be brief. One of a small number of deletions from the emergency provisions legislation that the Government now propose involves the powers granted under the EPA to extend searches for munitions. The Government propose that only one extension should be allowed in respect of any particular search operation.

In Committee, the Minister said specifically that the Chief Constable of Northern Ireland was content with the two other deletions from the EPA to which I had drawn the Committee's attention, which were the provisions concerning the wearing of hoods and the arrangements for the Secretary of State to regulate the siting of explosives factories. I inferred from the way in which the Minister talked of the police being content with those changes that perhaps they were less happy with the imposition of restrictions on extensions to searches for munitions. I wish to press the Minister to say briefly whether the Government are introducing that restriction simply to meet human rights obligations, or whether they believe that the power is now superfluous to legitimate police investigatory requirements.

Mr. Ingram: We had a good and thorough debate on the matter in Committee, and it was obvious that, before a decision is taken to remove a power from the RUC, full consultation must take place to ensure that the Chief Constable and his force are happy and satisfied with that course of action. We keep the legislation under constant review and, if elements of it become effectively redundant—if they have not been used, are no longer effective or, indeed, do not comply with the provisions of the European convention on human rights—we must take that into account. That is the approach that we have taken to the specific issues in the amendments. The Chief Constable was consulted and we would not have moved without his approval. The amendments will tidy up the legislation and I hope that, as in Committee, the hon. Gentleman will not press them to a Division.

Mr. Simon Hughes: The Government amendments are useful and we are grateful that the Minister accepted the constitutional point. It means that the Bill is now much clearer and there can be no doubt about the carry-over provisions.

Amendment agreed to.

Amendments made: No. 39, in page 57, line 1, at end insert—

'( ) paragraph 6(2) or 7(3) of Schedule *[Financial information]*;'.

No. 40, in page 57, line 2, at end insert—

'( ) paragraph 9(1A) of Schedule 7;

( ) paragraph 9A(4) of Schedule 7;'.

No. 41, in page 57, line 25, leave out "or".

No. 42, in page 57, line 26, at end insert—

'( ) by virtue of paragraph 35 of Schedule 4, or

( ) under or by virtue of any of paragraphs 18A to 18C of Schedule 5.'—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

New Schedule 1

FINANCIAL INFORMATION—ORDERS

1.—(1) Where an order has been made under this paragraph in relation to a terrorist investigation, a constable named in the order may require a financial institution to provide customer information for the purposes of the investigation.

(2) The information shall be provided—

(a) in such manner and within such time as the constable may specify, and

(b) notwithstanding any restriction on the disclosure of information imposed by statute or otherwise.

(3) An institution which fails to comply with a requirement under this paragraph shall be guilty of an offence.

(4) It is a defence for an institution charged with an offence under sub–paragraph (3) to prove—

(a) that the information required was not in the institution's possession, or

(b) that it was not reasonably practicable for the institution to comply with the requirement.

(5) An institution guilty of an offence under this sub–paragraph (3) shall be liable to a fine not exceeding level 5 on the standard scale.

Procedure

2. An order under paragraph 1 may be made only on the application of—

(a) in England and Wales or Northern Ireland, a police officer of at least the rank of superintendent, or

(b) in Scotland, the procurator fiscal.

3. An order under paragraph 1 may be made only by—

(a) in England and Wales, a Circuit judge,

(b) in Scotland, the sheriff, or

(c) in Northern Ireland, a county court judge.

4.—(1) Crown Court rules may make provision about the procedure for an application under paragraph 1.

(2) The High Court of Justiciary may, by Act of Adjournal, make provision about the procedure for an application under paragraph 1.

Criteria for making order

5. An order under paragraph 1 may be made only if the person making it is satisfied that—

(a) the order is sought for the purposes of a terrorist investigation,

(b) the tracing of terrorist property is desirable for the purposes of the investigation, and

(c) the order will enhance the effectiveness of the investigation.

Financial institution

6.—(1) In this Schedule "financial institution" means—

(a) a person who carries on a business of taking deposits for which he is authorised under the Banking Act 1987,

(b) a building society (within the meaning of the Building Societies Act 1986),

(c) a credit union (within the meaning of the Credit Unions Act 1979 or the Credit Unions (Northern Ireland) Order 1985),

(d) a person carrying on investment business within the meaning of the Financial Services Act 1986,

(e) the National Savings Bank,

(f) a person who carries out an activity for the purposes of raising money authorised to be raised under the National Loans Act 1968 under the auspices of the Director of National Savings,

(g) a European institution person carrying on a home regulated activity (within the meaning of the Second Council Directive on the coordination of laws, regulations and administrative provisions relating to the taking up and pursuit of the business of credit institutions),

(h) a person carrying out an activity specified in any of points 1 to 12 and 14 of the Annex to that Directive, and

(i) a person who carries on an insurance business in accordance with an authorisation pursuant to Article 6 or 27 of the First Council Directive on the coordination of laws, regulations and administrative provisions relating to the taking up and pursuit of the business of direct life assurance.

(2) The Secretary of State may by order provide for a class of person—

(a) to be a financial institution for the purposes of this Schedule, or

(b) to cease to be a financial institution for the purposes of this Schedule.

(3) An institution which ceases to be a financial institution for the purposes of this Schedule (whether by virtue of sub–paragraph (2)(b) or otherwise) shall continue to be treated as a financial institution for the purposes of any requirement under paragraph 1 to provide customer information which relates to a time when the institution was a financial institution.

Customer information

7.—(1) In this Schedule "customer information" means (subject to sub–paragraph (3))—

(a) information whether a business relationship exists or existed between a financial institution and a particular person ("a customer"),

(b) a customer's account number,

(c) a customer's full name,

(d) a customer's date of birth,

(e) a customer's address or former address,

(f) the date on which a business relationship between a financial institution and a customer begins or ends,

(g) any evidence of a customer's identity obtained by a financial institution in pursuance of or for the purposes of any legislation relating to money laundering, and

(h) the identity of a person sharing an account with a customer.

(2) For the purposes of this Schedule there is a business relationship between a financial institution and a person if (and only if)—

(a) there is an arrangement between them designed to facilitate the carrying out of frequent or regular transactions between them, and

(b) the total amount of payments to be made in the course of the arrangement is neither known nor capable of being ascertained when the arrangement is made.

(3) The Secretary of State may by order provide for a class of information—

(a) to be customer information for the purposes of this Schedule, or

(b) to cease to be customer information for the purposes of this Schedule.

Offence by body corporate, &c.

8.—(1) This paragraph applies where an offence under paragraph 1(3) is committed by an institution and it is proved that the offence—

(a) was committed with the consent or connivance of an officer of the institution, or

(b) was attributable to neglect on the part of an officer of the institution.

(2) The officer, as well as the institution, shall be guilty of the offence.

(3) Where an individual is convicted of an offence under paragraph 1(3) by virtue of this paragraph, he shall be liable on summary conviction to—

(a) imprisonment for a term not exceeding six months,

(b) a fine not exceeding level 5 on the standard scale, or

(c) both.

(4) In the case of an institution which is a body corporate, in this paragraph "officer" includes—

(a) a director, manager or secretary,

(b) a person purporting to act as a director, manager or secretary, and

(c) if the affairs of the body are managed by its members, a member.

(5) In the case of an institution which is a partnership, in this paragraph "officer" means a partner.

(6) In the case of an institution which is an unincorporated association (other than a partnership), in this paragraph "officer" means a person concerned in the management or control of the association.

Self–incrimination

9.—(1) Customer information provided by a financial institution under this Schedule shall not be admissible in evidence in criminal proceedings against the institution or any of its officers or employees.

(2) Sub–paragraph (1) shall not apply in relation to proceedings for an offence under paragraph 1(3) (including proceedings brought by virtue of paragraph 8)).'.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Brought up, read the First and Second time, and added to the Bill.

Schedule 1

NORTHERN IRELAND (EMERGENCY PROVISIONS) ACT 1996

Amendments made: No. 43, in page 60, leave out lines 8 to 17 and insert—

'(2) Subject to the provisions of this paragraph and paragraph 2—

(a) the provisions to which this paragraph applies shall continue in force for the period of 12 months starting with the day on which this Act is passed, and

(b) the Secretary of State may by order provide for all or any of those provisions to continue in force for the period of 12 months immediately following the period mentioned in paragraph (a).

(3) Sub–paragraph (2) shall have effect notwithstanding—

(a) the expiry of a period specified in an order under section 62(3)(a) or (c) of the 1996 Act (temporary extension) where the order was made before the passing of this Act, and

(b) section 62(10) of the 1996 Act (automatic repeal on 24th August 2000).

(4) The Secretary of State may by order provide for any of the provisions to which this paragraph applies—

(a) to cease to have effect on a specified day;

(b) to cease to be one of the temporary provisions for the purposes of section 62 of the 1996 Act on a specified day;

and different days may be specified for different purposes.'.

No. 44, in page 60, line 20, leave out 'paragraph 1(2)(a)' and insert—

'virtue of paragraph 1(2)(a) or (b)'.

No. 45, in page 60, line 20, leave out—

'by virtue of paragraph 1(2)(b)'

[Mr. Simon Hughes]

and insert—

'on the expiry of a period mentioned in paragraph 1(2) or ceases to be a temporary provision by virtue of paragraph 1(4)(b)'.

No. 46, in page 60, line 23, at end insert—

'the following provisions of the 1996 Act—

( ) section 26(1)(b) (power of entry on authority of Secretary of State),'.

No. 47, in page 60, line 24, leave out 'of the 1996 Act'.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Schedule 3

THE PROSCRIBED ORGANISATIONS APPEAL COMMISSION

Amendments made: No. 48, in page 62, line 42, at end insert—

'( ) In making the rules the Lord Chancellor shall, in particular, have regard to the need to secure—

(a) that decisions which are the subject of appeals are properly reviewed, and

(b) that information is not disclosed contrary to the public interest.'.

No. 49, in page 62, line 47, at end insert—

'and from any person representing it or him'.

No. 50, in page 63, line 1, leave out 'legal'.

No. 51, in page 63, line 7, leave out 'leave' and insert 'permission'.

No. 52, in page 63, line 22, at end insert—

'( ) In paragraphs 5 and 8 of this Schedule a reference to an organisation includes a reference to a person designated under this paragraph.'.

No. 53, in page 63, line 40, at end insert—

'( ) In paragraphs 5 and 8 of this Schedule a reference to a representative does not include a reference to a person appointed under this paragraph.'.

No. 54, in page 63, leave out lines 47 and 48.

No. 55, in page 63, line 49, at end insert—

'or

( ) any person representing the organisation concerned or the applicant.'.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Schedule 4

FORFEITURE ORDERS

Amendments made: No. 56, in page 73, line 30, at end insert—

'.—(1) This paragraph applies where—

(a) a forfeiture order or a restraint order is made in or in relation to proceedings for an offence under any of sections 15 to 18, and

(b) the proceedings result in a conviction which is subsequently quashed on an appeal under section 7(2) or (5) as applied by section 8(1).

(2) A person who had an interest in any property which was subject to the order may apply to the Court of Session for compensation.

(3) The Court of Session may order compensation to be paid to the applicant if satisfied—

(a) that the applicant has suffered loss in consequence of anything done in relation to the property by or in pursuance of the forfeiture order or restraint order, and

(b) that, having regard to all the circumstances, it is appropriate to order compensation to be paid.

(4) Compensation payable under this paragraph shall be paid by the Secretary of State.'.

No. 57, in page 79, line 48, at end insert—

'.—(1) This paragraph applies where—

(a) a forfeiture order or a restraint order is made in or in relation to proceedings for an offence under any of sections 15 to 18, and

(b) the proceedings result in a conviction which is subsequently quashed on an appeal under section 7(2) or (5), as applied by section 8(2).

(2) A person who had an interest in any property which was subject to the order may apply to the High Court for compensation.

(3) The High Court may order compensation to be paid to the applicant if satisfied—

(a) that the applicant has suffered loss in consequence of anything done in relation to the property by or in pursuance of the forfeiture order or restraint order, and

(b) that, having regard to all the circumstances, it is appropriate to order compensation to be paid.

(4) Compensation payable under this paragraph shall be paid by the Secretary of State.'.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Schedule 5

TERRORIST INVESTIGATIONS

Amendment made: No. 58, in page 94, line 20, at end insert—

'18A.—(1) The Secretary of State may by a written order which relates to specified premises give to any constable in Northern Ireland—

(a) the authority which may be given by a search warrant under paragraph 1;

(b) the authority which may be given by a search warrant under paragraph 11.

(2) An order shall not be made under this paragraph unless—

(a) it appears to the Secretary of State that the information which it would be necessary to provide to the court in support of an application for a warrant would, if disclosed, be likely to place any person in danger or prejudice the capability of members of the Royal Ulster Constabulary to investigate an offence under any of sections 15 to 18 or under section 55, and

(b) the order is made for the purposes of an investigation of the commission, preparation or instigation of an offence under any of sections 15 to 18 or under section 55.

(3) The Secretary of State may make an order under sub-paragraph (1)(a) in relation to particular premises only if satisfied—

(a) that there are reasonable grounds for believing that there is material on the premises which is likely to be of substantial value, whether by itself or together with other material, to the investigation mentioned in sub-paragraph (2)(b), and which does not consist of or include excepted material, and

(b) that the authority of an order is likely to be necessary in the circumstances of the case.

(4) The Secretary of State may make an order under sub-paragraph (1)(b) in relation to particular premises if satisfied that an order made under paragraph 5 in relation to material on the premises has not been complied with.

(5) The Secretary of State may also make an order under sub-paragraph (1)(b) in relation to particular premises if satisfied that there are reasonable grounds for believing that—

(a) there is material on the premises which consists of or includes excluded material or special procedure material but does not include items subject to legal privilege,

(b) the material is likely to be of substantial value, whether by itself or together with other material, to the investigation mentioned in sub–paragraph (2)(b), and

(c) an order under paragraph 5 would not be appropriate in relation to the material for the reason mentioned in paragraph 12(4)(a) or (b) or because the investigation mentioned in sub–paragraph (2)(b) might be seriously prejudiced unless a constable can secure immediate access to the material.

(6) An order under sub–paragraph (1)(b) may not be made except in the circumstances specified in sub–paragraphs (4) and (5).

(7) A person commits an offence if he wilfully obstructs a search under this paragraph.

(8) A person guilty of an offence under sub–paragraph (7) shall be liable on summary conviction to—

(a) imprisonment for a term not exceeding three months,

(b) a fine not exceeding level 4 on the standard scale, or

(c) both.

18B.—(1) The Secretary of State may exercise the power to make an order under paragraph 5 in relation to any person in Northern Ireland who is specified in the order.

(2) An order shall not be made by virtue of this paragraph unless it appears to the Secretary of State that the information which it would be necessary to provide to a county court judge in support of an application for an order under paragraph 5 would, if disclosed—

(a) be likely to place any person in danger, or

(b) be likely to prejudice the capability of members of the Royal Ulster Constabulary to investigate an offence under any of sections 15 to 18 or under section 55.

(3) Paragraphs 5 to 9 shall apply to the making of an order under paragraph 5 by virtue of this paragraph with the following modifications—

(a) references to a county court judge shall be taken as references to the Secretary of State,

(b) the references to "a terrorist investigation" in paragraphs 5(1) and 6(2)(a) shall be taken as references to an investigation of the commission, preparation or instigation of an offence under any of sections 15 to 18 or under section 55, and

(c) the references to "a terrorist investigation" in paragraphs 6(2)(b) and 6(3)(a) shall be taken as references to the investigation mentioned in paragraph 6(2)(a).

(4) Paragraph 10 shall not apply in relation to an order made under paragraph 5 by virtue of this paragraph.

(5) The Secretary of State may vary or revoke an order made by virtue of this paragraph.

(6) A person commits an offence if he contravenes an order made by virtue of this paragraph.

(7) A person guilty of an offence under sub–paragraph (6) shall be liable—

(a) on conviction on indictment, to imprisonment for a term not exceeding two years, to a fine or to both, or

(b) on summary conviction, to imprisonment for a term not exceeding six months, to a fine not exceeding the statutory maximum or to both.

18C.—(1) The Secretary of State may by a written order require any person in Northern Ireland who is specified in the order to provide an explanation of any material—

(a) seized in pursuance of an order under paragraph 18A, or

(b) produced or made available to a constable in pursuance of an order made by virtue of paragraph 18B.

(2) The provisions of paragraphs 13(2) to (4) and 14 shall apply to an order under this paragraph as they apply to an order under paragraph 13.

(3) The provisions of paragraph 16(3) to (5) shall apply to an order under this paragraph as they apply to a notice under paragraph 16.'.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Schedule 6

PORT AND BORDER CONTROLS

Amendment made: No. 59, in page 100, line 43, leave out 'an examining officer' and insert—

'a constable for the police area in which the port is situated (or, where the port is in Northern Ireland, to a member of the Royal Ulster Constabulary).'.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Schedule 7

DETENTION

Amendments made: No. 60, in page 104, line 14, at end insert—

'( ) In this Schedule a reference to a police station includes a reference to any place where the Secretary of State has directed under sub–paragraph (1) that a person is to be detained under section 40.'.

No. 61, in page 104, line 17, at end insert—

'( ) his examination under that Schedule,'.

No. 62, in page 104, line 20, at end insert—

'( ) A constable who arrests a person under section 40 shall take him as soon as is reasonably practicable to the police station which the constable considers the most appropriate.'.

No. 63, in page 104, line 21, at end insert—

'( ) Where a person is arrested in one Part of the United Kingdom and all or part of his detention takes place in another Part, the provisions of this Schedule which apply to detention in a particular Part of the United Kingdom apply in relation to him while he is detained in that Part.'.

No. 64, in page 104, line 33, at end insert—

'*Rights: England, Wales and Northern Ireland*

2A.—(1) Subject to paragraph 2C, a person detained under Schedule 6 or section 40 at a police station in England, Wales or Northern Ireland shall be entitled, if he so requests, to have one named person informed as soon as is reasonably practicable that he is being detained there.

(2) The person named must be—

(a) a friend of the detained person,

(b) a relative, or

(c) a person who is known to the detained person or who is likely to take an interest in his welfare.

(3) Where a detained person is transferred from one police station to another, he shall be entitled to exercise the right under this paragraph in respect of the police station to which he is transferred.

2B.—(1) Subject to paragraphs 2C and 2D, a person detained under Schedule 6 or section 40 at a police station in England, Wales or Northern Ireland shall be entitled, if he so requests, to consult a solicitor as soon as is reasonably practicable, privately and at any time.

(2) Where a request is made under sub–paragraph (1), the request and the time at which it was made shall be recorded.

2C.—(1) Subject to sub–paragraph (2), an officer of at least the rank of superintendent may authorise a delay—

(a) in informing the person named by a detained person under paragraph 2A;

(b) in permitting a detained person to consult a solicitor under paragraph 2B.

(2) But where a person is detained under section 40 he must be permitted to exercise his rights under paragraphs 2A and 2B before the end of the period mentioned in subsection (3) of that section.

(3) An officer may give an authorisation under sub–paragraph (1) only if he has reasonable grounds for believing—

(a) in the case of an authorisation under sub–paragraph (1)(a), that informing the named person of the detained person's detention will have any of the consequences specified in sub–paragraph (4), or

(b) in the case of an authorisation under sub–paragraph (1)(b), that the exercise of the right under paragraph 2B at the time when the detained person desires to exercise it will have any of the consequences specified in sub–paragraph (4).

(4) Those consequences are—

(a) interference with or harm to evidence of a serious arrestable offence,

(b) interference with or physical injury to any person,

(c) the alerting of persons who are suspected of having committed a serious arrestable offence but who have not been arrested for it,

(d) the hindering of the recovery of property obtained as a result of a serious arrestable offence,

(e) interference with the gathering of information about the commission, preparation or instigation of acts of terrorism,

(f) the alerting of a person and thereby making it more difficult to prevent an act of terrorism, and

(g) the alerting of a person and thereby making it more difficult to secure a person's apprehension, prosecution or conviction in connection with the commission, preparation or instigation of an act of terrorism.

(5) If an authorisation under sub–paragraph (1) is given orally, the person giving it shall confirm it in writing as soon as is reasonably practicable.

(6) Where an authorisation under sub–paragraph (1) is given—

(a) the detained person shall be told the reason for the delay as soon as is reasonably practicable, and

(b) the reason shall be recorded as soon as is reasonably practicable.

(7) Where the reason for authorising delay ceases to subsist there may be no further delay in permitting the exercise of the right in the absence of a further authorisation under sub–paragraph (1).

(8) In this paragraph "serious arrestable offence" has the meaning given by section 116 of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 (in relation to England and Wales) and by Article 87 of the Police and Criminal Evidence (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 (in relation to Northern Ireland); but it also includes—

(a) an offence under any of the provisions mentioned in section 39(1)(a) of this Act, and

(b) an attempt or conspiracy to commit an offence under any of the provisions mentioned in section 39(1)(a).

2D.—(1) A direction under this paragraph may provide that a detained person who wishes to exercise the right under paragraph 2B may consult a solicitor only in the sight and hearing of a qualified officer.

(2) A direction under this paragraph may be given—

(a) where the person is detained at a police station in England or Wales, by an officer of at least the rank of Commander or Assistant Chief Constable, or

(b) where the person is detained at a police station in Northern Ireland, by an officer of at least the rank of Assistant Chief Constable.

(3) A direction under this paragraph may be given only if the officer giving it has reasonable grounds for believing that, unless the direction is given, the exercise of the right by the detained person will have any of the consequences specified in paragraph 2C(4).

(4) In this paragraph "a qualified officer" means a police officer who—

(a) is of at least the rank of inspector,

(b) is of the uniformed branch of the force of which the officer giving the direction is a member, and

(c) in the opinion of the officer giving the direction, has no connection with the detained person's case.

(5) A direction under this paragraph shall cease to have effect once the reason for giving it ceases to subsist.'.

No. 65, in page 106, line 41, leave out from 'shall' to the end of line 48 and insert '—

(a) issue a code of practice about the audio recording of interviews to which this paragraph applies, and

(b) make an order requiring the audio recording of interviews to which this paragraph applies in accordance with any relevant code of practice under paragraph (a).

(1A) The Secretary of State may make an order requiring the video recording of—

(a) interviews to which this paragraph applies;

(b) interviews to which this paragraph applies which take place in a particular Part of the United Kingdom.

(1B) An order under sub–paragraph (1A) shall specify whether the video recording which it requires is to be silent or with sound.

(1C) Where an order is made under sub–paragraph (1A)—

(a) the Secretary of State shall issue a code of practice about the video recording of interviews to which the order applies, and

(b) the order shall require the interviews to be video recorded in accordance with any relevant code of practice under paragraph (a).

(1D) This paragraph applies to—

(a) any interview by a constable of a person detained under section 40, and

(b) any interview by a constable of a person detained under Schedule 6, if the interview takes place in a police station.

(1E) A code of practice under this paragraph—

(a) may make provision in relation to a particular Part of the United Kingdom;

(b) may make different provision for different Parts of the United Kingdom.

9A.—(1) This paragraph applies to a code of practice under paragraph 9.

(2) Where the Secretary of State proposes to issue a code of practice he shall—

(a) publish a draft,

(b) consider any representations made to him about the draft, and

(c) if he thinks it appropriate, modify the draft in the light of any representations made to him.

(3) The Secretary of State shall lay a draft of the code before Parliament.

(4) When the Secretary of State has laid a draft code before Parliament he may bring it into operation by order.

(5) The Secretary of State may revise a code and issue the revised code; and sub–paragraphs (2) to (4) shall apply to a revised code as they apply to an original code.

(6) The failure by a constable to observe a provision of a code shall not of itself make him liable to criminal or civil proceedings.

(7) A code—

(a) shall be admissible in evidence in criminal and civil proceedings, and

(b) shall be taken into account by a court or tribunal in any case in which it appears to the court or tribunal to be relevant.'

No. 66, in page 106, transpose paragraphs 9 and 10 to after paragraph 2.

No. 67, in page 107, line 5, leave out 'arrested and'.

No. 68, in page 108, line 9, leave out '12(3)' and insert '12(4)'.

No. 69, in page 108, line 21, leave out first '(3)' and insert '(4)'.

No. 70, in page 110, line 36, leave out from 'under' to end of line 37 and insert 'paragraphs 2A and 2B'.

No. 71, in page 110, line 39, leave out 'sections' and insert 'paragraphs'.

No. 72, in page 110, line 40, after 'accordance', insert 'with'.

No. 73, in page 110, line 40, leave out 'that section' and insert 'paragraph 2C'.

No. 74, in page 110, line 43, leave out 'sections' and insert 'paragraphs'.

No. 75, in page 111, line 1, leave out—

'section 56 and 58 of the 1984 Act'

and insert—

'paragraphs 2A, 2B and 2C'.

No. 76, in page 111, leave out lines 3 to 5.

No. 77, in page 112, line 15, at end insert—

'(3) For the purposes of this Schedule, an application for a warrant is made when written or oral notice of an intention to make the application is given to a judicial authority.'.

No. 78, in page 112, line 17, leave out 'made' and insert 'heard'.

No. 79, in page 112, line 19, leave out 'an' and insert 'the'.

No. 80, in page 112, line 19, leave out 'will be made' and insert 'has been made,

( ) the time at which the application was made,'.

No. 81, in page 112, line 20, leave out 'made' and insert 'be heard'.

No. 82, in page 113, line 6, leave out 'making' and insert 'who has made'.

No. 83, in page 113, line 29, at end insert—

'*Adjournments*

.—(1) A judicial authority may adjourn the hearing of an application for a warrant only if the hearing is adjourned to a date before the expiry of the period mentioned in section 40(3).

(2) This paragraph shall not apply to an adjournment under paragraph 30(2).'.

No. 84, in page 113, line 42, after 'Paragraphs', insert '27(3) and'.

No. 85, in page 113, line 43, at end insert—

'(5) A judicial authority may adjourn the hearing of an application under sub–paragraph (1) only if the hearing is adjourned to a date before the expiry of the period specified in the warrant.

(6) Sub–paragraph (5) shall not apply to an adjournment under paragraph 30(2).'.

No. 86, in page 113, line 46, after 'detained', insert—

'in accordance with section 40(5) or (6) or'.

No. 87, in page 113, line 47, after 'that', insert 'any of'.

No. 88, in page 113, line 47, leave out 'for his detention'.

No. 89, in page 113, line 48, after 129(1)', insert—

'(a) and (b) upon which the judicial authority authorised his further detention'.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Schedule 13

EXERCISE OF OFFICERS' POWERS

Amendments made: No. 90, in page 130, leave out lines 14 to 16.

No. 91, in page 130, line 23, leave out—

'the whole or part of'.

No. 92, in page 130, line 33, leave out—

'the whole or part of'.

No. 93, in page 130, line 34, after 'the', insert 'first'.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Schedule 14

CONSEQUENTIAL AMENDMENTS

Amendments made: No. 94, in page 130, line 42, at end insert—

'*Suppression of Terrorism Act 1978 (c.26)*

.—(1) The Suppression of Terrorism Act 1978 shall be amended as follows.

(2) For paragraph 19A of Schedule 1 (list of offences) substitute—

"*Financing terrorism*

19A. An offence under any of sections 15 to 18 of the Terrorism Act 2000." '.

No. 95, in page 130, line 42, at end insert—

'*Legal Aid, Advice and Assistance (Northern Ireland) Order 1981 (S.I. 1981/228 (N.I.8))*

.—(1) In Schedule 1 to the Legal Aid, Advice and Assistance (Northern Ireland) Order 1981 (proceedings for which legal aid may be given under Part II of that Order) at the end of Part I insert—

"8. Proceedings brought by an individual before the Proscribed Organisations Appeal Commission.".

(2) The amendment made by sub–paragraph (1) is without prejudice to the power to make regulations under Article 10(2) of the Legal Aid, Advice and Assistance (Northern Ireland) Order 1981 amending or revoking the provision inserted by that sub–paragraph.'.

No. 96, in page 131, leave out lines 12 to 18 and insert—

'( ) For section 56(10) and (11) (application of right to have someone informed) substitute—

"(10) Nothing in this section applies to a person arrested or detained under the terrorism provisions.".'.

No. 97, in page 131, leave out lines 19 to 25 and insert—

'( ) For section 58(12) to (18) (application of right of access to legal advice) substitute—

"(12) Nothing in this section applies to a person arrested or detained under the terrorism provisions.".'.

No. 98, in page 131, line 44, leave out '(5)'.

No. 99, in page 131, line 45, leave out from '58)' to end of line 47 and insert '—

(a) in subsection (3) for "subsections (4) and (5)" insert "subsection (4)", and

(b) subsection (5) shall cease to have effect.'.

No. 100, in page 131, line 48, leave out 'for "section' and insert—

'for "or after being arrested under section'.

No. 101, in page 131, line 50, leave out 'Schedule 5" substitute "section' and insert—

'Schedule 5 to that Act by an examining officer who is a constable" substitute "or after being arrested under section'.

No. 102, in page 132, line 4, leave out 'for "Part' and insert—

'for "or an offence under Part'.

No. 103, in page 132, line 5, leave out 'substitute "any' and insert—

'substitute "or an offence under any'.

No. 104, in page 132, line 6, leave out 'In' and insert 'For'.

No. 105, in page 132, line 6, leave out from 'property)' to end of line 8 and insert 'substitute—

"(d) an order under section 23 of the Terrorism Act 2000 (forfeiture orders)," '.

No. 106, in page 132, line 8, at end insert—

'(4) In section 93E (application to Scotland of sections 93A to 93D)—

(a) in the definition of offences to which Part VI of the Act applies, for "Part III of the Prevention of Terrorism Act 1989" substitute "any of sections 15 to 18 of the Terrorism Act 2000"; and

(b) in the definition of proceeds of criminal conduct, for paragraph (b) substitute—

"(b) terrorist property within the meaning of section 14 of the Terrorism Act 2000".'.

No. 107, in page 132, line 8, at end insert—

'*Elected Authorities (Northern Ireland) Act 1989 (c.3)*

.—(1) The Elected Authorities (Northern Ireland) Act 1989 shall be amended as follows.

(2) In section 6(5) (breach of terms of declaration), in the definition of "proscribed organisation" for "section 30 of the Northern Ireland (Emergency Provisions) Act 1996" substitute "section 3 of the Terrorism Act 2000".

(3) In Schedule 2 (declaration against terrorism) for "Schedule 2 to the Northern Ireland (Emergency Provisions) Act 1996" substitute "Schedule 2 to the Terrorism Act 2000".'.

No. 108, in page 132, line 20, leave out 'Schedule 5" substitute' and insert—

'Schedule 5 to that Act by an examining officer who is a constable" substitute'.

No. 109, in page 132, leave out from line 39 to line 43 on page 133.

No. 110, in page 133, line 43, at end insert—

'( ) In Article 60 (tape-recording of interviews), omit paragraph (2).'.

No. 111, in page 134, line 4, at end insert—

'( ) In Article 66 (codes of practice), omit paragraph (12).'.

No. 112, in page 134, line 24, at end insert—

'*Proceeds of Crime (Scotland) Act 1995 (c. 43)*

.—(1) The Proceeds of Crime (Scotland) Act 1995 shall be amended as follows.

(2) In subsection (2) of section 1 (offences to which Part I (confiscation) applies), for "Part III of the 1989 Act" substitute "any of sections 15 to 18 of the Terrorism Act 2000".

(3) In subsection (1)(c) of section 42 (reciprocal enforcement of orders), for "1989 Act" substitute "Terrorism Act 2000".

(4) In subsection (1) of section 49 (interpretation), the definition of "the 1989 Act" shall cease to have effect.'.

No. 113, in page 134, line 41, at end insert—

'*Criminal Procedure and Investigations Act 1996 (c.25)*

.—(1) The Criminal Procedure and Investigations Act 1996 shall, in its application to Northern Ireland (as set out in Schedule 4 to that Act), be amended as follows.

(2) In section 14A(1) (public interest: review for scheduled offences) for "section 1 of the Northern Ireland (Emergency Provisions) Act 1996" substitute "section 64 of the Terrorism Act 2000".

(3) In section 39(3)(a) (start of trial on indictment without a jury) for "section 11 of the Northern Ireland (Emergency Provisions) Act 1996" substitute "section 74 of the Terrorism Act 2000".'.

No. 114, in page 135, line 2, at end insert—

'*Northern Ireland Arms Decommissioning Act 1997 (c. 7)*

.—(1) This paragraph applies to a reference in paragraph 9 or 10 of the Schedule to the Northern Ireland Arms Decommissioning Act 1997 (amnesty) to an offence under a provision ("the old provision") of—

(a) the Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Act 1989, or

(b) the Northern Ireland (Emergency Provisions) Act 1996.

(2) The reference shall be taken as a reference to an offence under this Act which is committed in circumstances which would have amounted to the commission of an offence under the old provision before it ceased to have effect.

(3) Sub-paragraph (2) has effect for the purpose of the application of section 4(1) of the Northern Ireland Arms Decommissioning Act 1997 (amnesty) in relation to anything done after the old provision ceases to have effect.'.

No. 115, in page 135, line 12, at end insert—

'*Access to Justice Act 1999 (c. 22)*

.—(1) In paragraph 2(1) of Schedule 2 to the Access to Justice Act 1999 (Community Legal Service: exceptions to excluded services) after paragraph (g) insert—

"or

(h) the Proscribed Organisations Appeal Commission".

(2) The amendment made by sub-paragraph (1) is without prejudice to the power to make regulations under section 6(7) of the Access to Justice Act 1999 amending or revoking the provision inserted by that sub-paragraph.'.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Schedule 15

REPEALS

Amendments made: No. 116, in page 135, line 19, at end insert—

'1984 c. 60.	Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984.	Section 116(5).'.

No. 117, in page 135, line 35, at end insert—

'1995 c. 40.	Criminal Procedure (Consequential Provisions) (Scotland) Act 1995.	In Schedule 4, paragraph 72.'.

No. 118, in page 135, line 35, at end insert—

'1995 c. 43.	Proceeds of Crime (Scotland) Act 1995.	In section 49(1), the definition of "the 1989 Act".'.

No. 119, in page 136, line 4, at end insert—

'1999 c. 22.	Access to Justice Act 1999.	In paragraph 2(1) of Schedule 2, the word "or" after paragraph (f).'.

No. 120, in page 136, line 12, column 3, at end insert—

'Article 60(2).
Article 66(12).'.

No. 121, in page 136, line 23, column 3, leave out "6,".—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Order for Third Reading read.

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the Bill be now read the Third time.—*[Mr. Charles Clarke.]*

1.25 am

Mr. Lidington: I wish that this Bill were not necessary. However, it is very necessary for the protection and security of the people of this country. Throughout our proceedings on Second Reading, in Committee and this evening, the Minister and his team have approached the subject with realism. They have also shown courtesy to the views that have been expressed by hon. Members of all parties.

Conservative Members have some differences of opinion with the Government over some aspects of the Bill, but we agree strongly with the proposals. We agree that the Bill is essential and should be on the statute book swiftly. If there is a Division on Third Reading, we shall support the Government.

1.26 am

Mr. McNamara: I, too, congratulate my hon. Friends the Ministers, who have listened to the debate and tried to meet the points made. I cannot support the Bill wholeheartedly, but I shall not vote against it.

My hon. Friend the Minister of State was right to pay tribute to the work of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, Liberty and the Committee on the Administration of Justice. When he introduced the Bill originally, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary mentioned the work of Gearty and Kimbell in preparing the ground for Lord Lloyd's report. I declare an interest, as I was responsible for that work being produced, with the help of a considerable grant from Unison to the civil liberties department of King's College.

All the bodies that I have mentioned have expressed concern that the Bill does not meet the requirements of the European convention on human rights. Nothing that we have heard in evidence this evening has persuaded me or some other Labour Members that the Bill meets the main thrust of some of the points of the convention.

On Second Reading, I drew attention to some of the points that the Bill failed to meet, and I want to revisit them and see where we have got to.

Clause 3 deals with prescription. Article 11 of the ECHR provides for a right to peaceful assembly and asserts that limitation of that right must be proportionate. Proscription is a cosmetic part of the prevention of terrorism legislation that is little used in the fight against terrorism. We discussed that earlier this evening.

Clause 5 and schedule 3 deal with the appeals commission for proscribed organisations, as we discussed earlier. Judicial review is the first test of appeal. In the case involving gays in the military, the European Court of Human Rights said that that was not sufficient and that the case must be heard on its merits.

Clause 18 deals with the duty to disclose information. Its reversal of the burden of proof is especially dangerous, given the breadth of the definition of terrorism. It contravenes article 10 of the convention, which deals with the right of freedom of expression, in that it limits press freedom to collect information.

Clause 38 deals with the tipping-off offence, and again reverses the onus. It will stifle criticism of police and security and could contravene article 10 of the ECHR.

Clause 39 and 40 deal with powers of arrest, and will allow a constable to make an arrest without a warrant, on the grounds of reasonable suspicion. If such arrests take place to obtain information, rather than to secure a conviction, they will contravene article 5(1)(c) of the convention, which states that the intention behind an arrest must be to bring a suspect before a competent legal authority. Stop and search is contrary to the ECHR. In paragraph 2(6) of schedule 14 and clause 40(3), the right of access to lawyers can be delayed up to 48 hours. The contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for St. Helens, South (Mr. Bermingham) showed how that could breach article 6 of the European convention on human rights on the right of access to legal representation.

Clause 40 and schedule 7 deal with the detention of an individual for up to 48 hours and the exclusion of legal representatives from the application to extend the detention. Again, article 6 demands a right of access to a lawyer. Clause 43 deals with stop and search powers applied to anyone whom a policeman reasonably believes to be a terrorist. That is extremely dangerous, given the wide definition of terrorism, and probably violates article 8 of the ECHR on the right to privacy, unless interference is necessary in a democratic society.

Article 5(1)(c) of the convention provides for arrest, but with the requirement that a person is brought before a court. That provision is also contravened. Clauses 56 and 57 deal with offences to possess items and information that give rise to reasonable suspicion that they are being used for terrorist purposes. Again, the reverse onus clauses are included, which possibly breach article 6(2) of the convention on the right to be presumed innocent until proven guilty.

Article 10 of the ECHR provides a right to receive and impart information without interference from a public body, even if the ideas shock and disturb the state. That can be overruled only if the benefit to the state outweighs the cost to society. Given the current security climate, coupled with the reverse onus of proof, that would not seem to be a proportionate response.

I do not believe that the Government have faced up to the matters in the convention. I do not intend to divide the House because I think that that will be dealt with effectively and more directly by the European Court of Human Rights and, if not, by our own judges after October of this year. The Minister has, I believe, failed in that respect.

I welcome the independent review. I am only sorry that it is not followed by a guaranteed debate on the Floor of the House, plus an affirmative order, keeping the Bill in operation. The amendment that was not accepted earlier would have made the matter more complete.

It is regrettable that new clause 5 was not debated, because it dealt with the proposed Bill of Rights that is being discussed in Northern Ireland and that will be followed by legislation either later this year or early

[Mr. McNamara]

next year. It will be a problem ensuring that the contents of the proposed human rights Bill are compatible with those of this Bill. It would have been wise to wait for that legislation. I regret that we did not have the criminal law review so that we could compare the two. It is a sad thing that the other place may have it but we will not. It will make judgments that we have been unable to make.

I regret that the Bill is necessary, but I will not divide the House on it.

1.33 pm

Mr. Simon Hughes: I begin with the less controversial matters and thank the Ministers for courteously dealing with these matters in Committee and afterwards, and for the help that their officials have given in providing information. That was much appreciated.

The debate has been appreciated by all right hon. and hon. Members, from all parties. Points were made and answered—we did not just play to each other in a series of monologues. Where we differed, we differed, but at least we tested the opinion of others.

I join the hon. Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara) in thanking those who briefed the Committee generally and individual members personally. I thank Liberty, which is based in my constituency, for its assistance, not least on an amendment on a crucial matter. I also thank the two Northern Ireland organisations, the Committee on the Administration of Justice and the Human Rights Commission.

That leads me to the more controversial element of my remarks. The chief commissioner of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission judged at the end of our proceedings—up to yesterday—that the Bill was seriously flawed. The commission is the one human rights body in the United Kingdom that we have set up to give statutory advice to Parliament and to public authorities. If it tells us that we are doing the wrong thing, we should listen carefully.

On Second Reading, my colleagues and I made it clear that we support the idea of a United Kingdom-wide Bill, rather than a partial UK Bill, and a Bill that would get rid of exclusion orders. This Bill does that. However, we said that we did not support the idea of a Bill that could not return to the House for further consideration once it was on the statute book. There is a difference between permanent legislation and legislation that contains no power of review. One can have the permanent framework, but with a power of review. It is a serious defect that the Bill does not have that.

After Second Reading, which we supported because we support the principle of a Terrorism Bill, we suggested having a Special Standing Committee to consider and take evidence on some of the difficult issues—we have now suggested that twice this year, but we do not do it to be tokenism. Tonight's debate has vindicated the wisdom of that proposal. The key issue in the Bill is how one defines terrorism. Clearly, a huge amount of work remains to be done to achieve a definition that would meet with the agreement of large numbers of people in the House and outside it, if that can be achieved. A Special Standing Committee might have been able to make some progress on that matter, but we did not have one. It was left to the debate in Committee.

One of the fundamental flaws that remains in the Bill is the fact that the definition of terrorism is extremely wide and is not targeted. Large groups of people whom we have never contemplated as terrorists may well be caught within it.

Another area of concern is that excessive powers are given to Ministers and the authorities and cannot be reviewed. A further recurrent problem is that far too often the Bill does not uphold the normal legal rights of individuals. Only an hour ago, we debated the reverse burden of proof—defendants have to prove that they are not guilty to establish their innocence.

Our conclusion is that the Bill has not been amended as it badly needed to be, and that it will not be fit for the statute book when it leaves this House—if Third Reading is agreed to—in that it will not sufficiently uphold liberties and does not get the balance right. We had to make the straightforward, but difficult decision whether to continue to support the Bill or to force a vote. We decided collectively that we could not support the Bill as it stands. It has not made the progress that it ought to have made and the other place will have much work to do on it—in particular on the legal aspects and the civil and criminal justice processes—to put it right.

However, as it is important that we have UK-wide legislation on terrorism and because the Bill contains some good provisions, we will not go into the Lobby against the Government tonight—*[Interruption.]* Nearly all my colleagues have been here all evening and have voted many times against specific provisions of the Bill.

The Bill does not have our support as it needs to be amended significantly. Unless we amend it, it will not get the balance right and the state will end up with excessive powers against the citizen. I hope that the good will and good faith of Ministers will ensure that the work that needs to be done where we and they have said that the Bill is defective, can be done. Above all, if we are to have a Terrorism Bill on the statute book for the whole of the United Kingdom, I hope that we can define terrorism correctly. We regret that we have not made more progress in the three months that the Bill has been in this place.

1.40 am

Dr. Lynne Jones: I shall not detain the House for long. Like most hon. Members, I accept that, unfortunately, the measure is necessary. However, I share the concern of my colleagues about the definition of terrorism used in the Bill.

My hon. Friend the Minister, in rejecting the alternative proposal made by my hon. Friend the Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara), said that that definition could have included the Yorkshire Ripper as a terrorist. I point out to my hon. Friend the Minister that Peter Sutcliffe terrorised the people of Yorkshire—especially women. Many members of the public might feel that a definition that included such a person would be more acceptable than one that included, for example, the women who inflicted serious violence on Hawk jets or who attempted to inflict serious violence on a Trident submarine.

For that reason, I hope that the Government will use the opportunity afforded during consideration of the Bill in another place to find a new definition that will ensure that the concerns expressed tonight are taken on board.

1.41 am

Mr. McDonnell: I apologise to my hon. Friends and comrades for detaining them. Many of us had an almost personal relationship with the predecessor legislation to the Bill.

In the early 1980s, Errol and Theresa Smalley approached me because they were concerned about their nephew—Paul Hill—who was one of the first people picked up under the prevention of terrorism Acts, and subsequently framed. I visited him in prison over the years—with my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn). I even attended his wedding in Long Lartin. It took more than half a decade to secure his release.

Throughout the 1980s, many members of the Irish community in this country campaigned for the eradication of the PTA—as did many members of the Labour party. Indeed, at one time, it was the policy of our party to repeal the Act. The PTA was used to harass the Irish community; it was ineffective and a source of injustice.

The Bill makes that legislation permanent. We have rejected the possibility of a parliamentary review; tonight, we rejected the potential for a quinquennial review. The Bill extends the scope of that legislation; it widens the definition to include many people who could never be defined as terrorist. It sets the scene for further miscarriages of justice. I cannot support the Bill and will vote against it.

1.43 am

Mr. Corbyn: I, too, will be brief. I endorse the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (Mr. McDonnell). I also remember clearly the saga of the Guildford Four and the way in which, under the prevention of terrorism Act, wholly innocent people were picked up by the police merely for attending meetings to discuss the situation in Ireland or because they were framed by others. They were subsequently released, but they have never forgotten the scar of interrogation.

Paul Hill was the first person to be arrested under the PTA. From that, followed the misery of the 17 years that he suffered in prison. I had hoped that we would get rid of such draconian legislation.

My worry is that the measure that I suspect the House will accept on Third Reading is draconian. It could be used against people who peacefully and legitimately campaign for change in their own country, but who live in the UK because it is not safe for them to mount such campaigns in their home country. That international dimension needs to be considered.

There is also the question of the rejected amendment in the name of the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), which sought to amend the clause that forces people to prove their innocence. That theme runs through the Bill, and it is bad legislation. It shifts the burden from the prosecution to prove an individual's guilt to the individual to prove their innocence, something that is obviously extremely difficult to do.

We have been through the pain of miscarriages of justice—Birmingham, Guildford, Judith Ward, Prem, and many others. Not all those cases were related to the prevention of terrorism Act, but they were miscarriages of justice. Parliament recognised that by setting up the Criminal Cases Review Commission. We recognised that the legal system in this country was not infallible. My concern is that without any possibility of review, the Bill might lead, although I hope that it will not, to further miscarriages of justice.

I suspect that we will be back here very soon, either because the House of Lords will significantly amend the Bill so that it must return here or because it will be overridden by the European convention on human rights and found wanting in European or British courts. I suspect that we will be amending the Bill in the near future. We ought to have better drafting of legislation in the first place so that we do not end up in that situation.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington. I have seen the effect of miscarriages of justice caused by crudely formed legislation to deal with terrorism. I am not in favour of violence or terrorism, but one does not solve those problems by imprisoning the innocent. In fact, one creates a far worse problem because if one imprisons the innocent, what happens to the guilty? The Bill will not do us any good, and we will be back here discussing it in the near future. I shall join my hon. Friend in opposing the Bill.

1.46 am

Mr. Charles Clarke: I begin by expressing my thanks, first to members of the Committee, Opposition spokesmen and my right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office for the way in which we have worked. Secondly, I thank the Bill team, who gave tremendous support throughout the proceedings, not only to Ministers but to all members of the Committee. Thirdly, I thank the officials of the House, including *Hansard* staff and clerks, who have worked extremely effectively. We have had an efficient and full discussion of many of the issues.

We have had a lengthy debate this evening, so I shall try to be brief, but I need to address some of the points that have been made. It is clear that my hon. Friend the Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara) was not satisfied with the answers given in the discussion, and that is entirely his right. However, it is simply not true that the Government have not faced up to the issues. In particular we have directly addressed the implications of the Human Rights Act 1998 and the various issues arising from that. I know that there will be controversy about the issues because people will argue that cases will arise.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) and my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn) have expressed concern about the inability to return to these issues. The doctrine of the omnicompetence of Parliament has simply not been grasped. There is a series of issues about the ways in which Parliament exercises its scrutiny in discussion, but it is possible, and indeed likely, that Parliament will return to discussion of these issues because it has a right and a duty to do so.

We have had a full discussion about the definitional points. Our definition is right, and it is defensible and positive. I acknowledge the difficulties of balance, and I repeat, as I have said throughout the debate, that we will

[Mr. Charles Clarke]

consider proposals that have been made. I repeat my thanks to those organisations that have sought to make constructive proposals.

The Bill starts from the necessity to recognise the existence of domestic and international terrorism, and the terrible things that terrorists do—blowing planes out of the sky, destroying buildings, blowing up people and knee-capping. There is a vast range of activities. The obligation not only of Ministers but of all elected politicians and legislators is to ask what we can do to address international terrorism, and to do everything in our power to prevent those who want to terrorise us from being able to do so. Our need and our duty is to fight terrorism domestically and internationally, and that is what the Bill is about.

It is absolutely true—it has been a theme running through our discussions—that the need to defeat international and domestic terrorism has to be set against the individual liberties of every citizen in the country and their right to be properly treated under the law. Another theme has been the need to avoid the abuses of justice, to which my hon. Friends the Members for Islington, North and for Hayes and Harlington (Mr. McDonnell) referred. They are absolutely right to say that we must achieve the right balance.

I say as emphatically as I can that it is our duty both to maintain the rights of individuals under the rule of law and to maintain their right to very existence and life in the face of the threat posed by international terrorism. It is our duty to ensure that we do all in our power to inhibit terrorists' ability to destroy, kill and create a negative atmosphere in our society. That is why we have introduced the Bill, it is why I hope that my hon. Friends will support it and it is why I am grateful for the support of the official Opposition. I commend the Bill to the whole House.

Question put, That the Bill be now read the Third time:—

The House divided: Ayes 210, Noes 1.

Division No. 114] **[1.50 pm**

AYES

Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Berry, Roger
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clelland, David
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Collins, Tim
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Dawson, Hilton
Day, Stephen
Dowd, Jim
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Ennis, Jeff
Flint, Caroline
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Gapes, Mike
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hinchliffe, David
Hope, Phil
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Rt Hon Adam
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lidington, David
Linton, Martin
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
Luff, Peter
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McDonagh, Siobhain
McFall, John
McIsaac, Shona
Mackinlay, Andrew
McLoughlin, Patrick
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Merron, Gillian
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morley, Elliot
Mountford, Kali
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
Organ, Mrs Diana
Pearson, Ian
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Singh, Marsha
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Soley, Clive
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*

Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
White, Brian
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Clive Betts and
Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe.

NOES

Flynn, Paul

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. John McDonnell and
Mr. Jeremy Corbyn.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Bill read the Third time, and passed.

Prevention and Suppression of Terrorism

2.1 am

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): I beg to move,

That the draft Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Act 1989 (Continuance) Order 2000, which was laid before this House on 3rd March, be approved.

Many principles behind the continuance order have been discussed in more than nine hours of debate today, and in many hours in Committee and on Second Reading of the Terrorism Bill. I shall therefore try not to detain the House for too long.

In an intervention on Third Reading of the Terrorism Bill, my hon. Friend the Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara) asked about its compatibility with the Human Rights Act 1998. It is right for me to tell the House our opinion of the compatibility of the continuance order with that Act.

The United Kingdom Government have had to enter a derogation from the 1998 Act because of the executive power for extensions of detention. That derogation arose from the case of Brogan, which came before the European Court. Apart from that derogation, I am satisfied that all the provisions that we want to renew tonight comply with convention rights.

We are considering the 1999 report on the operation of the prevention of terrorism Act by Mr. John Rowe QC, who has undertaken his usual thorough review of the provisions.

Mr. Kevin McNamara (Hull, North): When will my right hon. Friend inform the Council of Europe that the derogation from the Human Rights Act 1998 no longer needs to apply to Britain?

Mr. Straw: We should be able to do that when the Terrorism Bill becomes law, if it is passed in another place. I hope that that will happen.

I should like to place on record my appreciation and thanks to Mr. Rowe for a further year's work in carefully and assiduously reviewing the operation of the provisions. To pick up the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Hull, North made about human rights, in paragraph 21 of the report Mr. Rowe states that on many occasions, the person interviewed—police officers or others to whom the prevention of terrorism Act is relevant—

volunteered, before I mentioned it, the question of the Human Rights Act, or breach of human rights. I learned that in many spheres there is active training going on about the elements of the Human Rights Act and human rights; and the general impression I received was that people are aware of the need to have in mind the Convention.

Those remarks are encouraging.

Mr. Rowe's report is concerned with 1999. In those 12 months, we had great optimism over the Good Friday agreement and, towards the end of the year, considerable pessimism about its full implementation. Notwithstanding the fact that the ceasefire continued, seven deaths in Northern Ireland occurred as a consequence of terrorist violence. I ought to remind the House of two: in June, Elizabeth O'Neill was killed in her home by a pipe bomb thrown through the window and, almost exactly a year ago, Rosemary Nelson was murdered in an act of sheer

[Mr. Straw]

brutality as she left her home in her car. Terrorist-related incidents also occurred on the mainland. In particular, I draw the House's attention to the siege of the Greek embassy in London last year.

The Home Office statistical bulletin on the operation of the prevention of terrorism legislation, which was published earlier this month, gives details of the use of those powers. In summary, 12 persons were detained in connection with Northern Irish terrorism during 1999—down from 20 the previous year—and 87 were detained in connection with international terrorism, up from 25 in 1998. The former powers to make exclusion orders were not used in 1999 and have now lapsed. That followed undertakings that I gave in opposition, which we have implemented in full in government. Of the 99 persons detained in 1999, 84 were charged with an offence. Extensions of detention were granted for eight persons, 437 persons were examined for more than an hour but not detained and 29 were charged with an offence. Mr. Rowe spells out in his report that he believes that the powers have been properly used and that they are needed for renewal.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): A matter on which Mr. Rowe reports is the operation of amendments to the prevention of terrorism legislation represented by the Criminal Justice (Terrorism and Conspiracy) Act 1998. His brief chapters 7 and 9 confirm that neither has been used. He makes no comment about that. Does the Home Secretary have a comment as to whether it is necessary for them to continue?

Mr. Straw: I suggest to the House that it does not always follow that the only proof of whether powers are needed is whether they are used. They can often have important deterrent value. That was part of the debate when the House considered that Act in September 1998. I believe that they are necessary for renewal, but the hon. Gentleman will know that they are replaced in the Terrorism Bill.

When the Terrorism Bill receives Royal Assent, as I hope that it will when it is passed by the other place, it will provide new, modernised counter-terrorism legislation proportionate to the threat that we face. However, it is vital that there is continuity and that the existing counter-terrorism powers remain available for the period before the Bill comes into force, pending the enactment and implementation of the new legislation through the renewal of the current legislation by the order.

2.8 am

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): Many of the points that we would have expected to cover were dealt with at length when the Terrorism Bill was debated so it may please the House to know that I shall be brief.

I join the Home Secretary in paying tribute to Mr. Rowe for his report, which convincingly argues that the provisions of the prevention of terrorism Act are needed for another year. The Conservative party, in opposition and in government, has never shirked its duty to take the toughest stand against terrorism and to give the police and the armed forces the powers that they need to protect the public. In that spirit, we fully support the report's conclusions and with them, therefore, the continuance of the Act.

The reasons given for the Act's continuance are compelling. In the past year, there have been substantial and welcome moves towards peace in the Province of Northern Ireland but, although the security situation in Northern Ireland has greatly improved, none of the main paramilitary organisations has even begun to decommission its illegally held arms and explosives. The capability of the paramilitaries therefore remains undiminished, and their organisations remain firmly intact. They retain huge arsenal of weapons, and continue to carry out shootings, beatings and mutilations and to exile people from their homes.

The Rowe report states that

> firearms, and ammunition, and bombing and explosive devices have been discovered, and this, among other things, is clear evidence that paramilitary groups have been making preparations to make violent attacks on the community. In the course of searches by security forces as many firearms have been found in 1999 as in 1998.

While those groups maintain the capability and the infrastructure to perpetrate gross acts of terrorism, we must ensure that our police and security services have the powers that are necessary to combat them.

Acts of violence carried out by paramilitary groups are also still prevalent in the Province. The report states that

> through 1999 there has been continuing incidence of deaths, injury and damage to property, carried out by paramilitary groups.

The findings of the report are borne out by figures given in reply to parliamentary questions. The Northern Ireland Office recently stated that there had been 225 shooting or bombing incidents in Northern Ireland during 1999, and figures supplied by the Government reveal that 2,400 persons have been injured as a result of terrorist attacks since the Good Friday agreement. During the same period, 49 deaths have been attributed to the security situation in Northern Ireland. The attack on an hotel in February and recent attempted attacks on Army bases in Northern Ireland remind us that the threat from terrorist groups has not gone away. Even with decommissioning by the main paramilitary groups, the dissidents opposed to the Good Friday agreement will retain their capacity for terror and destruction.

The Act, however, is not concerned solely with Northern Ireland. The Rowe report states that

> in the international field, the threat to the United Kingdom of terrorism continues year by year.

We need only read the history of terrorism on the international scene, written by Professor Wilkinson and contained in volume II of the report of Lord Lloyd's inquiry, to realise that the threat is still there.

The order gives special powers to the police and security services to deal with the threat of terrorism. They include provisions allowing for the admissibility of evidence from a police officer that a defendant belonged to a specified organisation, along with other powers which the Home Secretary has already set out and which I shall therefore not repeat.

Dr. Ian Gibson (Norwich, North): And this is a brief speech?

Miss Widdecombe: It could become longer, if I were tempted.

Today the House has debated the Terrorism Bill, which will combine the existing emergency provisions Act and prevention of terrorism Act in a single piece of permanent UK-wide legislation. As I have said, we support the Bill; but if the Home Secretary speaks again—he does not seem much inclined to do so at the moment—he should give the House an assurance that the order contains all the provisions that it should contain.

I shall not be ungenerous enough to dwell on the error in the Home Office that allowed—

Mr. Straw: The right hon. Lady will not be surprised to learn that I have double-checked and sought assurances. I cannot be certain that there is not some glitch elsewhere in the small print, but I am assured that every section of the famous part IV—one bit of which was not brought into force last year—is being brought into force this year. The officials have staked their pensions on that.

Miss Widdecombe: I hope that the Home Secretary has staked his pension on it as well, as he has said that he will take personal responsibility for everything that happens in the Home Office.

In view of that assurance, it only remains for me to regret that, when the Government were in opposition, they did not give us the support that we are rendering them tonight. Nevertheless, we consider it to be overwhelmingly in the interests of the security of Northern Ireland for us to render that support, despite the Government's rather ungenerous approach when they were in opposition.

2.14 am

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): Mr. Rowe's report is particularly welcome. It is clear that he has done a thorough job in the past year, as he did before. We thank him for that.

It almost goes without saying that one of the benefits of the renewal process is that it has a reporting structure, so that we have the basis on which we can judge the appropriateness of continuing all the legislation. On the basis of the report and analysis, we, like the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe), her party and the Government, can come to no conclusion other than that the present legislation should continue while Parliament is debating what legislation to put in its place. There are two reasons why it is vital that we do that.

First, as so often in the past quarter century, we are in a delicate period in the history of Northern Ireland. To take away the security that special legislation gives would be unsettling at the moment, when people are calling for a more settled and permanent solution. If the politics can deliver a settled arrangement with the devolved Assembly and the like, that will be all the more reason why it will not be necessary to have the exceptional powers in an Act such as the PTA.

Secondly, some of us have been here since 5 o'clock to debate the Government's proposed legislation to replace the prevention of terrorism legislation. We have our criticisms. They have been aired, but it would be inappropriate, when the Government have honoured their commitment a year ago to bring a Bill to the House that put legislation in a UK-wide context and that did not require annual renewal, for us then to say that it was right to take away the shield, the safeguard, that the order provides in the interim.

We hope that this will be the last occasion that we have to renew the prevention of terrorism legislation, with its exceptional and, in some ways, unfair powers. Whatever the necessity for anti-terrorism legislation, it would be better if there were a different Act of Parliament, so we hope that it is the last occasion.

Clearly, it would be inappropriate, not just in Northern Ireland but generally, to allow any of our citizens not to have the protection of some legislation, so the choice that we have tonight is stark. Put crudely, it is whether to continue with what we have, which has inadequacies, but which the report shows is working relatively well in providing security; or to have a few months with nothing at all.

We have opted for the first option, but the lesson of the exercise is that it is appropriate not just to have a report regularly to Parliament, but that Parliament should have the opportunity to decide whether and how to renew the legislation. I hope that the practice that we are going through on the PTA will be one that the Government adopt for the Terrorism Bill. At least once a Parliament the provisions should come back to Parliament for consideration on the basis of such a report.

2.18 am

Mr. Kevin McNamara (Hull, North): I do not intend to delay the House long, but it is incumbent on me to reply to the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) and to congratulate my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary on his action in changing the legislation. We voted against the PTA renewal orders because they contained provisions for internment without trial and for exclusion orders, both of which were contrary to human rights and caused considerable unfairness and unhappiness and considerable problems.

Exclusion orders set up people as targets in the areas in which they lived if they ventured outside their community. Internment without trial was one of the major things that helped to supply recruits to the Provisional IRA, so my right hon. Friend is to be congratulated on introducing an order that does not contain either of those provisions. It is good that he has done so, and that fact should be recorded. I have taken part in as many of these debates as anyone, and I am happy that this will be the last on the old legislation. Like the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), though, I should have hoped for scrutiny of the renewal of the forthcoming Terrorism Act on the Floor of the House every year.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Act 1989 (Continuance) Order 2000, which was laid before this House on 3rd March, be approved.

Dairy Industry

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

2.20 am

Mr. Tim Collins (Westmorland and Lonsdale): A little over 12 hours ago, I met a number of my constituents who had come to London as part of a national demonstration by dairy farmers about the state of their industry. Members of Parliament from all parties were present during the demonstration, recognising the scale of difficulties facing the industry.

I congratulate those who organised the demonstration, which began with four farmers sitting around a kitchen table in Kendal, in my constituency. They had in mind the idea of trying to create an agricultural analogy to the Jarrow march of the 1930s when there was great despair in certain communities in our country. It is not wrong of us to recognise that some of our agricultural communities face despair, bleakness, lack of hope and fear for the future that parallel the experiences of some communities in the 1930s.

On a personal note, I should say that my parents were dairy farmers. I no longer have a direct family connection with dairy farming, but I take a personal interest in it. While mentioning family links, I welcome the presence of my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien), whose connections with south Cumbria mean that he holds that part of the world as dearly in his heart as I do in mine. I also thank my hon. Friends the Members for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown) and for Mid-Worcestershire (Mr. Luff) for their presence. Both strongly support the dairy industry.

I can reassure the Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food by saying that I do not intend to make a series of partisan points. I accept, of course, that the problems of the dairy industry did not spring instantly into being on 1 May 1997. Some pre-dated the general election, and we accept that the Government have no magic wand. No one who came to London today to demonstrate believes that the Government have it within their gift simply to solve all the problems of the dairy industry. Nor did any of them seriously question the good will of the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. I welcome the fact that he met some of the demonstrators, including some of my constituents. I applaud his generosity in making his time available.

That said, the Minister of State will recognise that the scale of the problem cannot be understated. The National Farmers Union has provided me with a brief that states, in its very first sentence:

> British dairy farming is facing meltdown.

The crisis is not minor or temporary. Nor is it analogous to anything that we have seen for decades. Its scale is without parallel in recent history.

I commend the Select Committee on Agriculture on its second report on the marketing of milk, which was published earlier this year. It provides useful material for the House, and I shall press the Minister on some points that arise from it.

The issues raised by many of the farmers who came to the demonstration today will not be unfamiliar to the Minister, but they bear some repetition. Farmers find it extremely frustrating that they sell milk at sometimes less than half—even no more than a third—of the price of bottled water in some supermarkets. It is impossible for any farmer, however efficient and however much he or she bears down on costs, to break even when the milk price is so low. Farmers feel strongly that they are asked to meet, and succeed in doing so, the highest milk quality standards in Europe. Yet they receive the lowest reward of any farmers in Europe. The United Kingdom is bottom of the European milk price league. On some comparisons, the milk price is lower now than it has ever been. They feel that the issue of agrimonetary compensation needs to be addressed seriously by the Government.

We recognise that it is not an easy issue, and the Minister will know that previous Governments have not found it easy to address it—in some ways, the Government have been more generous than their predecessor on the issue—but she will also recognise that the scale of the difficulties facing the industry are greater than they were under any previous Government. Therefore, I hope that the Minister and her colleagues will be able to give serious consideration to the issue. As she knows, the money has to be claimed by April, or the opportunity to claim it will disappear.

Today, dairy farmers raised with a great deal of passion and feeling the issue of what they regard as the truly absurd Monopolies and Mergers Commission report. That report was crazy, crackpot, damaging, slipshod and quite simply the worst piece of official documentation presented for many a long year. The idea that the fundamental problem affecting the milk market is excessive producer power driving up the milk price is so far at variance with the reality that farmers are having to experience that it beggars belief that anyone could have put it down on paper.

I recognise the fact that the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry did not simply accept that report, but felt the need to reflect on it. However, the outcome has been that we are moving towards a situation in which Milk Marque is breaking itself into three. As the Minister will recognise, the Secretary of State said in his evidence to the Select Committee that that was highly likely to lead to a further fall in the farmgate price of milk, which will only make the problems that we are talking about today even worse. Again, I accept that that is not direct Government responsibility, but that report was extremely damaging and should have been binned, rather than, in some ways, being implemented.

We have to move on to deal with the world as it is, rather than the world as it might have been. I should be interested in anything that the Minister has to say, particularly on a point that the Agriculture Minister himself discussed with my constituents and others today: the possibility of finding some means of bringing together—perhaps in a forum, which, in its report, the Select Committee itself mentioned—all the players in the dairy industry, perhaps with the Government playing an enabling role, so that all the parties sit down and put aside the petty jealousies, back biting and spiteful fighting that has gone on for many years in the industry, and recognise that they have a collective interest. The dairy industry is a £3 billion industry, which is a significant part of the United Kingdom economy. Anything that the Government

can do positively to encourage co-operation and the recognition of common interests would be much welcomed by dairy farmers.

There is the issue of quotas. I do not want to detain the Minister long on that, but she will know that many dairy farmers feel that the deal that was done last year by the Government was not a great one for the United Kingdom. The United Kingdom's quotas were frozen for six years, while Ireland—which produces about four times its consumption requirement—received additional quotas.

Dairy farmers raised another issue and—although there are perhaps only a limited number of spheres in which the Government could provide immediate assistance—they asked me specifically to press the Minister on it: the issue of increasing the price in the over-30-month scheme, and reconsideration of phasing out the calf-processing aid scheme. We know that none of those actions is likely to provide a panacea, but it would be helpful if the Minister could say whether the Government are prepared at least to consider them.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury): I congratulate my hon. Friend on initiating this debate, which is of key interest to my constituents in Eddisbury—which, as the Minister will well know, shares with North Shropshire the honour of being Europe's largest milk field. I have not only large dairy farmers, but small dairy farmers. However, the economies of scale that one would expect to be a differentiating factor between them simply no longer exist. That is a major plight that is affecting all dairy farmers.

In addition to sharing the sentiments expressed about south Cumbria—to which I have a fond attachment—I should like to mention that, when I met my constituents at today's lobby, there was a great sense of dismay about the absence of Government support for immediate action on the Food Labelling Bill, which the Minister and I had a discussion on just over a week ago, in this very place. It is yet another matter on which Government action really must be focused.

Mr. Collins: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. As he knows, I strongly support his proposed legislation and I hope that the Government think again on that.

As the Minister will recognise, perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the agricultural situation is that even a year ago—certainly two years ago—dairy farmers and farmers in any agricultural sector would say that things were grim, but in six months' time they would be better. They said that six months after six months until six or nine months ago. As the Minister will probably acknowledge, sadly, farmers are no longer saying that—they have endured so many knocks, so many hopes have been dashed, and so many chances that there was light at the end of the tunnel have proved fruitless.

An entire generation of farmers believe that they will be the last. The average age of farmers is something like 57. Many fewer farmers' sons and daughters expect to follow their parents into farming than was the case before. As a result, many farmers who are still in business do not expect to hand over to the next generation, something that has been a great incentive to invest and produce for the future, but are simply carrying on, waiting for the opportunity to get out of the industry and retire. That is very sad.

It is allied to the point that was made to me by Matthew Robinson, one of my constituents who came down to London for the demonstration earlier today, that they way in which the financial constraints are biting is hitting the new, younger, possibly more technologically sophisticated and more efficient farmers who are at the start of their careers, have heavy borrowings and are perhaps most vulnerable to a financial shock. Older farmers, who may have paid off their mortgages and loans, are more likely to keep going for a few more years, hoping that things will get better, because they will have built up some fat on which they can depend.

The Select Committee stated at paragraph 43 of its report:

> sadly, there are likely to be more casualties before any real recovery is felt.

We should not kid ourselves that only the less efficient, older producers will be forced out by the present circumstances. It may well be the next generation who are knocked out and, if we are not careful, the industry will have no future at all.

My final point relates to the nature of farming in my constituency. I represent a large chunk of the lake district. The Minister will recognise that a large number of the farmers there—both dairy and otherwise—are hill farmers. Consequently, they are on the margin of the margin. In many cases, the dairy part of their farming was the diversification strategy, alongside sheep. Now they find that the sheep market and the dairy market are down. Some of them depend on farming incomes of only £2,000 or £3,000. Many of them are on family credit and are really at the margin of viability.

Paragraph 44 of the Select Committee report specifically addressed the fact that those small family farms are important to the industry because of what they bring to the environment, the social life of the area and rural communities. It stated:

> The benefits currently provided by small and remote dairy farms can only be retained in the prevailing circumstances by a Government policy which recognises the environmental and social rationale for assisting them . . . We recommend that the Government commission research into the implications for the rural economy and the environment of further structural change in the dairy sector. We further recommend that the Government identify areas where small farms are at risk as priority areas for help under rural development measures.

I hope that the Minister will say something about that. There is a general problem across the board for the dairy sector, particularly in my part of the world, where the only significant alternative employment is in tourism. Frankly, tourists come to the lake district to see not blasted heath and wilderness but a man-made landscape. Without the small dairy farmers, we will not have that landscape and the pit prop of the whole underpinning of the economy in large tracts of Cumbria and elsewhere will be knocked away.

Inevitably, it is not possible in such a short debate to raise all the problems facing the industry, but I hope that the Minister will say that the Government recognise the scale of the problem, that they accept that there should be a strategy to keep a significant dairy industry viable and that they will address specifically, perhaps in the context of the Prime Minister's farming summit on 30 March, the need to provide targeted assistance for the dairy industry and to help small dairy producers in particular.

2.35 am

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Ms Joyce Quin): I congratulate the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Mr. Collins) on securing this debate. I would have wished him better fortune in the timing, as it is an important subject and it is a pity to discuss it at such a late hour; but it is timely in that it is taking place on the day when dairy farmers have reached London in their campaign to increase public awareness of their serious plight. I am conscious that the march started in the hon. Gentleman's region, the north-west, in Carlisle, so it is suitable for him to have introduced the subject.

I am grateful for what the hon. Gentleman said about my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and his willingness to meet members of the delegation today and to engage in discussions with them, examining the very difficult issues that face the dairy sector. The industry is important nationally. It is the largest and arguably most economically important of all the agricultural sectors.

The industry is also important regionally, as the hon. Gentleman said. He represents a constituency in which dairying is very important. I understand that Cumbria has the second largest breeding herd, exceeded only by Devon's. The hon. Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien) also referred to the importance of the industry in his area.

I share something in common with the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale, as one branch of my family comes from his constituency—and they were farming folk.

We recognise the severity of the problems. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that there is a variety of factors in the current situation. The most dramatic aspect is the fall in the price of milk, which has several causes. The hon. Gentleman referred to the fact that milk is less expensive than bottled water. One might also say that it is less expensive than some not very healthy fizzy drinks that we have been encouraged to drink in preference to milk. Indeed, we dealt with that subject in a Standing Committee last week, and at least one Conservative Front Bencher here tonight was there then.

The price has fallen especially dramatically in the United Kingdom. Prices are low in some other European countries, but there are some particularly British aspects to the crisis. Obviously, as the hon. Gentleman recognised, the strength of sterling against the euro is an important factor affecting agriculture and the dairy industry in two ways: not only the familiar problem of the high price of exports but the fact that the European Union support price is set in euros and its value falls as sterling appreciates. As the hon. Gentleman knows, that represents the market of last resort and provides a floor in the commercial market. That is an important factor, but at the same time the level of sterling is an incentive for imports into the UK and makes for problems with exports. It certainly adds very much to the competitive pressures on our producers.

I was not surprised that the hon. Gentleman also mentioned several issues concerning the marketing of milk. We know that the main deregulation took place in 1994, and at that time everyone in the industry was in a new and perhaps alarming situation. However, the second stage has involved the results of last year's Monopolies and Mergers Commission report into the marketing of milk. That is an issue that the Agriculture Committee considered closely in its recent report on the marketing of milk, and I welcome that. In this short debate, it is not possible to go into all the different aspects of that report.

Despite the difficulties and frustrations involved in the whole process, I welcome the fact that Milk Marque chose to act positively and decisively to meet some of the criticisms in the MMC report. The successor organisations are in the process of getting up and running. Obviously, we want them to bring a new dynamism to the market and to have a positive effect on returns, even if only in the medium term, rather than the negative effect that many people worry will result.

Mr. Collins: The Minister will know that one of the issues for the successor bodies to Milk Marque is whether they will be allowed to go into processing. That is dependent on a decision that rests with the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, who in turn has to wait for advice from the Director General of Fair Trading. The Select Committee was told that that would arrive some time near Easter. Does the Minister have any further information on an issue about which the dairy industry is waiting desperately to hear?

Ms Quin: I understand the anxiety of the dairy industry and dairy farmers about that matter, but the hon. Gentleman pre-empted my reply. The timetable is as he describes, and I cannot add anything to that this evening.

Government action has taken place on several fronts, despite the limitations on the Government, especially in terms of price setting and other forms of intervention. I am glad that the hon. Gentleman recognised those limitations. Some issues have had an effect on the dairy sector. When I first became an Agriculture Minister, dairy and cattle farmers were very worried about the impending introduction of cattle passports. We have alleviated that burden by deferring payment for the passports for two and a half years, and that will save a significant amount of money.

We have also undertaken to provide help to make it possible to have a generic promotion campaign for milk. That is important, because it is a long time since we have had such a campaign. All of us will remember the effectiveness of campaigns such as "Drinka pinta milka day", the bottles of milk dancing on to the doorstep and "Milk has gotta lotta bottle". They had an effect. I do not underestimate the potential of that, and I am glad that the processing side of the industry is committed to matching the sum raised by producers, so that a sizeable promotional campaign can be mounted. Clearly, we shall monitor that closely to see how effective it is, but Ministers are very committed to a project that has been welcomed by hon. Members of all parties.

The Government also support the continuation of European Union school milk scheme. That has been under threat, as the European Commission is looking to reduce its budget in all sorts of ways. The EU school milk subsidy came in for especially close scrutiny. My right hon. Friend the Minister spoke strongly about the matter in the Agriculture Council and received support from other Ministers. The plans to abandon the subsidy have

been shelved for the moment, although we must remain vigilant and continue to build alliances with other countries to try and ensure that the scheme can survive.

The hon. Gentleman specifically mentioned the importance of trying to get people in the dairy food chain together, and we agree. The hon. Gentleman will be aware of the food chain initiative that my right hon. Friend the Minister set in motion. It involves senior figures from MAFF, the National Farmers Union, the Food and Drink Federation and various retail groups, and its report showed that it is conscious of the importance of trying to get the various parts of the food chain working together.

The tensions and difficulties that exist between sectors were very well documented in the report from the Agriculture Committee. We shall study that report's recommendations in detail, but we also want to build on the momentum of the food chain initiative to achieve greater understanding of the pressures and constraints on each part of the food chain.

It is not true that there is no passing on of lower prices at the retail end, but there is a time lag in what is a slow and modest process, and I understand the frustrations of farmers who suffer as a result.

The investigation by the Competition Commission is also relevant and, when the elements of the food chain appear not to be co-operating, the commission is available to help. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that the Government are keen to make progress on both aspects of the food chain.

The hon. Gentleman also asked about the rural development regulation, and about how that might relate to small dairy farms. We hope that the various measures announced last December by my right hon. Friend the Minister as part of the rural development regulation and its implementation in this country will help the dairy sector.

I was pleased that the recent round of marketing awards under the agricultural marketing development scheme went to some innovative projects from the dairy sector. That justifies the way in which we have built on the agricultural development scheme in the rural development regulation to address some of the issues that the hon. Gentleman mentioned.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned quotas. Our long-term approach in the European Union is for an orderly end to the milk quota system. We believe that the British dairy industry can compete in Europe. It has several natural advantages, such as good-quality pasture, and it has a good record with regard to quality standards.

However, many of the recommendations on marketing of product in the Select Committee report are well worth considering. I was also interested to hear some of the comments on the radio this morning from the president of the NFU. He spoke of the need for better organisation in the industry—

The motion having been made after Ten o'clock, and the debate having continued for half an hour, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *adjourned the House without Question put, pursuant to the Standing Order.*

Adjourned at ten minutes to Three o'clock.

House of Commons

Thursday 16 March 2000

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

LONDON LOCAL AUTHORITIES BILL *[LORDS] (BY ORDER)*
Order for consideration read.
To be considered on Thursday 23 March.

KENT COUNTY COUNCIL BILL *[LORDS] (BY ORDER)*

MEDWAY COUNCIL BILL *[LORDS] (BY ORDER)*

MERSEY TUNNELS BILL *(BY ORDER)*
Orders for Second Reading read.
To be read a Second Time on Thursday 23 March.

Oral Answers to Questions

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

The Minister was asked—

Farm Incomes

1. **Mr. Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield): If he will make a statement on the change in farm incomes over the past three years. [113368]

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Nick Brown): From 1996 to 1999, total income from farming fell by 56 per cent. in real terms. Total income from farming increased by 100 per cent. in real terms between 1990 and 1995, before dropping 60 per cent. between 1995 and 1999.

Mr. Fabricant: I am grateful for that honest answer, at least. However, does the Minister yet realise that, in the past three years, farmgate milk prices have fallen by a third, more than 5,000 dairy farmers have given up work, the cost of milk production is 11p per pint and the farmgate price paid is less than 10p a pint? Mr. Micawber would tell the right hon. Gentleman what that means. How long can he remain complacent? Will he be satisfied when the only milk that we can buy in the United Kingdom is frozen milk from France?

Mr. Brown: I am not complacent about the difficulties in the dairy sector. The Government are examining what they can do to help. As the House will know, the remedy lies in the supply chain and in the marketplace.

Mr. David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire): As my right hon. Friend knows, agriculture receives more subsidy than the rest of British industry put together, and it has the lowest incomes for a long time. Is he confident that we are taking genuine and radical steps to move farming away from its dependence on subsidies and transform the common agricultural policy into something that resembles more closely a rural development policy?

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend makes a good point. The supply side of the CAP, although it is extraordinarily expensive, does not serve United Kingdom agriculture well. That is why, last December, I announced the new direction for agriculture and our making much more use—something that is a departure for the UK Government—of the new second pillar of the CAP, which provides support for farm businesses that is decoupled from production and directed much more to the marketplace than to the CAP's traditional structure.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): With dairy farm incomes continuing to fall, with milk prices the lowest in Europe and with supermarkets pushing their three-for-two offer—they buy three litres of milk and pay farmers for only two—is it not time for more action? Will the Minister look again at agrimonetary compensation before it is too late? Will he think about the over-30-months scheme and will he talk some sense into his colleagues at the Department of Trade and Industry on milk co-operatives and on concerted efforts to increase milk prices?

Mr. Brown: As the hon. Gentleman knows, I have been a strong advocate of farmer co-operation working through the supply chain. I believe that real benefits accrue to farmers if they are able to exercise some influence further down the supply chain. As for the over-30-months scheme, surely the Government's real objective should be to work towards an unwinding of the scheme. That is clearly obtainable in the medium term. As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made clear at the National Farmers Union conference, the door is not closed on agrimoney.

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley): Following the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for North-West Leicestershire (Mr. Taylor), I am sure that the House has recognised that more money has gone into farming through this Government than through any previous Government. However, I am sure that my hon. Friend is aware of the plight of dairy farmers in Lancashire, who are being paid the lowest prices. Will he have discussions with supermarkets and other middle men paying low and unjustified prices? All that they are doing is putting our poor farmers out of business. I am sure that, with my right hon. Friend's good offices, we can improve the plight of farmers.

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend is right. The answer to the problem lies in the supply chain and ultimately in the marketplace. There are not sufficient sums available under the agrimonetary compensation regime, for example, to compensate farmers for the difficulties that they are going through. Of course there are measures at the margin that the Government could take to help. However, we must focus on the real problem, which is the marketplace.

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): Given that many dairy farmers are selling their milk at a price below the cost of

production, does the Minister support the plan announced today by Safeway and Waitrose to increase the price of milk—yes or no?

Mr. Brown: I have made it absolutely clear in all my answers that the difficulties can be resolved only through the supply chain and in the marketplace. That is why I support the initiatives of retailers that are designed to help their own producers. They have my support and encouragement, but these are private sector arrangements. The hon. Gentleman has listened carefully to my answers, and I notice that those on the Opposition Front Bench are not coming forward with a remedy of their own.

Environmentally Sensitive Areas

2. **Mr. Phil Woolas** (Oldham, East and Saddleworth): What recent assessment he has made of the benefits of the environmentally sensitive areas scheme for wildlife in rural areas. [113369]

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley): Detailed monitoring has taken place since the scheme was introduced in 1987. The results have been used to adapt and refine the scheme to increase environmental benefits.

Mr. Woolas: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. The environmentally sensitive area scheme has been welcomed in my constituency. Baroness Young, the chair of English Nature, has described it as the most important decision on the countryside for 20 years. However, can my hon. Friend help my constituent, Mr. Graham Tibbot of Belle Vue farm in Delph, who faces an apparent contradiction over stock density between the ESA scheme and the proposed hill farm allowance scheme? Will my hon. Friend examine that case?

Mr. Morley: I support my hon. Friend's comments on ESAs, which are valuable and provide genuine benefits. The scheme involves some restrictions on stock density, and I appreciate that that can cause anomalies in payments such as hill livestock compensatory allowances. I assure my hon. Friend that we are only too pleased to examine the matter in detail. I shall write to him.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): However beneficial the scheme may be, might it not be thoroughly undermined if hedgerows were grubbed up? Will the Minister put on record the remarks that he made earlier when I tackled him in the water closet, where he said that there is some prospect of seeing off the European directive?

Mr. Morley: I need to be careful about giving the hon. Gentleman privileged access.

I want to make a serious point about the recent directives from the Court of Auditors on field boundaries. There is some logic to them, because the European Union pays a subsidy on the cropped area, which may not always extend right up to the field boundary. However, that is a traditional method of farming in this country. That was acknowledged when we agreed the scheme, which was based on Ordnance Survey maps, with the European Commission. There are risks to the environmental benefits of hedgerows and uncropped edges of fields. We are discussing that with the European Commission, and we hope that we can reach a workable and reasonable compromise.

Wild Birds

3. **Mr. Hilary Benn** (Leeds, Central): What action he is taking to halt the decline in the number of wild birds in rural areas. [113370]

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley): The Government's strategy for sustainable development includes a headline indicator on the populations of farmland and woodland birds, which have declined significantly in the past 25 years. Halting and reversing the decline will take time, but our recently announced switch of funding from production support to environmental measures is evidence of our determination to improve that important indicator.

Mr. Benn: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's reply. Does he know that the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds has recently bought a lowland arable farm, aptly named Hope farm, to develop agricultural methods that are economic and good for farmland birds and other wildlife? I welcome the increased investment in countryside stewardship in its broadest sense, but will my hon. Friend tell the House his plans for drawing on the lessons of that important research?

Mr. Morley: I agree that that is important research. The RSPB should be congratulated because we must consider the most appropriate changes in agricultural practice to tackle the decline in many farmland species. Those changes can be supported through schemes such as countryside stewardship. I am glad to say that we are increasing the number of schemes that we intend to accept from 1,600 last year to 3,000 this year.

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): Is not the policy of ripping up English hedgerows and destroying field margins crazy? It is especially crazy given the Bill on access to the countryside that we will consider on Monday. When I was a Minister of State in the Ministry of Agriculture, the Commission endorsed the use of Ordnance Survey maps and satellite monitoring. We should not be considering finding a fair and reasonable compromise, but seeing off the Commission, and pointing out that it agreed to something several years ago and asking how it can accept ripping up English hedgerows. The present policy simply gives ammunition to some of my Euro-sceptic colleagues. Will the Minister tell the Commission that that policy is crazy?

Mr. Morley: It should be remembered that the root of the problem is subsidies to the CAP regime and the way in which they work. However, we believe that the Commission should take into account the practices that have been established in our country. It has agreed to a tolerance of 2 m either side of OS boundaries. That effectively creates a 4 m boundary.

We do not want to over-estimate the impact of the policy because many farms will not be affected by the changes. However, there should be a more flexible approach towards

farms that might be caught by the policy. It is not beyond the realms of possibility to agree that approach with the Commission. We are trying to do that.

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East): In reading the tea leaves, may I take it that my hon. Friend believes that there are alternatives to the pesticides tax, or is it still under consideration?

Mr. Morley: The Prime Minister announced at the National Farmers Union conference that the pesticides tax is not under consideration. There is an argument for various forms of financial instrument, but we must consider the impact that applying them would have on the sector and balance that with the potential benefits. A pesticides tax could have detrimental effects; in addition, more advanced and more environmentally friendly pesticides could be introduced.

Mr. Malcolm Moss (North-East Cambridgeshire): Now that the Government are preparing to compromise on section 28 in the teaching of the birds and bees, will they do another U-turn on an issue affecting the real birds and bees? Given the 15 May deadline for the integrated administration and control system applications, does the Minister appreciate the urgent need to reverse the recent rule change that is forcing farmers to destroy hedgerows and their habitats, on which wild birds depend for food and cover?

Mr. Morley: Let me make it perfectly clear that this is not a rule change, but an interpretation following a visit from the Commission and the auditors in relation to the application of arable area payments through the IACS scheme. It is not a change in respect of the area that is cropped and the area that is paid and we believe that any change or interpretation that could have a detrimental environmental effect on hedges and field boundaries is to be deplored. We are working with the Commission and my right hon. Friend the Minister has had a meeting with Franz Fischler. We were encouraged by the Commissioner's sympathetic response.

Agricultural Development Scheme

4. **Mr. Jim Cunningham** (Coventry, South): How many applications he has received for grants under the agricultural development scheme to date; and how many were successful. [113371]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Ms Joyce Quin): The scheme was designed to support farmers and growers to improve marketing and 161 projects were put forward. We were pleased to make 47 awards of grant totalling £2 million to the best of them. Partly because of the interest shown, we intend to make new marketing awards available later this year under the rural development plan.

Mr. Cunningham: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. The scheme is imaginative and makes a big difference. That contrasts with the Opposition, who presided over a crisis when they were in government. What are her proposals for taking the scheme forward in other farming sectors?

Ms Quin: We are keen to take the scheme forward and believe that the rural development plan is by far the best way to do so. The scheme has provided support to sectors that are ineligible for other assistance and, for that reason, I am glad that the pig industry has received a substantial proportion of the awards that have been made. I am also glad that awards in the dairy sector go hand in hand with other initiatives that we are taking, such as facilitating the generic promotion and advertising of milk.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): I am sure that the House welcomes any help with marketing that farmers can receive, but is not the biggest problem with all these schemes the fact that, having invested their money in marketing excellent British products, farmers often cannot label them to show where they are from? The Government made sure that the Food Labelling Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien) was talked out on Friday last. Having established excellent schemes, surely the Bill represents a way of ensuring that farmers can use such labelling.

Ms Quin: I contest strongly the allegation that we talked out a Bill—given that the promoter, the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien), spoke for one and a quarter hours but I was allowed only 12 minutes to respond to the huge number of points that were raised. The Government had already made clear their view of the Bill. The Bill's substance was incompatible with European law. As the promoter was arguing for European Union aid, it seemed foolish to pass a Bill in clear contravention of EU law. This Government have been much more active on labelling issues than the previous Government. The action that we have taken domestically in MAFF and with trading standards officers and our initiatives to change the labelling regime within the European Union bear ample testimony to that claim.

Organic Farming

5. **Ms Julia Drown** (South Swindon): What recent assessment he has made of the environmental advantages of organic farming. [113372]

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley): Evaluation of the environmental impact of organic farming is one of the three main objectives of the Ministry's organic research and development programme. For example, studies on biodiversity, soil fertility and nutrient cycling are in progress. Earlier work has indicated that organic farming has a positive effect on biodiversity.

Ms Drown: Given that the demand for organic food continues to rise rapidly and we are still importing 70 per cent. of the organic produce sold, will the Minister further increase the amount of Government support for farmers who wish to convert to organic farming methods, and set clear targets for the proportion of land that could be farmed organically, to reflect consumer demand,

the environmental advantages of organic farming and the Government's desire to promote sustainable farming methods?

Mr. Morley: I can certainly give my hon. Friend an assurance that the Government are committed to providing more support for organic conversion. We are committing £149 million in the rural development programme over the next seven years to assist farmers who want to convert. I understand my hon. Friend's points about targets. I was pleased to meet the promoter of a private Member's Bill on this matter, the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler), and my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Joan Ruddock). Although the Government have concerns about the potential effects of targets, which can be negative as well as positive, there is no doubt that the Government and the Bill's sponsors have in common the objective of promoting and increasing organic conversion.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): Organic farming may have some environmental advantages and be a great talking point for Labour luvvies round Islington dinner tables, but it is not the answer to the deepest crisis that has hit British farming for 60 years. We need long-term solutions but also short-term solutions for farmers such as those who lobbied Ministers yesterday, and those at a dairy farm in my constituency that I visited on Sunday. If all farmers transferred to organics, the price depression that has hit regular farming would also hit organics. May we have some decent and honest answers to the crisis hitting farmers now?

Mr. Morley: When one hears comments such as that, one can understand why organic farming got virtually nowhere under the previous Government. No one is pretending that organic farming is the answer to all aspects of agriculture. However, we want our farmers to have a share of the huge demand for organic products. To refer to the many farmers who have converted and the many more who are queueing up to convert as Islington Labour luvvies is an insult to the people who are trying to maximise their business.

Hill Farmers

6. **Helen Jackson** (Sheffield, Hillsborough): What assistance he has provided to hill farmers in the past two years. [113373]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Ms Joyce Quin): Hill farms received £600 million to £700 million in total in livestock headage payments last year. A significant proportion of the £235 million purchase costs under the over-30-months scheme and various sums under other schemes, including for environmentally sensitive areas, also went to hill farmers.

Helen Jackson: I repeat the welcome that I gave to the Government policy of putting environmental schemes at the heart of their grant programmes for hill farming and other purposes, because that will improve the countryside in hilly areas. Does my hon. Friend acknowledge that, often, hill farming is not big business? Do not small businesses need greater simplicity built into countryside stewardship schemes so that smaller applications, as well as larger integrated projects, are also given favourable treatment?

Ms Quin: I know that my hon. Friend takes a keen interest in hill areas, especially those in her part of the country. I accept the validity of what she said about the size of hill farms and their present circumstances, but we believe that our approach is right. In particular, the review of red tape that we have undertaken, and our keenness to simplify the advice system, will help to meet her requests.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): What, in the Minister's view, is the future for hill farmers—bright or gloomy?

Ms Quin: The Government recognise the role that hill farmers play in agriculture, and the economic, environmental and social aspects of hill farming. We believe that our rural development plan, and developing the second pillar of the common agricultural policy, will help hill farmers, because those measures recognise their multi-functional role. Hill farmers have an environmental role, and are also an important part of the social fabric of the countryside.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): One of the things that sicken me about the whole question of subsidies from the Common Market is that, according to research and calculations over the past 12 months, 80 per cent. of subsidies went to 20 per cent. of farms—the conglomerates—whereas only 20 per cent. ended up with the hill farmers and the rest. We never hear the Tories talk about subsidies of that kind. I propose that we start dividing the subsidies more equally, and stop the fat cats from getting them.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): Such as Livingstone.

Mr. Skinner: Yes, including him.

We should have a pesticide tax on the millionaire conglomerates that are getting the subsidies. Once we start the process, we shall manage to solve some of the problems.

Ms Quin: I firmly believe that the existing common agricultural policy provides support in an inefficient way—a way that distorts markets, helps some sectors but not others and is backward-looking rather than forward-looking. That is why the Government have adopted a rural development approach rather than the backward-looking traditional common agricultural policy approach.

Pig Farming

7. **Miss Anne McIntosh** (Vale of York): What recent representations he has received on the state of pig farming; and if he will make a statement. [113374]

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Nick Brown): Ministers have received a number of representations. I am pleased to see a strengthening of the producer price for pigs over recent weeks, although I realise that it is not yet at the level that many producers

require. I attribute the rise, at least in part, to measures taken by the Government and the Meat and Livestock Commission. Nevertheless, we continue to examine possible ways of helping the sector.

Miss McIntosh: When will the Government stop telling porkies to the pig farmers? Will the Minister tell us what progress, if any, the Government have made in regard to an application for state aid for those farmers? Does he accept that there is a BSE-equivalent tax of £5.26 per pig on each pig farm, and will he make good the promise given by the Prime Minister both at the NFU conference and on his west country tour that compensation for the tax would be paid?

Mr. Brown: As I have said, the Government are exploring what more we can do to help the industry. I have been as up-front and candid as any Minister has ever been in tackling the problems. Every suggestion that has been made to me—by Members in all parts of the House—has been considered and, where we have been able to help, we have helped. We have taken a number of steps, such as writing to public sector purchasing bodies, writing to local authorities, and reviewing the labelling regime—a subject that Conservative Members raised earlier. If it was deficient, they had 18 years in which to remedy it, but they did absolutely nothing.

The Opposition are calling for a state aid that they know cannot be paid. We are exploring what can be done, but the request for the European Union to buy out the offal disposal costs that were imposed on the industry by the last Conservative Government in 1996 is not a runner.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): When I met farmers from Cumbria yesterday, they were discussing the problems in the pig, meat and milk industries in the county. I told them that my view was that, when we join the euro, many of the problems will be resolved. If my right hon. Friend had been sitting at the meeting with me, would he have been shaking his head or nodding in agreement?

Mr. Brown: It is true that the current exchange rate between sterling and the euro exacerbates the problem of supply and demand in the single market.

Mr. William Thompson (West Tyrone): Has the Minister had the opportunity to study the report from the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs on the livestock industry in Northern Ireland, which highlights the tremendous problems that farmers have there, especially pig farmers? More than half of them have gone out of business and the rest are up to their ears in debt. Will he consider not only that report, but the fact that the pig breeding herd has gone down by more than 40 per cent? Will he examine the document carefully, take it to heart and, above all, expeditiously accept and act on its recommendations?

Mr. Brown: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his efforts in this place to raise the problems of pig farmers in Northern Ireland with UK Ministers. There is a crisis in the sector throughout the European Union. It is particularly severe in the UK. Within the UK, it is particularly severe in Northern Ireland. He is right to remind us of that. I will study the report and see what more I can do to help farmers in the UK and especially in Northern Ireland.

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): Why does Labour care so little about Britain's pig farmers that it talked out the Bill that would have let consumers know whether the bacon that they were buying was British or not? Why does Labour care so little that it took the Minister four months and much Conservative prompting even to send letters to public authorities asking them to buy from suppliers who meet British standards? Why does Labour care so little that it will not even ask the European Commission about helping Britain's pig farmers to pay for public health measures, as Belgian farmers were helped last summer? Commissioner Fischler has confirmed to many Conservatives that that could be done for Britain.

Mr. Brown: You have had to listen to that offensive nonsense from Conservative Front Benchers at a number of Agriculture questions, Madam Speaker. Each and every one of the hon. Gentleman's questions has been answered before. If he cared so much about the labelling regime, he would have done something about it in the 18 years that he was in government. The present Government care so much that we have addressed the issue by issuing new guidelines to trading standards officers, who enforce the law. It is not a polite request from the Government. It is a requirement. That law is to be enforced.

Mr. Yeo: If the Minister were a little more honest about his analysis of what has happened—

Madam Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must withdraw that remark. We cannot have that.

Mr. Yeo: I withdraw the implication that the Minister has not been honest.

Madam Speaker: Order. I asked the hon. Gentleman to withdraw the remark.

Mr. Yeo: I withdraw my remark about the Minister's honesty.

Madam Speaker: Good, now begin again.

Mr. Yeo: If the Minister analysed what happened in the 18 years before he took office, he would know that at no stage were British pig farmers losing money by as much and going out of business as rapidly as they are now. I asked him three simple questions. The fact is that, unfortunately, we know the answer. Two Fridays ago, the Minister of State talked out the Food Labelling Bill. It took four months and a lot of prompting from me and my colleagues for the Minister even to send the letters, when he told the House that they were ready to go at the beginning of July last year. We have confirmation in writing from Commissioner Fischler that he would be willing to find a way in which to make payments to meet the public health costs that are crippling Britain's pig farmers, and the Minister will not even go to Brussels and discuss it.

Mr. Brown: The hon. Gentleman's remarks are both offensive and disingenuous. The Commission is not

willing to support a subsidy scheme for offal disposal costs. It might be willing to consider a restructuring scheme similar to the one that it agreed for Belgium, but that would not keep the industry going. It would effectively downsize it.

Organic Farming

8. **Mr. Peter Bradley** (The Wrekin): If he will make a statement on the rate of growth in organic production in the last three years. [113375]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Ms Joyce Quin): Organic farming has undergone a rapid expansion in the past three years. The area of land in the United Kingdom, both in conversion and fully organic, has increased from just under 50,000 hectares in December 1996, just before the Government came to office, to an estimated 540,000 hectares in November 1999.

Mr. Bradley: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that answer and for the action that the Government are taking to support organic farming. That action is in stark contrast to the gratuitous insults offered by Conservative Members to consumers of organic products—whose money is as good as anyone else's, particularly when it is going into the pockets of British farmers. I should have thought that point would not be lost on Conservative Members, but apparently it is.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that support is necessary for conversion to organic farming, as it is for new research into food products, for helping farmers to exercise greater control over the food-processing chain and for marketing? Does she agree that, if the Government's objectives are to be met, it is very important that when innovative projects arise, as they have in my constituency, the Government and their agencies, including the regional development agencies, should do all that they can to move as quickly as possible to ensure that ideas get off the drawing board and on to farms as quickly as possible, to offer the relief to farmers that we all want to get to them?

Ms Quin: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. We are very keen to work with farmers who wish to go organic. I certainly recognise the interest that my hon. Friend has taken in schemes launched in his own constituency. He also makes a good point when he speaks of the need to link our priorities for organic farming and those for the future of agriculture with regional development initiatives. We are very keen to ensure that regional development agencies, when they are examining the economic potential of their region, take full account of the agricultural and rural sector. That must include growth and expansion in organic farming.

Mrs. Ann Winterton (Congleton): I welcome the growth in organic production in the United Kingdom, especially in milk. However, does the right hon. Lady recognise that, although grant aid is extremely welcome, it is limited, and that many milk producers, particularly in Cheshire, who might like to convert to organic milk production to obtain the premium price, will not be able to do so? They cannot convert not least because the industry is in crisis—and to convert, farmers have to be sound financially. What advice can she give to those farmers?

Ms Quin: My hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has already spoken of the huge increase—a tenfold increase—in financial support to the organic sector that has occurred under this Government. I note that although Conservative Members keep calling for an increase in that money, there seems to be a lot of amnesia on their part, given the very small sums that they provided and the very little interest that they took in the organic sector when they were in office. I encourage the farmers in the hon. Lady's constituency and others who are interested in these schemes to consider aspects of the rural development plan. Although money is specifically earmarked for organics, farmers should also be considering other relevant schemes.

Joan Ruddock (Lewisham, Deptford): People in my inner-city constituency want to eat organic foods because of its quality. She will be aware that in 1998, on the advice of the chief medical officer, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food gave advice to the public on peeling and cleaning fruit and vegetables that had been conventionally grown, because of variable levels of pesticide residue. Will she confirm that advice is still in force? Has she had any reason whatever to refer to the chief medical officer any consideration of problems with human health caused by the consumption of organic food, or to seek advice from him on any such problem?

Ms Quin: First, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's work in promoting the benefits of organic food. She has consistently drawn attention to the potential of the organic sector. There is increasing recognition of the health benefits of organic food. I am not aware of any substantial change in the advice, but I shall write to my hon. Friend about the current situation and place a copy of the letter in the Library. I assure her that the Government take her general concerns about the organic sector very much to heart.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): What assessment has the right hon. Lady made of the impact of the backlog in applications for organic conversion grants on Britain's balance of trade in organic products, notwithstanding the important and worthwhile points that she has just made? Does she accept that one of the inevitable effects of the cessation of grants for 18 months is to enable foreign producers and competitors to strengthen their stranglehold on the British market?

Ms Quin: We allocated £10 million specifically to tackle the backlog that the hon. Gentleman mentions. We were motivated not just by the importance of expanding the organic sector for its own sake and its economic potential, but because we were aware of how much organic produce was imported and how beneficial it would be to UK agriculture if our producers were able to replace much of that imported produce. That is one of the factors behind the dramatic expansion of organics that has taken place under this Government.

Livestock Farmers

9. **Mr. Huw Edwards** (Monmouth): What plans he has to apply for agrimonetary compensation for livestock farmers. [113377]

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Nick Brown): A total of £397 million in agrimonetary compensation has already been paid over the past 3 years, of which £227 million has gone to beef and sheep farmers. Up to £132 million will be paid this year and next, of which £93 million will be to beef and sheep farmers. No decision has yet been made on whether to pay further compensation.

Mr. Edwards: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that answer. Does he agree that the high level of sterling partly reflects the Government's sound management of the economy, but that it is greatly disadvantaging the farming community, for whom agrimonetary compensation is one of the key measures that could help in the present crisis? Will my right hon. Friend work with the Prime Minister and Ministers at the Treasury and do all that he can to maximise the amount of agrimonetary compensation that can be paid to UK farmers?

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend is right to point to the reasons why the policy instruments are in place. His remarks highlight why the Government have already made such extensive use of them. I cannot announce any further extension today of the use that the Government are making of the agrimonetary regime. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has made it clear that we are keeping the issue under review.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): I fully support the request made by the hon. Member for Monmouth (Mr. Edwards). I met the Macclesfield and district branch of the National Farmers Union on Saturday morning in an extremely well-attended but very sober three-hour meeting. Throughout my time in the House, I have never known livestock farmers to be more depressed. Will the Minister take seriously his hon. Friend's request, which is endorsed in all parties, that agrimonetary compensation should be used to the maximum to help British farmers to overcome a uniquely serious crisis? I make a special plea from the Conservative Benches. Will he and the Prime Minister please respond?

Mr. Brown: The Prime Minister has very carefully not closed the door on making further use of that instrument, of which we have already made extensive use. My meetings with farmers, particularly livestock farmers, have exactly the character that the hon. Gentleman described. He is right to say that the livestock sector is going through difficult times. There are particular problems in the dairy sector, but the agrimonetary regime alone does not provide sufficient money to deal with those current difficulties.

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): Notwithstanding those comments, does the Minister accept that his Government have made less use of the agrimonetary compensation scheme than have other European Governments, and that there is an opportunity to make greater use of it? If the problem is the Fontainebleau agreement, negotiated by the previous Government, does he accept that that should not stand in the way of helping some of the most deprived rural areas, such as my constituency where farm incomes have fallen by nearly 140 per cent. in the last year?

Mr. Brown: The hon. Gentleman is right to make the case for his constituency, but I do not accept what he says about the relative use of the agrimonetary regime. As he correctly points out, we are constrained by the Fontainebleau agreement, negotiated by the last Conservative Government. I can say confidently to the House that we are making more use of the compensatory regime for farmers than the last Government did, because they did not draw down a single penny.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

The Solicitor-General was asked—

Ministerial Meetings

28. **Dr. Brian Iddon** (Bolton, South-East): How often the Law Officers meet their counterparts from other countries. [113398]

The Solicitor-General (Mr. Ross Cranston): The Attorney-General and I frequently meet our counterparts from other countries, on a bilateral basis and at meetings and conferences. Attorneys-General and Solicitors-General from countries in the Commonwealth and beyond regularly call on us when they are in the UK.

In addition, the Attorney-General and I from time to time represent Her Majesty's Government at meetings and conferences in the UK and elsewhere. In May, the Attorney-General will host a conference in London of presidents of the Supreme Courts and Attorneys-General of the member states of the EU. Later this month, the Attorney-General will attend a conference of Attorneys of the UK overseas territories.

Dr. Iddon: It seems that as the borders come down, we make it much easier for criminals to ply their trades—for example, trafficking drugs. Is it not important that we stay one step ahead of the criminals? Does my hon. and learned Friend agree that there is room for more co-operation between the criminal justice and criminal intelligence systems across Europe?

The Solicitor-General: I know that the trade in hard drugs has had serious ramifications in my hon. Friend's constituency. There is always scope for more co-operation, and the Government are dedicated to improving that. At an operational level, the co-operation involves mainly the police and Customs and Excise. As regards the Crown Prosecution Service and the Serious Fraud Office, co-operation is crucial and occurs at the level of mutual legal assistance and the provision of evidence. The SFO plays an important role in respect of international fraud.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): When the Law Officers meet their counterparts from other countries, do they talk about the administration of local justice? Is the Minister aware of the growing concern about the closure of magistrates courts in rural areas? What will the Government do about it?

The Solicitor-General: It is a bold move from international matters to magistrates courts. Certainly, we can learn from other countries about local justice and how it is administered. That matter has featured from time to time on the agendas of those meetings.

Mr. David Kidney (Stafford): Given highly mobile capital flows and sophisticated information and communications technology, does my hon. and learned Friend agree that it is essential for law enforcement agencies to work together internationally to detect and deter serious financial crime, such as money laundering, market manipulation and scams?

The Solicitor-General: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The SFO is concerned about international fraud. These days, in such centres as London, fraud is almost by definition international, and the SFO is active in this regard. Money laundering is on the agenda for improvement of the law. The SFO pursues international fraud in other ways, and sometimes comes up against barriers in other countries. Sometimes we find it difficult to get the necessary evidence to prosecute in this country. However, I agree with my hon. Friend.

EU Law

29. **Miss Anne McIntosh** (Vale of York): What discussions he has held with the European Commission on matters relating to European Community law. [113401]

The Solicitor-General: I have held no discussions with the European Commission on matters relating to European Community law. However, Government Departments have regular discussions with the Commission on such matters, and I am aware of those discussions. In particular cases, I am asked for legal advice in relation to them. I have also been involved in litigation before the European Court of Justice in Luxembourg.

Miss McIntosh: I thank the Solicitor-General for that reply. In the context of the intergovernmental conference negotiations, can he give the House an undertaking that criminal law will not form part of the competence of the EU and will remain the jurisdiction and preserve of the national legal systems of England, Wales and Scotland?

The Solicitor-General: Criminal law falls within the competence of member states and will continue to do so. There is scope for co-operation between prosecuting agencies and we have said that we will further that. However, in relation to the wider issue, criminal law remains—as far as we are concerned—a matter for individual states.

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): Does the Solicitor-General have discussions with the European Commission on matters such as legal procedure? Does he believe that cases such as the European Commission *v.* France, on the ban on British beef, take far too long to resolve? Does he believe that any damages from such proceedings should accrue to those who have suffered—in that case, the hard-pressed British farmer?

The Solicitor-General: There is a case for the procedure of the European Court of Justice to be more flexible and, at present, there is a considerable backlog. On the particular issue of beef, the approach of my right hon. and hon. Friends in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food was right, and I would have thought that the hon. Gentleman would know from experience that it is better to try to effect a non-legal solution than a legal solution. However, the non-legal solution failed, so the Commission began proceedings. We believe that it has a watertight case because freedom of movement is a fundamental aspect of the treaty, and in that sphere member states have no competence because the European Union has taken measures that pre-empt that competence. I assure the hon. Gentleman that my right hon. and hon. Friends acted impeccably in the matter.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): Does the Solicitor-General recognise that his answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh), in which he said that he had no such meetings or discussions, will be greeted with astonishment well beyond the House? Does he recognise that that is indicative of the supine attitude that the Government have adopted to every pronouncement of Mr. Prodi, Commissioner Kinnock and their ilk? If the Government will not stand up for British sovereignty in beating off the attempt to impose Napoleonic law and corpus iuris, the Opposition must do it, and we shall wish to put pressure on the Commission. I hope that the Solicitor-General will recognise that we will continue to press him and his colleagues and ensure that they are encouraged to fight for Britain.

The Solicitor-General: I am sure that the European Commission will be quaking in its boots after that. I have set out the position clearly. Discussions continue day to day, but they are the responsibility of the policy departments to which we provide legal advice.

Crown Prosecution Service

31. **Mr. Tom Levitt** (High Peak): What steps he is taking to make the operation of the Crown Prosecution Service more accessible to people with hearing impairments. [113403]

The Solicitor-General: The CPS is committed to equality of access to justice, and that includes equality in its day-to-day dealings with others in the criminal justice system, including defendants, victims and witnesses. Together with others from other criminal justice agencies, the CPS works closely with representatives of associations

involved with deaf people or those who are hard of hearing to ensure that their needs are addressed. The CPS is aware of its responsibilities under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and is a user of the Employment Service's "Positive About Disabled People" symbol. It has a programme of action on disability and has a network of equal opportunities officers.

Mr. Levitt: I greatly welcome that reply. I speak as someone who, some five years ago, wrote a book on how deaf people can better access public services. When I heard that the CPS was interested, I sent it a copy, so it has the book to help it.

Is my hon. and learned Friend aware that there are essentially four ways in which deaf people can be helped to have better access to those services—text telephones, sound enhancement, sign language where appropriate and, above all, through the general awareness of front-line staff of the communication needs of people with hearing impairments? Which measures does he contemplate using in the CPS to enhance that access to services?

The Solicitor-General: I take this opportunity to congratulate my hon. Friend on his book "Sound Practice", which has been used widely in Government agencies, including the CPS.

The CPS subscribes to TypeTalk, which provides a link between hearing or speech-impaired telephone users and hearing persons. My hon. Friend mentioned awareness, and training is one aspect of that. The CPS official responsible for interpreter issues is at present undergoing training in British sign language, stage 2. In addition, training on the victims pilots, about which I have spoken in the past, includes disability awareness training. That training includes awareness of the problems faced by the deaf and hard of hearing.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): How can the CPS facilities be made more available to people with hearing impairment? Local CPS offices are being closed, and their facilities moved further away from people. The same is happening with magistrates courts and their administrative offices. Is that the way to make the operations of the CPS more accessible to people with disabilities, especially those with hearing impairment?

The Solicitor-General: I am surprised by those comments. To my knowledge, no CPS offices have been closed. The CPS is getting out into the community, through the criminal justice units, and CPS officials now attend regularly at police stations.

We accept that deaf and hard of hearing people face problems. For example, the design of courts can render lip-reading difficult. We must be much more aware of the problems faced by defendants, victims and witnesses, but there is no substance to the main thrust of the hon. Gentleman's question.

Charities Litigation

32. **Mrs. Linda Gilroy** (Plymouth, Sutton): If he will make a statement on the grounds on which Law Officers intervene in charities litigation. [113404]

The Solicitor-General: The Attorney-General's function in relation to charities is to represent the Crown and so to act as protector, both of charity in general and of particular charities.

It falls to the Attorney-General and to me to institute legal proceedings to protect a charity and to represent the charitable interest. The Attorney-General is also a necessary party to any litigation in which the objects of a charity need to be separately represented—for example, where the interest of the trustees do not coincide with the object of the charity.

Mrs. Gilroy: Will my hon. and learned Friend explain what happens if a gift is willed to a charity called Cancer Research, when no charity exists under that name?

The Solicitor-General: There is a provision under which the sovereign, acting under the sign manual, can allocate moneys in such a case as that. That power has now been delegated to the Attorney-General and to me. If there is a general charitable interest such as cancer research, the Attorney-General or I can assign the moneys to charities with that interest. That is a very valuable power, and it is used regularly. People often will money to a general charitable interest such as cancer research, or to charities that no longer exist. If a general charitable intent can be found, we will allocate the money to an interest close to the original interest of the testator.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Is the Solicitor-General aware that his initial answer and his answer to the supplementary question from the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton (Mrs. Gilroy) were both very self-contained and intelligible only to a tiny minority of persons with a particular interest in a given case? For the general enlightenment of right hon. and hon. Members, would the hon. and learned Gentleman care to tell us in how many cases, either specifically or roughly, during the period in which he has held office Law Officers have had reason to intervene in charities litigation matters?

The Solicitor-General: I am sorry that the answer went over the hon. Gentleman's head. We intervene on a regular basis. For example, last week I appeared in the Court of Appeal in an important charitable case which will, I think, set the law for the future. It is a regular aspect of our work, involving, for instance, telling my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton (Mrs. Gilroy) how the testator's intention can be affected. It also involves, in some cases, important and large charities.

Business of the House

12.30 pm

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): Could I ask the Leader of the House to give us the business for next week?

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): The business for next week will be as follows:

MONDAY 20 MARCH—Second Reading of the Countryside and Rights of Way Bill.

TUESDAY 21 MARCH—My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will open his Budget Statement.

WEDNESDAY 22 MARCH—Continuation of the Budget debate.

THURSDAY 23 MARCH—Continuation of the Budget debate.

FRIDAY 24 MARCH—Private Members' Bills.

The provisional business for the following week will be as follows:

MONDAY 27 MARCH—Conclusion of the Budget debate.

TUESDAY 28 MARCH—Second Reading of the Criminal Justice and Court Services Bill.

WEDNESDAY 29 MARCH—Remaining stages of the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill.

THURSDAY 30 MARCH—Second Reading of the Learning and Skills Bill *[Lords]*.

FRIDAY 31 MARCH—The House will not be sitting.

The House will wish to know that on Wednesday 29 March, there will be a debate on the aid system for flax and hemp in European Standing Committee A.

Sir George Young: The House is grateful for next week's business and an indication of the business for the following week. Will the Leader of the House reflect on the amount of time that she has allocated to the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill? There will be some important Government amendments on the state second pension, following some confusion in Committee. Any changes in the Child Support Agency are of interest to a large number of right hon. and hon. Members, as are the controversial benefit changes in the Bill, not to mention the Prime Minister's announcement today of a new agency that will impact on the Benefits Agency. It seems that just one day to deal with all that is inadequate unless it is to be a very long day.

The Upper House has debated the Wakeham report, but there is still no sign of progress down this end of the building. Last week, the right hon. Lady said that she was giving priority to Government Bills. However, Members of Parliament need a balanced diet, with light debates on Wakeham, the intergovernmental conference and the Liaison Committee between her heavy, indigestible Bills.

On Rover, can the right hon. Lady undertake that the House will be kept in the picture next week if there are any important developments? Can we have a statement next week on the precise role in the Government of Lord Levy, as it is shrouded in mystery?

Finally, can the right hon. Lady deny what was reported in *The Times* on Monday about her plans to curtail debate in the Chamber? The article says:

> Ministers are threatening an unprecedented curb on Commons debating time amid fears that they may fail to force all their Bills through before the end of the parliamentary session.
>
> The proposal to timetable all business on the floor of the chamber has been raised by the Government's business managers.

I hope that the right hon. Lady will be able to deny that. Last night, not only Conservative but Labour and Liberal Democrat Members resented the inadequate time available on the remaining stages of the Terrorism Bill. Will the right hon. Lady admit that the programme is too large to be manageable and that some of the Bills, such as the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial Bill), should be dropped?

Mrs. Beckett: First, the right hon. Gentleman asks me to reflect on the time allotted for the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill, and of course I will do so, although the business for the second week is always provisional. If, as he says, a number of issues need to be aired, there may be much to be said for having proper programme motions so that we can be confident of having time to air the issues in which right hon. and hon. Members are particularly interested. On Monday and Tuesday, the right hon. Gentleman's side took a sensible approach, for which we were grateful, and we got through our business efficiently and effectively with all hon. Members feeling that they had had an opportunity to air their concerns.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Really?

Mrs. Beckett: We cannot take two days for everything.

Mr. Forth: Why not?

Mrs. Beckett: Because there is not enough parliamentary time.

The right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) asked next about a debate on the Lords. I understand his wish for a balanced diet, but he must appreciate that every Government's priority is their legislative programme. Since we have not been having programme motions, several Bills have taken more time than was allotted—or, indeed, originally asked for. Consequently, we are anxious to ensure that our Bills have proper priority.

I give the right hon. Gentleman the undertaking that he sought on the House being kept informed about Rover. On Lord Levy, I understand that the Prime Minister has answered questions about that matter. The right hon. Gentleman asked finally about a newspaper report—I cannot recall whether he said what paper it appeared in—

Sir George Young: *The Times*.

Mrs. Beckett: I beg the right hon. Gentleman's pardon. The report was about Government business managers having discussions. It is completely untrue to say that there is not enough time for the Government's programme. Our programme is challenging, but there is certainly enough time, provided that the House deals with its business efficiently and effectively.

The right hon. Gentleman will find the fact increasingly appearing in biographies of me, I am pleased to say, that I am not one of those politicians who make their way through cultivating the press. I do not leak stories to the press. Anything that has appeared under any byline about my intentions or discussions with business managers has no authority behind it. It comes neither from my right hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury, nor from me.

Mr. Michael Clapham (Barnsley, West and Penistone): My right hon. Friend may have read early-day motion 439 on deaths from asbestos-related diseases:

[*That this House regrets to learn of the death of Sidney Dalton due to mesothelioma caused by exposure to asbestos whilst working at the former Blackburn Meadows Power Station; calls for a public inquiry into the high incidence of asbestos-related disease amongst former power industry workers; deplores the conduct of his employers Powergen plc in forcing former employees or their widows to take their cases for compensation to the High Court; and reminds the company that under the Electricity Act 1989 they were required to take over liabilities and not just the assets of the former Electricity Generating Board, and that accordingly they have a duty to compensate former workers who have suffered asbestos-related disease.*]

She may also have read early-day motion 440, which draws attention to international repetitive strain injury awareness day. She will be aware of the report of the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs on the Health and Safety Executive, and she may be aware that the Health and Safety Commission will reply, over the next week or so, to the consultation exercise carried out last year. Following that publication, will she endeavour to make time for a debate on health and safety, an important matter in a changing world, and an issue badly neglected by the Opposition during their 18-year Administration?

Mrs. Beckett: I have some sympathy with my hon. Friend's point, and I understand concern across the House about health and safety matters. As I have just said to the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire, I cannot undertake to find time in the near future for a special debate, particularly as my hon. Friend has identified a wide range of issues. I recommend to him the debates in Westminster Hall.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): In his answer to my hon. Friend the Member for St. Ives (Mr. George) yesterday, the Prime Minister laid great stress on the importance of the farming summit that he is convening at 10 Downing street on 30 March. Can the Leader of the House give an absolute assurance that there will, as soon as possible after that event—we are getting close to it—be a statement by the Prime Minister or a debate in Government time on the crisis in agriculture?

The shadow Leader of the House referred to the huge amount of business to be undertaken on Wednesday 29 March. May I suggest a means by which we could relieve the pressure? If, instead of trailing announcements about the proposed merger of the Benefits Agency and the Employment Service on the "Today" programme or sneaking out a written answer at the end of Thursday, the Government made a proper statement in the House, we could have a proper discussion and hold Ministers to account. Given that the Prime Minister himself—according to the "Today" programme—thought the matter so important that he had to make the announcement himself, why is he not making it to the House?

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): You don't have to believe everything John Humphrys says.

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend is entirely right. One does not have to believe all that John Humphrys says. [HON. MEMBERS: "Don't you?"] That is no criticism, but a statement of fact which, I am sure, John Humphrys would be the first to endorse.

I undertake that the House will be kept informed about the outcome of the farming summit. The Government recognise its great importance to the industry and to many hon. Members on both sides. I cannot undertake that the statement will be made by the Prime Minister, but the House will be kept informed.

The hon. Gentleman referred to matters being trailed on the "Today" programme and asked for a statement in the House. There is always a balance to be struck on how the public and the House are informed. He will be aware that, as Madam Speaker has pointed out in the past, the Government can make announcements to the House through written parliamentary answers. There is nothing unparliamentary about that. Of course, I understand the pressure and the desire for more statements, but the hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Government have already made far more statements than did our predecessors over a similar period. If we continue to have demands for statements on everything, there will not be time for the debates that hon. Members are calling for.

Mrs. Ann Cryer (Keighley): Would my right hon. Friend consider a debate on residential care for people with a mental handicap and the problems raised for devoted relatives by the complete lack of choice in many areas? The matter is set out in my early-day motion 517 on residential village communities:

[*That this House welcomes the strengthened guidance given to health and local authorities last July (HSC 1999/162: LAC (99)28) confirming the rights of people with a mental handicap and their families to make informed choices about residential and other placements, but is concerned that evidence presented to an NHS conference on 28th January indicated that by a ratio of over two to one families claimed they were not being allowed the choice to which this Government is committed; and therefore urges the Government to adopt effective measures quickly to ensure that family choices, including the choice of village-type residential communities, preferred by many families are properly respected by local health and social service authorities and that more serious consideration is given to the evolution of such village communities, as argued for in, Made to Care, by the noble Baroness, Baroness Cox, and the noble Lord, Lord Pearson of Rannoch.*]

Mrs. Beckett: I take heed of the concern aired by my hon. Friend. There are local complaints procedures, if there is unhappiness. However, I take my hon. Friend's point that there is not the range of choice for people with

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such disabilities that one might want. I shall certainly draw her remarks to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health.

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): I know that you, Madam Speaker, are aware of the real anger in the livestock industry about the failure of the Government to pay agrimonetary compensation up to the maximum allowed. However, you may not be aware that the Agriculture Commissioner, Franz Fischler, has recently stated that the UK is the only country in the European Union that is not paying up to the maximum allowed under the legislation. May we have an early debate so that the Minister of Agriculture can come to the House and explain why the Government are so resolute in refusing to increase those amounts to the maximum allowed? Instead of giving us excuses for his failure, can he give us some reasons for continuing to sell the farmers short?

Mrs. Beckett: I am confident that if the hon. Gentleman casts his mind back he will understand the reasons very well. As I understand the matter—from memory—it was part of the package negotiated at Fontainebleau by the former Prime Minister, now Lady Thatcher, when she decided not to participate in that scheme.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): Would the Leader of the House consider giving us an early full-day debate on the Select Committee on Liaison report, "Shifting the Balance: Select Committees and the Executive"? There is a carrot for my right hon. Friend in granting the debate, because if that report is implemented by the Government, it will be her enduring legacy to Parliament. It will be much more important than the botch of the House of Lords reform, the introduction of the parallel Chamber, or Thursday sittings that end at 7 o'clock. Shifting the balance away from the Executive back to this place so that Back Benchers can control the Executive will be an enduring legacy. To hold such a debate would be a huge step forward. Will my right hon. Friend do all she can to advance that major constitutional reform?

Mrs. Beckett: I am touched by my hon. Friend's regard for my place in history. However, I fear that I am much more interested in what works effectively for better governance of the country than I am in my own track record or in how I am perceived.

Mr. Charles Wardle (Bexhill and Battle): The Leader of the House will be familiar with the draft strategy, "A way with waste", produced by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. Ministers suggested that it would emerge in its final form early this year. Will she tell the House when that strategy will be finalised? Will she arrange a debate so that public concern about pollution and contamination from incineration plants, such as might affect the residents of Mountfield in my constituency, can be fully explored?

Mrs. Beckett: I fear that I cannot undertake to find time for a debate on the subject in the near future, although I remind the hon. Gentleman of the 200 extra opportunities for debate that are offered by the proceedings in Westminster Hall. He will also have observed that Environment questions are scheduled soon and he might like to use that opportunity.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): A statement will no doubt be made next week, but does my right hon. Friend agree that the report of the Standards and Privileges Committee on the hon. Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman), which has been debated in the House, and yesterday's report on the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) demonstrate that, at long last, Members' outside financial interests are being properly investigated? I emphasise the words "at long last", and I speak as a Member with 25 years' experience in the House.

Is there any reason at all why the annual tax returns of Members are not given to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards? If we have nothing to hide—I know that Conservative Members will object to the suggestion—why should the Parliamentary Commissioner not see our annual tax returns?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend raises an interesting point about the proper handling of our financial interests. The whole House has agreed to the way in which we handle such matters so as to make it clear that we pay high regard to our reputation and standing with the public. He made an interesting suggestion about tax returns, but I freely confess to him that, although he has made a serious point that should be carefully considered, many Members struggle to meet the new arrangements that have been made for the declaration of tax and the early filling in of forms. Certainly, I have never found it easy to make sure that I get all the information together in time to meet the deadlines, so the idea of having to meet the Parliamentary Commissioner's deadline as well is something to which I would wish to give a little careful thought.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): I was disappointed with the response of the Leader of the House to the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler), who raised with her the handling of this morning's lead news item on the amalgamation of the Benefits Agency and the Employment Service. The Leader of the House has a crucial job in protecting Parliament's interest in discussing important business. Will she tell us specifically why that business does not merit a statement today or a statement or debate next week? We have been told that the change is one of the most significant to the way in which benefits will be dealt with in future, yet so far she has offered the House no chance to discuss it.

Mrs. Beckett: The right hon. Gentleman is wrong, I am afraid. I did not hear the report to which he referred, so I genuinely do not know whether I have sympathy for his complaint or whether I think that—and this is a sort of compliment—it is one of the bogus points frequently made by Conservative Members in pursuit of advancement of their political cause. [HON. MEMBERS: "Unfair."] That is not a criticism, because they obviously think that that is their job.

The right hon. Gentleman said that there should be a special statement. He will have observed that there is the opportunity for debate. When Members have had a chance

to consider whatever is being said, no doubt they will know whether the issue is one that they can legitimately raise in the debate and will seek opportunities to do so. However, we cannot make statements on everything that comes to mind.

Angela Smith (Basildon): My right hon. Friend may recall a lengthy and fascinating debate that we had in the House on 19 January on the Representation of the People Act 2000, including a rivetting discussion of about an hour on the meaning of the word "and" in legislation. Because of that, we could not, on that occasion, debate on the Floor of the House the Fur Farming (Prohibition) Bill. My right hon. Friend made a statement and promised that she would bring the Bill back to the House as soon as possible. When is that likely to be and what plans has she to bring the Bill back to the House as soon as possible?

Mrs. Beckett: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. Although she may be completely right, I must admit that I do not recall using the precise words "as soon as possible". I am always a little cautious, knowing that sometimes other things intervene in the scheduling of business. However, her underlying point is absolutely right and was strongly made. The procedures of the House were used to make sure that we did not reach the Fur Farming (Prohibition) Bill. I gave the House the undertaking that we expected the Bill to come before the House and, I hope, pass into law. That remains my view, although I cannot give my hon. Friend a date for that at present.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): We understand that the Government have to get their business through and we know from experience that Governments of both persuasions have made many blunders in trying to push business through the House and wasted more time later on. When we ask to debate certain subjects, it is a ploy of those on the Government Front Bench to tell the Opposition parties that they can use their Supply days. May I therefore plead with the Leader of the House to use her influence with the usual channels to grant a half-day Supply day to the Ulster Unionist party? It is four years since we had one, we are trying to get one and I trust that it will not be towards the end of the Session before that happens.

Mrs. Beckett: I am sorry to learn of the hon. Gentleman's concerns. He clearly appreciates that this is not a matter for me directly, but I am confident that his observations will have been heard on the Opposition Benches.

Mr. Phil Hope (Corby): May I ask my right hon. Friend for an early debate on the future of the BBC World Service? It has now achieved a record 151 million listeners worldwide, reaching more than 100 cities across the globe, and its information and education work reaches some of the poorest communities in the world. I would welcome an early debate on its future.

Mrs. Beckett: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. One of the more unfortunate features of the Conservatives' record in government was that they cut the funding for the World Service, which has always seemed to me to be not only a huge cultural but a huge economic asset to the country, so I thought that the cut in funding was an act of extraordinary folly. I entirely agree that the House should welcome, as I think it does, the improvement in the World Service and the additional funding that the Government have made available. I fear that I cannot undertake to find time for an early debate on the Floor of the House, but I recommend to him the attractions of Westminster Hall.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): According to one of the many best-selling biographies of the Leader of the House, she was a distinguished member of the Labour common market safeguards committee. She will therefore appreciate the significance of yesterday's statement by the European Commissioner in charge of economic and monetary union, Mr. Pedro Solbes, who stated:

> In the longer term it's not possible to be in the Union and outside EMU.

Will she find time for an early statement by the Foreign Secretary about those blackmailing tactics by unelected Commission officials, particularly in the light of the statement last October by the President of the Commission, Mr. Prodi, that the European Commission is in reality the Government of Europe?

Mrs. Beckett: I thank the hon. Gentleman, but I must slightly correct him: I do not think that there have been any biographies of me, but there are various biographical summaries of varying accuracy. They are correct in identifying that I was a member of the common market safeguards campaign. I understand the hon. Gentleman's point about the commissioner's remarks, but I would simply say to him that, not only do I not regard that as blackmail, but I do not even regard it as new. EMU has been a clear potential consequence of our involvement in the European Union from the very beginning, as those of us who urged caution at the time pointed out to the British people. I recognise that many Conservative Members were putting a different point of view at the time, and I hope that they are sorry, but it is too late.

Mr. John Cryer (Hornchurch): When will my right hon. Friend be able to find time for the annual debate on the police? She will know that in the Met, resources are being taken from divisions and concentrated in murder investigations. Havering, the division that I represent, will be undermined by that move.

When the Tories and Liberals whinge about not having enough time, will my right hon. Friend bear it in mind that plenty of Labour Members would happily sit through Easter and August and other holidays? Perhaps if she suggested that on the Floor of the House, she might see Opposition Members taking a different outlook.

Mrs. Beckett: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the first half of his remarks. I recognise the interest in and concern about policing in London. He will know that the Government have always tried to find time, on a suitable occasion, to focus on those matters, and we shall certainly bear his remarks in mind.

With regard to sitting through Easter and August and so on, I am of course well aware that my hon. Friend and other colleagues, including my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner), are always willing to be here,

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and that is a useful cautionary reminder to the Conservative party. However, I have to tell him that the Government's policy is for a good work-life balance, and in that light I cannot necessarily undertake to accede to his request.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): The Leader of the House is doubtless aware that next week the Commissioner for Public Appointments will publish her long-awaited report on Government appointments to NHS trusts and health authorities. Will the right hon. Lady make representations to her colleagues in the Department of Health and the Cabinet Office to ensure that Ministers from both Departments make early statements to the House, setting out the action that the Government intend to take to clean up the process of public appointments and to ensure that the political bias that has been evident to date is brought to a stop?

Mrs. Beckett: Of course, I know that the report is to be published, but I do not know what it contains and I do not know that the hon. Gentleman does. I cannot undertake that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will come to the House to make a statement. There may or may not be any need for him to do so. It is right that the Commissioner for Public Appointments should look into such matters, as the Government intended and support, but I do not accept the notion that there is a process to clean up and that that lies at the door of this Government.

I say to the hon. Gentleman, not for the first time, that Conservative Members have very short memories. We remember that under the previous Government, anyone with remotely Labour sympathies was kicked off the board of every health authority and trust, as were many loyal Tories who were not thought to be sufficiently toeing the line of the policies of the then Government. It is no good the hon. Gentleman shaking his head. He knows that what I say is true.

Mr. Jonathan Shaw (Chatham and Aylesford): Is my right hon. Friend aware of the M2 widening that is taking place throughout my constituency? Drivers and freight will enjoy the benefits of driving through Kent to the ports, but is it not right that people who must lose their homes to accommodate the widening are fairly compensated? Mr. and Mrs. Russell of Bluebell Hill have lived in their home for 30 years and received an offer far below the market price from the Highways Agency. Will my right hon. Friend see to it that the Deputy Prime Minister makes a statement to the House about the guidelines that the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions gives to the Highways Agency for providing fair compensation to people such as my constituents?

Mrs. Beckett: I understand my hon. Friend's concern and the matter that he raises, correctly, on behalf of his constituents. I am aware that such matters always cause great anxiety and sometimes considerable resentment. I fear that I cannot undertake to find time or to ask my right hon. Friend to come and make a special statement to the House, but I undertake to draw my hon. Friend's remarks to his attention, and I am sure that he will look into the matter.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): May we please have an urgent statement from the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on the Part-Time Employees (Prevention of Less Favourable Treatment) Regulations 2000, which have so far been issued only in draft form? Given that the Government agreed in April 1998—probably during the tenure of the right hon. Lady at the DTI—to the incorporation in British law of the European directive on the rights of part-time workers, does the Leader of the House agree that it is shameful and appalling for British business that the Government have taken almost two years to produce the proposed directive, and that they have issued consultation proposals allowing only six weeks—

Madam Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman knows that a number of hon. Members want to put business questions. Will he now come to his point, and will all other hon. Members who are called please put their questions briskly? It happens to be an Opposition Day.

Mr. Bercow: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I apologise profusely to you and to the House.

Is it not a disgrace that businesses have had only six weeks to comment on the highly unsatisfactory proposals that have only belatedly emerged from the Government?

Mrs. Beckett: Although I understand the hon. Gentleman's concern that it has taken so long to bring the directive forward, the Conservative party resisted doing any of that. However, I shall draw to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry the hon. Gentleman's remarks about the length of time for consultation, although from memory, I believe that that is not the first or only opportunity for consultation.

Kali Mountford (Colne Valley): Has my right hon. Friend had an opportunity to see early-day motion 515:

[That this House, noting that it is a breach of international law and a defiance of mandatory United Nations sanctions to supply arms, fuel, equipment and goods to, or to purchase diamonds from, Jonas Savimbi's UNITA rebel force in Angola, calls for the public identification and, where possible, prosecution of all individuals, private companies and public officials involved; in particular calls upon the Governments of the Ukraine and Belarus to stop arms and munitions exports to UNITA, on Ukrainian pilots to stop flying weapons and diesel to UNITA, on the Government of Zambia to stop convoys of lorries and planes from crossing the border into UNITA-controlled areas with the occasional paid assistance of Zambian Ministers and public officials, on the Government of Uganda to sack senior officials implicated, including President Museveni's half brother, General Salim Saleh, on the Government of Cote d' Ivoire, Togo and Burkina Faso to act immediately to halt their longstanding supplies to UNITA, on the Government of Rwanda to stop their almost daily supply flights from Kigali and other airports to UNITA, on the Government of South Africa to crack down on the dozens of individual business people and arms suppliers who continue to supply UNITA, on the Government of Israel to act against

those of its citizens involved in supply operations and those buying diamonds for sale via the Tel Aviv trading centre, on the Government of the United Arab Emirates to prevent arms being transited from eastern Europe via Dubai to UNITA, on the Government of Switzerland and banking authorities across the world to track down the millions of pounds of Savimbi's assets, secured through illegal sales of diamonds, and without which he cannot pay for the arms and fuel he needs to continue the dreadfully destructive war which has gone on for decades and which is now engulfing the whole region; supports the efforts of De Beers and the Governments of Belgium and the United Kingdom to block illegal sale of UNITA diamonds through Antwerp; welcomes the work of Canada's Ambassador Fowler in leading United Nations efforts to identify and block UNITA sanctions busters; and calls on the entire international community to act decisively to end the war by rigorously imposing sanctions on UNITA and preventing the making of money and private profit out of the misery of the Angolan people.]?

The early-day motion, which is in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Stevenage (Barbara Follett), is an excellent resumé of sanctions-busting in the region. On Tuesday, in Foreign and Commonwealth Office questions, the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Mr. Hain), told the House that he was going to New York this week to discuss the flagrant breach of international law. When he returns, will there be an opportunity for the House to debate the matter?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend is right. There is great concern, and the motion tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Stevenage (Barbara Follett) is important. The Government sympathise, but I cannot necessarily undertake to find time for a full debate in the House. I recommend to my hon. Friend, as to others, the attractions of Westminster Hall. One of the reasons for proposing it was so that there would be more time for more specific debates on issues such as foreign affairs.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): Can we have a debate on the administration of local justice? Is the Leader of the House aware that the proposals to close Ashbourne, Bakewell and Matlock magistrates courts have been brought forward without the alternative arrangements that were promised at the time of the original closures? Will the right hon. Lady arrange for a debate on this important issue?

Mrs. Beckett: No, I was not aware that the proposals had been brought forward without the alternatives being in place. I cannot undertake to arrange a debate, but I can undertake to draw attention to the hon. Gentleman's remarks.

Mr. Tom Levitt (High Peak): Can my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the funding of health care? I was inspired to ask the question because I understand that the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) has made the somewhat bizarre claim that the Tories

would revolutionise private insurance in the way that they revolutionised pensions in the 1980s.

Given that my memory of insurance and pensions in the 1980s is one of rip off and chaos, is it not time that we took an opportunity to lance the boil at an early stage?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend makes an important point. As he says, the way in which the Tories revolutionised private pension insurance is well within everybody's memory. That is precisely why everybody is afraid of the Tory proposals for health care. I fear, however, that I cannot on those grounds undertake to find time for a special debate on the matter. When the Opposition next try to exploit health matters, my hon. Friend will no doubt bear in mind the points that he has raised.

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): Will the Leader of the House find time for an early debate on the growing scandal of the £92 million which the Government spend on their own advertising? Will we have an opportunity during that debate to ascertain how it came about that Mr. Ray Porter was chosen to star in the new deal advertisements? Was it because he had been a subscriber to Labour party funds or because he was an example of a particularly bad and inappropriate employer?

Mrs. Beckett: I do not know anything about Mr. Ray Porter, but I do know about the Government's advertising. I am well aware that much of that advertising has been directed to ensuring that people are aware of the opportunities that are available under programmes such as the new deal. It is perfectly legitimate for the Government to do that and it is something that every Government have done. Unlike the previous, Conservative Government, whom the hon. Gentleman supported, we are making sure that our advertising covers the entire country and is not confined, as under the previous Government, to constituencies where there might be concern about unemployment without there being many unemployed people within them.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): Further to the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for North–West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) about the status of Lord Levy, will the Leader of the House give the House the opportunity to hear, in the form of a statement, clarification of the specific responsibilities and duties of Lord Levy, who is described as the Prime Minister's personal envoy in the middle east? That would put an end to the speculation about his shadowy dealings in funding political parties in this country and in the middle east. It would be fairer to him, to the House and to the wider public, because the House needs to know to whom Lord Levy is accountable.

Mrs. Beckett: As I have already said, a written answer is a statement to the House. I refer the hon. Gentleman to yesterday's *Hansard*, column 221W. He says that a statement would put an end to speculation; I doubt that very much.

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): May we have a debate in Government time on the work of the immigration and nationality directorate? I am sure that everybody at Croydon works extremely hard, and I know that the Minister and her private office who have a responsibility for immigration matters are always extremely courteous, but there is chaos.

[Mr. Tony Baldry]

I quote two cases that have arisen in the past 24 hours in my constituency. A company in Banbury wants a key person with a work permit. It has been given three different answers: first, it has been told that the case has been filed and put in the archives; secondly, it has been told that the individual can come; and, thirdly, it has been told to consult the British Consulate in the country concerned. The second case involves a lady who married and came to the United Kingdom perfectly properly last July. She applied for entry clearance to Croydon in July and is still waiting.

Those cases have arisen within 24 hours. I am sure that every colleague in the House is aware of numerous cases of this sort. Please may we have a debate? Our staff are spending a disproportionate amount of time on the telephone to Croydon and are chasing one another's tails. It must be possible to do things in a better way.

Mrs. Beckett: I understand the anxieties that the hon. Gentleman properly identified. I am sure that many hon. Members have similar anxieties and experiences. I have had them for the past 20 years; I hope that a Labour Government will finally sort out the problems.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): The Leader of the House does a wonderful job, and I congratulate her. Will she agree to the request of the hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) for an early debate on the Liaison Committee report entitled "Shifting the Balance"? That important Select Committee is dominated by Labour Members of long service and experience, and the report received unanimous support.

Secondly, will the Leader of the House make arrangements for a statement on what was apparently the Prime Minister's decision to locate Diamond Synchrotron in Oxford rather than Daresbury in the north-west? That decision to locate more jobs in the home counties and the south-east rather than the north-west has caused serious anxiety and disappointment across the political spectrum, including in Labour councils.

Mrs. Beckett: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his kind remarks. The Liaison Committee report is a major, substantial document, which requires careful consideration. However, I cannot undertake to find time for an early debate.

I understand completely the concern that has been expressed throughout the north-west about the Daresbury project. Many of my hon. Friends have also raised the matter. The Office of Science and Technology and the Wellcome Trust recommended the site that has been chosen to the two Governments involved. However, I understand the anxiety in the north-west and the Government are endeavouring to respond to it.

Mr. Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove): May I press the Leader of the House on the amalgamation of the Employment Service and the Benefits Agency? When she returns to her office, she will discover that it is not a gimmick that my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) or the right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) dreamt up. Will she undertake to make a statement and give us the opportunity for a debate on a fundamental matter of Government policy and administration?

Mrs. Beckett: *I accept the hon. Gentleman's point that* an indication, to which he and other hon. Members referred, has been given. I cannot undertake to find time for a specific statement, but I shall draw his remarks to the attention of my right hon. Friend.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Given that Back Benchers have few opportunities to speak on proposed legislation if they are not members of a Standing Committee, does the Leader of the House agree that producing timetabling motions for more Bills restricts Back Benchers' ability to represent their constituents' interests? Will she consider the rights of Back Benchers and their obligation to their constituents, and keep such timetabling to an absolute minimum? I agree with the hon. Member for Hornchurch (Mr. Cryer), who called for shorter recesses to allow more time for us to examine Bills adequately and ensure that proper legislation reaches the statute book.

Mrs. Beckett: Under this Government, there have been shorter recesses. I know that Conservative Members deny that, but if the hon. Lady checks, she will find that that is true.

I could not disagree with the hon. Lady more. Proper timetabled debates are in the interests of Back Benchers. [HON. MEMBERS: "No."] I can tell the hon. Lady that I have been a Member of Parliament for substantially longer than her. During that time, when I have been involved with legislation, I have always made sure that the time was properly apportioned. That ensured that there was time to discuss the important issues.

None of our constituents understand or have sympathy for Members of Parliament wasting hours on trivial debates—*[Interruption.]* I know that the hon. Lady does not waste time, but I simply point out that our constituents do not understand it when we waste time on trivial debates and complain that there is no time for important issues. A proper agreement to tackle important issues avoids that. I believed that when I was a member of the Opposition—we were a good Opposition—and it remains my view.

Mr. Forth: At the risk of being accused of being political in this of all places, may I tentatively suggest to the Leader of the House that it is time for a proper and, if necessary, lengthy debate on the role of so-called "envoys" of the Prime Minister? It would be in the interest of any such envoys, and certainly in the public interest, for us to know with much greater clarity what relationship they have with the Government and the ministerial code of practice, and exactly where they stand in terms of Government policy at home and abroad. They also lack accountability to either House of Parliament. This matter of great importance is worrying more and more people. In the interests of good governance, surely we must have it out in the open and clear beyond all possible doubt.

Mrs. Beckett: Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman is again pursuing the issue of Lord Levy. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has answered questions about that, but what is quite plain and what has not been

disputed by anybody is that Lord Levy has engaged in talks and conversations, which one hopes will promote the cause of middle east peace. Most people will think that more important than such nit-picking.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): During her busy day, has the right hon. Lady had a chance to read the report entitled "EU Membership—What's the Bottom Line?", which was published this morning by the Institute of Directors? It says that, taking into account the free market in the European Union and the inward investment that results from our membership, that membership costs each British family £1,000 a year. As we want to remain in the EU, but do not want to be run by it, may we have an urgent debate on how the EU needs to be restructured so that Britain benefits from it?

Mrs. Beckett: I do not think that there is any need for an urgent debate because the Government report assiduously to the House and spend a great deal of time on their efforts to achieve restructuring of the EU and more efficient spending of the public moneys that it uses, which the Conservative party singularly failed to do in government.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): Will the Leader of the House arrange for an early debate on the crisis of democracy in local government? She may not be aware that the Labour leader of Cardiff council has had his pay for his three-day week increased to £58,000. He is the highest-paid councillor in Britain, and Cardiff council tax payers face increases of 10.2 per cent. this year. Seven Labour councillors voted against the increase and one abstained. They were immediately suspended from the Labour Whip. I fear that, unless we can stop the rot in Cardiff, it will spread to every other Labour authority in Britain and council tax payers will have to foot the bill for the greed of Labour councillors.

Mrs. Beckett: I have only two things to say to the hon. Gentleman. First, his party abolished the controls on those allowances in 1995. Secondly, if I were a Conservative Member I would not make a lot of fuss about people who get thousands of pounds for a few days' work.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): The right hon. Lady will have noted the widespread demand for a proper debate—not merely one subsumed in the debate a week on Wednesday—on the statement that the Prime Minister is apparently making today. She will have noted also the considerable unease in the House about the precise role of Lord Levy. She has referred to the Prime Minister's answers, which I have before me. They say merely that, from time to time, Lord Levy has passed on oral messages. Will she be a real sport and pass an oral message from me to the Prime Minister? We expect changes in Government policy to be announced on the Floor of the House and we should like a little more detail as to the precise role of this extraordinary plenipotentiary.

Mrs. Beckett: I am always willing to pass on messages, but I can think of no circumstances in which it is likely that time will be found for a debate. The people of this country are much more interested in the prospect of peace in the middle east than in the preoccupation of Opposition Members. If any changes are announced, no doubt in the fullness of time those matters will come before the House. At first hearing, they do not sound to me so urgent that they need to be dealt with in five minutes. It does not sound the kind of matter that would take a short time to consider.

Personal Statement

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): Madam Speaker, may I make a personal statement? During Prime Minister's questions yesterday afternoon, it was I who—from a sedentary position—accused the Prime Minister of being a liar. I recognise that that was unparliamentary language and happily withdraw the remark. When you asked who was the culprit, I fear that I remained silent. In retrospect, I realise that that was inexcusable. I apologise to you and to the House for my remark and my silence after it.

Madam Speaker: Thank you.

Mr. Stephen Pound (Ealing, North): In light of that full statement, Madam Speaker, it is clear to me that my suggestion to the House yesterday that it may have been the hon. and gallant Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan) who called the Prime Minister a liar was wholly unfounded. I wish to express my unreserved apologies to him and to the House.

Madam Speaker: Thank you.

WELSH GRAND COMMITTEE

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 107 (Welsh Grand Committee),

That the matter of the Budget Statement and its implications for Wales be referred to the Welsh Grand Committee for its consideration—*[Mr. Clelland.]*

Question agreed to.

Opposition Day

[8TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Mozambique

[Relevant document: Minutes of Evidence taken before the International Development Committee on 14th March, HC 326-i.]

Madam Speaker: I have selected the amendment that stands in the name of the Prime Minister.

1.16 pm

Mr. Gary Streeter (South-West Devon): I beg to move,

That this House notes with concern that the Government's response to the humanitarian crisis in Mozambique was hampered by indecision and delay, and that infighting between Ministers in the Department for International Development and the Ministry of Defence contributed to the delay in sending helicopters and boats to assist in the rescue of the people of Mozambique; deeply regrets that lives were lost as a result; deplores the absence of 'joined up government' and the failure by the Prime Minister to intervene until Her Majesty's Opposition and the media exposed the Government's failings; calls upon Ministers to accept responsibility for such delays; and seeks assurance that the response to any future disasters will be more immediate and co-ordinated.

Something went wrong with the British relief effort in Mozambique. In seven critical days when thousands of people were hanging in trees, there were not enough helicopters flying to rescue them. We will never know how many lives were lost. It was the failings of many, not just of our Government. The purpose of this debate is to examine what went wrong and to learn the lessons, so that next time a natural disaster on this scale strikes—as sadly it will—the British Government can respond more effectively.

Mr. Tony Worthington (Clydebank and Milngavie): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that 14 helicopters were flying in Mozambique on 1 March? There were seven South African helicopters fuelled and paid for by the British Government and seven provided by the British Government. All 14 helicopters flying in Mozambique were funded by the Department for International Development. Is he saying that Britain failed? What was the rest of the world doing?

Mr. Streeter: I will come to that. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman agrees that for most of the time, people were hanging in trees and clinging to rooftops in Mozambique and there were not enough helicopters flying to rescue them. That is irrefutable and the British people feel strongly about it. Most of the time, there were five helicopters in the air.

The House should judge the Government's handling of the Mozambique crisis not by the standards of tabloid headlines or unrealistic counsel of perfection but by the words and promises of the Secretary of State. In February 1998, the right hon. Lady said:

As for my Department's response to emergencies, it is true that the capacity of the British Government to respond rapidly sits within my Department. It works very smoothly and very fast. When there is a need to move, Ministers are not consulted. We have delegated powers and resources available to us, and we move immediately. We can move over a weekend. There is no need to consult lots of Departments and delay our response.—[*Official Report*, 11 February 1998; Vol. 306, c. 375.]

Unfortunately, we all know from agonising recent experience that the Secretary of State's words were not translated into action. There was delay. Her Department did not move immediately. There was no rapid response mechanism involving the Ministry of Defence or any other Department. It did not work smoothly. Mistakes were made—mistakes that cost lives. Whatever else happens as a consequence of today's debate, the delay, indecision and infighting that undermined the British Government's response must never occur again.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): In view of the seriousness of the delay that the hon. Gentleman is describing, will he tell us which helicopters arrived on the scene first after those from Mozambique and South Africa? From which country did they come?

Mr. Streeter: Perhaps the hon. Lady is a little out of touch. Helicopters were flown from this country on 3 March; I think that they should have been flown during the weekend before that, at the latest.

Before I consider the Government's response in detail, let me deal with two other matters that should concern us all. The first is the response of the United Nations and the European Union. Yet again, it has been inadequate. In the medium term, it will be important for the House to debate the failure of the international community's multilateral agencies to respond to the crisis in Mozambique, and to others. Although our Government's response fell well short of the expectations of the British people, the truth is that nation states responded more quickly and more effectively than multilateral organisations.

It is often said that nothing happens in the United Nations until a matter reaches the 38th floor, and by then it is too late. We shall need to explore whether these are the right vehicles to be in the front line when natural disasters strike. No official stands before a committee in the United Nations today to be examined on how the UN responded, yet this is the second time that the Secretary of State has been called to account this week. She is being held to account for decisions that she made, or did not make. That is democracy in action, and it works.

Of course it is also true that the response of other nations was patchy. Some countries, both in the region and further afield, should certainly give thought to their own responses, and learn their own lessons. The British people, however, have shown how they feel about the plight of the people of Mozambique with—yet again—their magnificent generosity. They have now given more than £20 million. They expect their Government to match their sacrifice, and to be in the front line when terrible disasters of this kind occur.

Mr. Worthington: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Streeter: The hon. Gentleman has already had one go, and he made a mess of that. I will not give way to him again.

As I was saying, the British people expect our Government to be in the front line when terrible disasters occur, especially in instances such as this. Mozambique is a Commonwealth country, and we have a special responsibility.

I am not saying that the British Government have done nothing; they have done much that the Conservative party welcomes. We will continue to support the Government over the next few months and years, as the painstaking task of helping the people of Mozambique to rebuild their lives continues. Those people now need food, water, medicine and seed to plant. They need help with the clearance of land mines dislodged by the floods and scattered everywhere. For many years, they will need help with the reconstruction of their homes, and the country's economic and physical infrastructure is in trouble. We will support the Government's efforts throughout that long process, but they must answer serious questions about their handling of the crisis. The people of this country are concerned about the infighting and delay that characterised the Government during the critical seven days while people were stranded, and it is my job to ask those questions on their behalf. They are straight questions, and they deserve straight answers.

Mr. Worthington: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Streeter: The hon. Gentleman can make his own speech later.

Let me ask the Secretary of State three sets of questions. First, where were the helicopters? On 10 February, the Mozambique Government were asking for help. On 11 February, Oxfam highlighted the need for helicopters and boats, and South African Government helicopters began flying in the region. On 14 February, South African experts predicted more heavy rain. On 18 February, UNICEF confirmed fears about the impending cyclone. All the warning signs were there. Why did it take a further two weeks—until Saturday 26 February—for the Department even to investigate with the Ministry of Defence the availability of British helicopters? Why was it only on Tuesday 29 February that the Department asked the MOD for helicopters? If it was right to send helicopters from Britain on 3 March, why was it not right to send them straight away?

It was obvious that, in the critical seven days from Friday 25 February to 3 March, helicopters to rescue people were the overwhelming priority. That was something that aid agencies and charities could not do. It requires Governments and armed forces to undertake such major logistical exercises. Providing helicopters to rescue people was the one thing that they were looking to us to do. The Government failed to deliver.

The Secretary of State's strategy was to locate helicopters in the region, but that strategy largely failed because, she says, she could not find enough. However, there is mystery here, too. Recently, in reply to a written question, she said:

> We have received many offers for the hire of helicopters both from the region and also further afield.—[*Official Report*, 7 March 2000; Vol. 345, c. 622W.]

If that was the case, why were so few of them taken up? There was a window of opportunity of just a few days to get people to safety before they drowned. It was a now-or-never situation. Why did she turn helicopters away? It cannot have been money because she told the House that money was not the issue. Does she now accept that she could have done more?

Does the Secretary of State now accept that, as soon as the situation over the weekend of 25 February arose, the right strategy was to mobilise helicopters from Europe? Does she accept that she should have explored the availability of Ministry of Defence helicopters well before then? The RAF was ready to go. It was well known that heavy-lift aircraft were available to hire and could get to Mozambique within 24 hours. The needs were obvious. The assets were available. Why did she not act?

Why did the Secretary of State delay so long before sending the Royal Fleet Auxiliary Fort George, which was finally instructed to go on 3 March? She told the House of Commons on Monday 28 February that the situation would get worse before it got better. How could she justify not sending Fort George when she knew that the ship would take a week to get to Mozambique? If it was right to send it on 3 March, why was it not right to send it on 1 March or on the weekend of 26 February? Given that the ship was later dispatched, does she accept that that, too, was an error of judgment?

Where was the joined-up government? The Secretary of State said that she had put in place a system that was very fast, worked very smoothly, could move immediately and could move over a weekend, but, when tested, no such system existed.

In recent years, it has almost always been the case that British aid in a disaster situation has involved the deployment of British forces. Surely, the Secretary of State had built a team approach that included the MOD. It would have been foolish not to, but, when a rapid reaction was necessary, there was no such system or team in place, so her Department and the MOD were at loggerheads for three days over money. That is what the British people find so utterly unacceptable. While people were dying in trees, the Government were wrangling over the price tag for four helicopters.

Having failed to put in place a rapid reaction team that worked, when the Secretary of State first heard that the MOD required £2.2 million for the four Puma helicopters, at the very least she should have picked up the telephone, called the Minister for the Armed Forces and negotiated a satisfactory deal there and then. Given that the Pumas went three days later, the failure to strike an immediate deal with her colleagues was shameful. Is it not true that she turned her back on the best solution because she failed to telephone one of her ministerial colleagues?

Was it because the Secretary of State has had a personal feud with that Minister for several years? Was it because she is in a permanent state of war with many of her Cabinet colleagues? What is the point of giving international development a Cabinet position and then giving it no clout? Where is the joined-up government that we were promised?

Does the Secretary of State think that the MOD should make a separate response to disaster emergencies? The lack of communication between the two Departments was so evident that, when the hon. Member for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle) put it to her on Wednesday 1 March that the RAF had hired an Antonov and was sending helicopters, she did not even know.

Whatever happened to collective responsibility? When I ask her about debt relief, she says that that is a matter for the Treasury. When I tackle her about export credit, she refers me to the Department of Trade and Industry. In the midst of a humanitarian crisis for which she has lead ministerial responsibility, she tells the House that it is up to the Ministry of Defence whether it sends helicopters. She tells the Select Committee that it is not her job to tell

[Mr. Streeter]

the MOD how much to charge for helicopters. But surely it is her job to co-ordinate the British relief effort. A key part of that is getting all Departments to work together. On that front, she has completely and utterly failed.

Whenever the Secretary of State is in difficulty, she blames someone else; it was the MOD's fault for charging too much; it was United Nations officials who left too early. Is it not time for her to accept responsibility for the choices and decisions that she has made?

Why does the Secretary of State tell the House of Commons one thing, but the outside world another? Why did the Secretary of State tell the House—on Monday 28 February and Wednesday 1 March—that money was not the issue, when it clearly was? She said:

> The problem is not shortage of money, either, but getting resources deployed in theatre quickly.

If the problem was not shortage of money, why did she fail to charter more helicopters locally when they were offered?

On Wednesday 1 March, why did she tell the House that there was absolutely no problem in co-operation between her Department and the Ministry of Defence, when that was clearly not the case? She told me:

> I am sorry, but the hon. Gentleman is misinformed. There is absolutely no problem about co-operation with the Ministry of Defence.—[*Official Report*, 1 March 2000; Vol. 345, c. 409.]

That was not true, was it?

The Secretary of State herself said, on the "Today" programme, that the MOD had asked for too much money. She said that the MOD is

> charging very high prices and coming in very slow.

Was she telling the truth on the "Today" programme or in the House of Commons?

Next came the most cynical act of all—it was so cynical and so typical of the Government. After a weekend of negative press, the Secretary of State decided to try to hide her Department's shame by announcing, via *The Observer*, an aid package of £70 million for Mozambique over the next two years. The announcement was clearly intended to give the impression of new money. I quote from *The Observer*—my favourite Sunday newspaper—of 5 March, which said:

> The British Government was last night accused of cynically attempting to manipulate public opinion—

surely not—

> over its humanitarian response to the Mozambique crisis after announcing an extra £70 million in aid—only to be forced to admit the figure was less than the amount it had already announced would be spent on aid to the country prior to the recent flooding.
>
> After a week of chaos over the Government's response to the tragedy in Mozambique, International Development Secretary Clare Short pledged to spend £70 m over the next two years in an aid package. The Government had hoped to offset criticism over Whitehall haggling and lack of financial assistance to the victims by announcing this "new" aid package.
>
> In a statement released to *The Observer*, Short said: "We are also planning to increase our programme of support to Mozambique to £70 m over the next two years and will take a lead role with the World Bank and the EC in assessing the implications of these floods for Mozambique's future needs."
>
> Department for International Development officials claimed the extra money had been agreed with senior civil servants at a meeting only last Tuesday.
>
> But, following inquiries from *The Observer* the DFID was forced to admit that its annual report, published last March, had projected spending on Mozambique of £38.5 m in 2000-01 and £38 m in the following year—a total of £76.5 m.
>
> Embarrassed DFID officials, confronted by the apparent cut in aid to Mozambique, then quickly increased the aid package to £76.5 m.

How cynical to re-announce money already announced, and how incompetent then to get it wrong! The headline perhaps says it all: "Clare Short's £70 million 'boost' for stricken Mozambique is actually a cut in planned spending". What a cheap and cynical publicity stunt. How typical of the Government.

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): As the hon. Gentleman probably knows, I was also involved in the incident with *The Observer* over that weekend. Is he ready to admit that the journalists have admitted that they had got the message wrong initially and misinterpreted it?

Mr. Streeter: It is typical of the hon. Lady to come to the rescue of the Government. We are used to that from the Liberal Democrats these days. I do not accept what she says. I am delighted to accept the story in *The Observer* at face value.

Mr. Michael Jabez Foster (Hastings and Rye): Whatever the truth of that story, which seems unclear, would there have been an extra £70 million if the hon. Gentleman had been in charge?

Mr. Streeter: I do not know who the hon. Gentleman is, but he does not know a lot about development or aid. Surely he does not condone his Government cynically re-announcing money that they had already announced and then getting the amount wrong. That is hypocrisy combined with incompetence.

There is not a single person in Britain who does not believe that in the crucial seven days when the lives of thousands of people in Mozambique were hanging by a thread, the British relief effort was paralysed by infighting and incompetence, which led to critical delays in getting more helicopters flying in Mozambique. There is not a single person in Britain who does not believe that lives were lost as a result. They want to hear that the Government have learned the lessons.

This is not the first time that the Secretary of State has been found wanting in a crisis. Her handling of the Montserrat crisis gave widespread offence and caused the Foreign Secretary to take the management of the dependent territories away from her Department. Her disparaging comments about the people of this country giving to the people of Sudan are still remembered with alarm. Her description of calls for debt relief after the devastating hurricane in central America as silly and irrelevant was a massive error of judgment that had to be overruled by the Chancellor. No one doubts that her heart is in the right place, but Ministers are paid to make good decisions. Is it not a vital part of her job to co-ordinate the relief effort across Whitehall? If not, what is her Department for?

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): The hon. Gentleman has twice suggested that lives were lost as a result of the delay, but he has failed

to say precisely when the delay happened. So that we can answer the debate properly, will he say precisely when the alleged delay occurred?

Mr. Streeter: I am staggered that the Secretary of State for Defence does not know. The delay, for which he was partly responsible, took place between Saturday 26 February and Friday 3 March, when helicopters were ultimately dispatched. Between those dates, there was ministerial incompetence, a lack of communication and infighting. Several days were lost. Everyone in the House and in the country knows that.

Is it not a vital part of the job of the Secretary of State for International Development to co-ordinate the relief effort across Whitehall? Is not a pattern emerging of a Cabinet Minister in a permanent state of war with her colleagues? She is a Minister building an empire who cannot build a team. She is fond of signing up for 20-year poverty targets, for which she can never be held accountable, but she could not meet a 48-hour target to get helicopters to desperate people hanging in trees.

The Secretary of State will blame others for what went wrong—she always does. She will say that there was no delay and that the Government did all that they could, but no one will believe her. The British people want to know that the Secretary of State, who, by her own admission, has direct responsibility for the Government's relief effort, has sufficient humility to recognise that mistakes were made. They want to know that the Government have learned the lessons. They want to hear that new systems and a cross-departmental rapid reaction force will now be put in place so that next time, the British response will be better; next time, more lives will be saved; and next time, the Government will respond in a way that we can all support.

1.40 pm

The Secretary of State for International Development (Clare Short): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

commends the Government for its speedy and effective response to the humanitarian crisis in Mozambique.

The House understands that it is the job of the Opposition to oppose, but it is sad when an Opposition spokesman on such important matters has no respect for accuracy; no concern for the merits of the case; little concern, clearly, for the people of Mozambique; and no respect for the large numbers of UK personnel who are in Mozambique, making a contribution that is respected across the world. Ours is the biggest contribution of any country, and it arrived more rapidly than that of any other country. Those are the facts, and the facts do matter.

If the hon. Member for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter) is capable of learning anything, he might want to study the performance of his predecessor, who cared about these matters, addressed the merits of each case and did not play cheap games.

Mozambique is the newest member of the Commonwealth, and the only member not colonised by the UK. It is one of the poorest countries in the world. At least 70 per cent. of the people live on less than $1 a day—the World Bank measure of absolute poverty. Of course that measure is what $1 a day would buy in the US, not in Mozambique. That demonstrates how poor the country is.

Only 40 per cent. of the population have access to basic health services, and only 28 per cent. access to safe water. Chronic malnutrition—when a disaster has not occurred—affects 30 to 40 per cent. of children. Some 60 per cent. of the population are illiterate; 77 per cent. of women are illiterate.

Mozambique has had a very hard hand from history. It was colonised by Portugal, and that meant that there was little investment in the country and no investment in education. Like the other Portuguese territories, it had to fight for its independence. Incidentally, that fight brought down the fascist Salazar regime and helped to bring democracy to Portugal—and thus more democracy to Europe. We should be grateful for that.

Following independence—because the Soviet Union had been its only ally in the struggle—Mozambique tried the disastrous Soviet economic model. This caused the neighbouring apartheid regime in South Africa to interfere and stoke up conflict, leading, in turn, to a vicious civil war, with all the loss and bitterness to which such a war leads.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Clare Short: No, I will not give way at the moment. It is important for the House—especially those who do not concern themselves with the country in question and just want to make cheap points—to know a little about the country we are discussing. *[Interruption.]* Sadly, that applies to many Opposition Members.

Nine years ago, Mozambique made peace and established democracy. The two sides in the conflict, Renamo and Frelimo, are now Opposition and Government. Mozambique also embarked on major reform—the economy has since then grown well—and the Government began the process of clearing mines and improving services for people.

The UK has a large and growing development programme. We inherited a £20 million-a-year development programme after the elections, and it has been growing steadily ever since.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): Was that money announced twice?

Clare Short: I will come to that. That is also untrue, as everything the hon. Member for South-West Devon said seems to be.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): The Secretary of State mentioned mines, and there have been extensive reports that, since the flooding, a lot of mines which were underground may have been dislodged. Does she have any up-to-date information about that, the risk that it presents and the efforts that have been made to try to deal with that risk?

Clare Short: The right hon. and learned Gentleman is right; it has been suggested that mines have been dislodged and are now more dangerous. The UN has a specialist mine-surveillance unit which has been called in. We do not yet have a report, but we are trying to attend to the problem. However, we do not know at the moment how much of a problem it is compared with all the other problems.

[Clare Short]

Before I turn to some of the specific issues surrounding Mozambique, I wish briefly to remind the House of some of the major emergencies across the world over the past two years to which my Department has made a significant contribution. Since June 1998, there have been 78 natural disasters to which we have responded and on which we have spent £41 million. Those disasters are quickly forgotten, but since December 1998, we have contributed assistance after floods in Vietnam; a cyclone in Fiji; and an earthquake in Colombia; in March 1999, after a famine in North Korea and floods in Bolivia; in April 1999, after a volcano in Cameroon—

Mr. Streeter: This is not relevant.

Clare Short: It is relevant, because the debate is about the competence of my Department in responding to emergencies and the false allegations made by the hon. Gentleman. We assisted after a cyclone in Pakistan in May 1999—*[Interruption.]* We are part of an international system that responds to emergencies, not to Opposition Members. We provided help after floods in China in August 1999; after the earthquake in Turkey, which the House might remember; after the earthquake in Taiwan in September 1999; after a hurricane in the Bahamas; after a cyclone in India in November 1999; after more floods in Vietnam; after another earthquake in Turkey; after a hurricane in Anguilla; after an earthquake in Vanuatu in December 1999; after floods in Venezuela; after storms in France, because it needed people to get the electricity system working; after storms in Mongolia in March; and after cyclones in Madagascar, also this month.

We are organised as a Department to respond very quickly. The Department maintains a round-the-clock, round-the-year, 24-hour, in-house emergency response capability in its—

Mr. John Hay (South Holland and The Deepings): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Clare Short: No, but I will give in to the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) at the end of my paragraph. I mean that I will give way—I certainly will not give in. *[Interruption.]* If the House is concerned about the capacity of the UK to respond, it should listen to what I am saying.

The emergency response capability is provided by the conflict and humanitarian affairs department—CHAD—which includes emergency response teams equipped with vehicles and communications equipment, which can be deployed immediately with specialist staff covering a wide range of disciplines. We maintain stockpiles of essential equipment and relief items such as tents, water equipment, household items and so on, which we can also deploy if required.

Dr. Julian Lewis: Will the right hon. Lady accept that some Opposition Members do know a little about the history of that tragic country, and that some of us know that in other crises her Department has performed more adequately than it has in Mozambique? Will she accept that we are having a debate about that crisis? Does she deny that she said on the "Today" programme that the problem was the Ministry of Defence

charging very high prices and coming in too slow?

If that is the case, will she say which of the two Defence Ministers who are sitting flanking her on the Front Bench like jailers she holds responsible?

Clare Short: I shall come on to the specific question the hon. Gentleman asks in a moment. I accept that some Opposition Members care about countries such as Mozambique, but I am sad to say that I do not believe that the hon. Member for South–West Devon cares about affairs in a country such as Mozambique.

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): That is a gratuitous insult.

Clare Short: The hon. Lady can hardly talk about gratuitous insults, given that she is sitting next to the hon. Member for South-West Devon.

In addition, my Department has established arrangements to call in resources from other Government Departments—*[Interruption.]* Opposition Members claim that they want to hear the answer to their questions. We also have arrangements to call in resources from companies and non-governmental organisations, including search and rescue teams from UK fire services, military assets from the Ministry of Defence, engineers from the Northern Ireland Electricity Company and from Registered Engineers for Disaster Relief, health care professionals from the NHS through the International Health Exchange—

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Clare Short: No, I will not.

We also have partnerships with Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland, so that resources and capabilities can be shared.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Clare Short: No, not at the moment. We have—

Mr. Duncan Smith: Will the Secretary of State give way on that point?

Clare Short: No, I will not.

It has been alleged by Opposition Members that we have frequently responded slowly. I am simply explaining to the House that the UK has capacities that are admired across the world and that it deploys quickly in emergencies all over the world. On this side of the House, we are proud of the people of our country who respond in that way, but clearly Opposition Members are not.

Mr. Duncan Smith: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Clare Short: Not just now, but I will in a moment.

We have a reputation across the world as one of the quickest, most effective and most generous countries in the world when responding to such emergencies.

Briefly, I should like to correct some of the misleading stories that appeared yesterday, as Lobby correspondents struggled to find a new row story, rather than simply report the truth.

Mr. Duncan Smith: Will the Minister give way?

Clare Short: No.

Mr. Duncan Smith: The Secretary of State said that she would give way.

Clare Short: I have made it clear to the hon. Gentleman that I am not giving way at the moment. I should be grateful if you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, would ask him to honour the normal rules of the House.

I certainly did not criticise officials from my Department when I gave evidence to the International Development Committee. The Chairman of that Committee, the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells), is present, and I am sure that he will confirm that. My officials—

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. I shall indeed use my authority to decide on these matters, but it is for the right hon. Lady to decide whether she is giving way in the debate. This is a very serious matter. I hope that the House can debate it in a calmer atmosphere, with fewer sedentary interventions.

Clare Short: As I was saying, my officials are some of the best in the world and are widely admired. I made no criticism of them, nor did I blame the United Nations for the emergency.

The emergency was what insurance companies call an act of God. Perhaps a story will now appear with the headline "Clare Short Shifts Blame to God". After each emergency we try to learn lessons and, as I told the Select Committee, once the UN arrived—in the person of Ross Mountain of the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs—the UN co-ordination was superb.

The UN response was a little slow in arriving, and we would have done better if it had come earlier, but that is a lesson for the future. I have discussed the matter with Kofi Annan, and we have agreed to try and tighten systems to ensure that the response is swifter in future.

Mr. Duncan Smith: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way. In an earlier intervention, my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) asked whether she had gone on the "Today" programme to blame the Ministry of Defence for the price that it had quoted and the delay in delivering items to Mozambique. Will she answer that question with a simple yes or no?

Clare Short: I shall come to that. *[Interruption.]* It is clear that Conservative Members care nothing about Mozambique, the emergency there or our response to it. They want to play cheap political games. I shall come to the matter raised by the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith), but the context is the emergency in Mozambique. The hon. Gentleman might at least pretend to be concerned about that.

The problem that we frequently experience is that a rush of press interest follows the rapid onset of an emergency. A paradox therefore arises: there is no doubt that press coverage moves the people of the world, and that that helps bring help, but it also usually leads to screaming headlines about who is at fault and why the disaster was not prevented or dealt with more efficiently.

Such discussion is, of course, valuable and legitimate, particularly after the event, as it helps us to learn from each disaster and strengthen international systems. However, during the emergency, it very often distorts discussion of what needs to be done and what is being done, and adds to the pressures on those dealing with the emergency—often, indeed, pressurising them to take inappropriate action.

We have seen a clear example of such distorted comment in the case of the UK response to Mozambique. Those distortions have been parroted by the hon. Member for South-West Devon today. All who are informed about events on the ground agree that the UK response has been the fastest and largest of any country in the world. President Chissano of Mozambique has sent a message to that effect. Moreover, Kofi Annan was in London yesterday, and made the same thing clear in all the meetings that he had during his visit.

As I made clear to the Select Committee on International Development on Tuesday—I understand that the record of that evidence has been made available to all hon. Members—there was no row of any kind between Ministers from the Ministry of Defence and my Department.

Mr. Hayes: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Clare Short: No, of course not.

Mr. Hayes: Why not?

Clare Short: Because you have been interrupting this very important discussion about the situation in Mozambique to try to talk about four helicopters. I am trying to give you the answer, but again you try and interrupt.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The right hon. Lady has used the word "you" on two occasions now. That is not the correct parliamentary language, and I should be grateful if she would observe the correct usage. When hon. Members try to intervene, she need do no more than indicate whether or not she will accept an intervention.

Clare Short: I would, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but Conservative Members keep shouting rather than merely asking whether they may intervene.

The decision not to commission four Puma helicopters from the Ministry of Defence at £2.2 million but to commission less costly helicopters from southern Africa caused no delay of any kind in getting helicopters to Mozambique. Even Conservative Members can understand that helicopters from the United Kingdom would take

[Clare Short]

longer to arrive in Mozambique than helicopters from southern Africa. Perhaps even they can cope with that concept, or that understanding of geography.

Mr. Fabricant: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Clare Short: No, I will not give way. May I proceed?

Mr. Streeter: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Clare Short: No, I certainly will not.

The reality is that during such an emergency, and every time, staff from our conflict and humanitarian affairs department commission emergency help on a daily basis from when the crisis begins. As we always do, we ask the Ministry of Defence as well as other providers what it has available. We then commission what is closest at the best price. I cannot see anyone advocating anything different—anyone with any sense, that is.

There was no financial ceiling on our available help. Indeed, the Treasury made it clear at ministerial and official levels that extra money was available if needed. In the early stages of such an emergency—for people in the mud in central America or on the top of trees or houses in Mozambique—it is the speed of response that saves lives.

Mr. Fabricant: Will the right hon. Lady give way on that point?

Clare Short: No, I will not give way.

In fact, 13,000 to 15,000 people were rescued in the early days from trees and roofs. Without the helicopters, perhaps half of them would have perished. The best thing that we did in this phase was to provide the money to keep the South African helicopters in the air, saving lives. The helicopters that came later have helped move supplies around and have been very valuable in the second stage of the emergency, but they were too late to help with search and rescue.

On 29 February, four days after the cyclone struck, we commissioned five further helicopters from southern Africa—they were the closest, so they could get there the fastest. Even they were too late to help with search and rescue, although of course they provided major help with the distribution of relief supplies. Those are the facts about saving lives and getting helicopters to Mozambique.

Mr. Hayes *rose—*

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West) *rose—*

Clare Short: On 29 February, we also sent two large aircraft containing 69 inflatable boats, 39 rafts, 20 Land Rovers, shelter material and 30 volunteer experts from our fire services and our life boat services. I have heard no one praise them. They are working there still today, and we should be proud of them.

We should be very proud that my Department has on standby firefighters, life boat experts, logisticians, health workers and other experts who will overnight drop everything and respond to an emergency anywhere in the world. We are entitled to be very proud of the generosity and expertise that is available in the United Kingdom and of the effectiveness of Department for International Development staff, who keep all such capacity up to date and on standby so that we can provide the help that is needed as emergencies arise.

Mr. Swayne: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Clare Short: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman, who asked a sensible question during International Development questions.

Mr. Swayne: I hope that the right hon. Lady will consider this a sensible question. While we are rightly proud of the contribution of those volunteers, we are concerned about the issue with the MOD. Why did she complain about the price that the MOD was charging for the helicopters?

Clare Short: Perhaps I should speak very, very slowly, in capital letters. When asked why we had not commissioned MOD helicopters, I explained that they were very expensive and would take quite a long time to get to Mozambique because they had to get from the UK down to southern Africa. We had alternatives that were closer and cheaper, so we commissioned those. That is the answer; that is what we did, and it was clearly the right thing to do.

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Clare Short: No, I am not giving way—the answer is clear. *[Interruption.]* There seems to be an awful lot of noise, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

A list is available of all the emergency help that has been provided to Mozambique, and it is being added to continuously. The House will see that my officials had been commissioning and sending help long before there was any media interest in the crisis in Mozambique, and that we will remain engaged after the media has moved on.

I should like to deal with the "someone ought to do something" criticism. Various people have produced articles suggesting that the disaster could or should have been prevented. Mozambique is used to floods and cyclones—they are regular events for the country. But the two events have not come at the same time, as in this emergency, since records began 50 years ago.

The first phase of the emergency began on 10 January with heavy rains in Mozambique, Botswana, South Africa and Swaziland, which caused flooding. Because of local topography, the flooding returns to Mozambique in a second stage, raising the water level. Flooding accelerated in early February when a number of rivers in Maputo and Gaza provinces burst their banks. By 10 February, 200,000 people were estimated to be affected, many of whom moved to emergency accommodation. During this phase the relief effort focused on delivering tents, sanitation facilities, shelters and basic survival items. From 11 to 16 February, we provided £1.1 million worth of such help through United Nations agencies and non-governmental organisations who were on the ground and able to help immediately.

Phase 2 started after 25 February and was the consequence of Cyclone Eline, which led to a massive tide of water, flooding rivers and bursting dams. Warnings went out to people to get to higher ground, but communications are poor in Mozambique, and a major flood crest surged down the Limpopo, Save, Buze and Inkomati rivers overnight on 25 February. Many people lost their lives, and large numbers of very poor people have lost everything—their homes, possessions, crops and animals—and are scattered in 87 formal and informal centres.

Mr. Fabricant: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Mr. St. Aubyn *rose—*

Mr. Hayes *rose—*

Clare Short: No.

The waters are going down. It looks increasingly as though there will not be flooding in the north, although that may be proved wrong as a danger remains that the Caborra Bassa will flood, and rain is still falling heavily even though the cyclone coming from the Indian ocean has turned and departed. We shall not be sure whether the north is safe from equally savage floods for another two or three weeks. We are now in the phase of the emergency in which we need to ensure that people have food, medical care, seeds and tools so that we can avoid more loss of life from hunger and disease. In many emergencies, more lives are lost in that second phase than in the first. We must help people to get back to their lands and rebuild their homes.

Obviously, rehabilitation will take time. At the weekend I announced a further £12 million worth of emergency assistance. The details of that help are outlined in the memorandum that we provided to the Select Committee, and it is available in the House.

Mr. Hayes: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Clare Short: I will. I hope that it is for the last time, but I realise that the hon. Gentleman has been trying to intervene.

Mr. Hayes: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady. We do not seek to challenge her good intentions. The debate is about her competence. Given the criticisms made of the co-ordination of our reaction after Hurricane Mitch, what plans did she make for disaster recovery, a rapid reaction force, and a strategy for crisis management? If such plans were in place, can we be made aware of it? Could the plans be laid before us so that we might study and debate them intelligently?

Clare Short: The hon. Gentleman and his hon. Friends have made so much noise during the debate that they have not heard the answer to that question. I have been telling the House what we have done, and I have outlined it in a memorandum to the Select Committee. UK performance and speed of response are honoured and respected across the world. It seems that the only people who do not respect it are the Opposition in the House of Commons, and that is very sad.

Mr. St. Aubyn: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Mr. Fabricant *rose—*

Clare Short: No, I will not.

As soon as possible, we must get back to development. Large numbers of lives are lost week in and week out in Mozambique as a result of the terrible poverty of that country. Life expectancy in Mozambique is 47 years. Between 30 and 40 per cent. of children are chronically malnourished.

We have already allocated £70 million to our development programme for the next two 2 years. The hon. Member for South–West Devon read out an article from *The Observer*. I know nothing of the supposed quotes in it. On Saturday, I authorised a statement to the Press Association, which simply described all that we had done and said—I amended it to say this, so there is no doubt about it—that we had already committed about £70 million for development efforts over the next two years. That remains the case.

Under pressure from the Select Committee, I am publishing our plans ahead of time in a way no previous Government have done. That does not mean that precisely that sum will be spent; obviously, funds are moved depending on effectiveness. The £70 million commitment, which I had already made public, as no previous Government ever would have done, remains, but funding can be increased if Mozambique can spend more over the next two years. As it is a very poor country with weak capacity, Mozambique has considerable reserves from debt relief that it has been unable to spend. We are committed to at least £70 million, but it will be more if the country needs more help.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Mr. Fabricant *rose—*

Clare Short: No.—*[Interruption.]* Hurricane Mitch has been referred to. The current fashion seems to be that when people are under the mud in Central America, we are asked for debt relief. That will not save lives. Debt relief is, however, important for reconstruction; that was the reference to central America.

On debt forgiveness, because Mozambique has been a star reformer, it received debt relief of £1.7 billion under the heavily indebted poor countries scheme—HIPC1. Under HIPC2, it will receive a further £250 million. The UK has made it clear that we will have a moratorium on payments in the meantime—just as we did in central America—before Mozambique qualifies for HIPC2; we shall then move to 100 per cent. debt relief. Under a UK initiative in the Paris Club yesterday, all countries have agreed to a moratorium on debt relief. Mozambique will not be required to pay debt relief anywhere in the world until it qualifies for enhanced HIPC. At that time, we hope that most countries will join us in moving to 100 per cent. debt relief.

Many people believe that the recent spate of disasters is the result of environmental degradation. The advice that I have received is that so far there is no evidence for that, but that, because larger numbers of people are living on more marginal lands or in inappropriate places, the human suffering resulting from natural disasters is growing exponentially. However, there is no doubt that global warming is taking place; it is predicted that that will cause more turbulence, so we can expect an increasing number of such disasters in the years to come.

[Clare Short]

We must, therefore, get the world's systems better prepared. For example, Bangladesh recently suffered its worst floods in 50 years, but there was little loss of life, because that country is now so well organised in coping with such disasters. However, floods in central America led to much greater loss of life because local organisations were not in place.

We have been working to improve the capacity of poor, disaster-prone countries to prepare and respond to disasters. For example, through a three-year programme with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, help is being given to national Red Cross and Red Crescent societies throughout the world to prepare countries to respond quickly to rapid-onset disasters. I have a copy of the document produced by the international federation if hon. Members are interested in the matter.

We are also working to strengthen international systems. Until about three years ago, the world's response to disasters was ad hoc. The unfortunate country suffering from a flood or an earthquake took its chances on whether its pleas for help were heard. It was pot luck whether countries received relief that suited their needs.

Lessons have been learned. Through my Department's partnership programme with UN agencies, such as the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs—I have a publication on the work of that organisation—the World Food Programme, UNICEF and especially the Red Cross, we have helped to set up much more systematic arrangements whereby information from a disaster is quickly assessed to produce a clear list of priorities to which donors can contribute. Contingency stocks of relief supplies and a worldwide network of experts can be made available at an e-mail's notice.

The UK is a major contributor to the UN disaster assessment and co-ordination system.

Mr. St. Aubyn: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Clare Short: No, I shall not.

That work needs to be strengthened and taken forward more rapidly. However, the House should know that the UK has been a leading country in work over the past three years—hon. Members should note the time scale—to strengthen disaster preparedness throughout the world.

In conclusion, the UK response to the floods in Mozambique was one of the speediest and most generous in the world. There was—

Mr. St. Aubyn: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Clare Short: No, I shall not, as I have made clear.

I repeat that there was no delay whatever in sending help to Mozambique because of our decision not to commission MOD helicopters. They came in expensively; they were far away; and we had cheaper and closer alternatives. There was no delay whatever. The thesis put by the hon. Member for South-West Devon is false.

Of course, much remains to be done to help Mozambique to recover from the disaster and to support the country's development. We have a large and growing programme in Mozambique and we shall be there for the long term. We need to redouble our efforts and those of the whole international system to improve disaster preparedness throughout the world—especially in countries subject to rapid-onset natural disasters.

I conclude by thanking the staff of my Department in London and in Maputo for their magnificent and continuing effort. I also thank—I hope on behalf of all of us—all the UK volunteers: the firefighters, the lifeboat experts, logisticians and members of our armed forces, who are working to help cope with the emergency.

Last but not least, I thank the British public for their generosity in responding to the appeal for Mozambique. We are entitled to feel proud of the spirit of generosity and concern that exists throughout our country. I am sure that the whole House will want to express its thanks to all who have worked so hard on our behalf to provide so much help to people in such desperate need in Mozambique.

Mr. Stephen Day (Cheadle): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I have listened to all the Secretary of State's speech because I thought that she might correct what was perhaps an inadvertent inaccuracy. In her brief history lesson on Mozambique, she told the House that it was the only non-British former colony to join the Commonwealth. In fact, on the same day that Mozambique joined the Commonwealth, the former French colony of Cameroon also joined. I would like the right hon. Lady to have the opportunity to correct—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. That is not a point of order for the Chair.

2.10 pm

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): The Liberal Democrats will not support the official Opposition's motion. In fact, in the course of the debate, my regard for the Conservatives has sunk to a new low.

Mozambique is one of the poorest countries in the world, but it has done well over recent years. It has been hit by a catastrophe in which 250,000 people have lost their homes, an unknown number are dead and children have been orphaned and in which malaria, diarrhoea and cholera are rampant. All that Her Majesty's official Opposition can do is seek to score cheap political points with this motion.

Mrs. Eleanor Laing (Epping Forest) *rose—*

Dr. Julian Lewis *rose—*

Dr. Tonge: I will not give way yet. Conservative Members have clearly missed the point. *[Interruption.]* If they stay in the Chamber, I shall explain why. When I was younger, I had methods for dealing with temper tantrums.

The official Opposition's approach has been destructive—business as usual, in other words.

Mrs. Laing: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Dr. Tonge: No, I will not give way until I am further into my speech.

The purpose of the debate should be to take a cool look at what happened, to see whether we can learn any lessons. I listened to the Secretary of State at a meeting

of the Select Committee on International Development on Tuesday. She admitted that the United Nations assessment team, which included two people from the Department for International Development, withdrew from Mozambique too early. That was a failure on its part. That was well reported on the website of Independent News World, and we read the report on the net.

Why did the United Nations quick response unit, along with two of our officials, withdraw too early? That is an issue that I would like to address. It must never happen again.

Clare Short: The press reports about our officials were inaccurate. British officials did not withdraw with the United Nations team, and my officials are upset by the report that they did. I did not like the way the reports suggested that the whole thing was the United Nations fault. We have a strengthening and improving UN system, and we need to learn from this experience so that we can strengthen it further. We should not just turn around and attack the UN when it is getting better at co-ordinating responses to such emergencies.

Dr. Tonge: I thank the Secretary of State for that response, but it is an issue that we need to consider carefully. We all remember poor Mr. Fish, the weather forecaster, denying that a hurricane was going to happen. Although the hurricane did a lot of damage, fortunately for us it did not do damage on the scale that has occurred in Mozambique. We must find ways to strengthen the forecasting of emergencies and to make sure that we know in advance what is going to happen.

Mrs. Laing: I thank the hon. Lady for her courtesy in giving way because, after all, this is a debate not a monologue. Does she accept that her opening remarks were not correct? Her Majesty's Opposition are seeking to do their job in holding the Government to account and making sure that the House and the Government learn from some of the mistakes that have been made. That will help to ensure that things are done better in future.

Dr. Tonge: If the hon. Lady listens carefully to my speech, I will teach her how best that can be done.

Mr. Robathan: Come on matron.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I think that we should get on to the main content of the debate. It is a very serious matter.

Dr. Tonge: Before we do that, I want to point out how easy it is in a disaster for people to do the wrong thing. That is a common human failing. Many years ago, I was a casualty officer in a London teaching hospital. I know that to be able to respond correctly to emergencies, one has to be extremely well trained and to have had lots of practice. Whether it is a small disaster or a large one, that is required. If I had a cardiac arrest here and now, most of you would rush around panicking and not know what to do. That might be a very good thing from your point of view and you might enjoy that very much—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady is not even using correct parliamentary language. I am sure that she will soon relate her remarks to what has happened in Mozambique.

Dr. Tonge: I will indeed, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but, if anything dreadful happened to me, I am sure that the Conservatives would blame it on the fact that the Secretary of State for Health was not sitting on the Front Bench.

From the evidence that I have heard, once DFID and the Secretary of State realised the full extent of the disaster, not even the Ministry of Defence's pricing policy, about which we have heard a great deal, slowed down the response. In fact, it speeded it up because the Secretary of State immediately looked for helicopters that were nearer. As we have heard, we had a much quicker and more efficient response, with helicopters funded by us but procured in South Africa.

The United Kingdom was in the forefront of the relief effort, at one stage funding nine out of 11 helicopters—and they were commissioned locally. We have prepared for the second stage of rebuilding shelters and distributing foods and medicines with our own equipment, which has started to go to Mozambique.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Dr. Tonge: No, I will not.

There are problems for us and for the world. We must look to the future. There is no question but that the United Kingdom and the international community must be able to respond to natural disasters more effectively. The pundits tell us that, with global warming, disasters will be more frequent. Many articles in the newspapers in recent weeks have been on that subject. Therefore, it is imperative that we establish not just a DFID rapid reaction force, but an international rapid response disaster task force.

Mr. Hayes: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Dr. Tonge: No, I wish to make a little progress.

That task force would ideally be based at the United Nations, but the European Union might be able to make a start.

Mr. Bowen Wells (Hertford and Stortford): Where was the European Union?

Dr. Tonge: Indeed. A rapid response task force would not mean having equipment standing by doing nothing while it waited for something to happen. It would mean that future Secretaries of State would know the location of the helicopters nearest to the disaster area and would know whether they could be commissioned. The Ministry of Defence would not take two days, as I believe it did, to discover that there were no usable UK helicopters less than 3,000 miles away. There would be no problem with funding, because that would be set according to a pre-determined formula.

Mr. Hayes: I was going to make a point in support of the hon. Lady, but perhaps she will answer the question that the Secretary of State failed to answer when I asked it. Following the criticisms of the co-ordination and the response to hurricane Mitch, what plans did the Secretary of State have to establish the sort of rapid reaction force that the hon. Lady has mentioned? She will know that a

[Mr. Hayes]

good response is about good planning. Our challenge to the Government is about their competence in emergency, disaster and recovery planning.

Dr. Tonge: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, because I was about to come to that point. Paragraph 52 of the strategic defence review, which is entitled "Peace Support and Humanitarian Operations", sets out the position clearly. It says:

> In a less stable world, we have seen more international operations of this type. The trends identified earlier suggest that this will continue. Britain will play its full part in such international efforts. At one end of the spectrum, this might involve logistic or medical support to a disaster relief operation.

In "Modernising Defence", the response to hurricane Mitch, to which the hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes) referred, is talked about in glowing terms. The Ministry of Defence describes its action in central America, where

> following the devastation wrought by Hurricane Mitch in October and November 1998 in some of the world's poorest countries, a Royal Navy task group led by NHS Ocean and with Royal Marines embarked, gave emergency life-saving assistance to Nicaragua and Honduras. We helped to search for and rescue people.

Mr. Blunt: One of the major issues in the debate is the MOD's involvement, and it is here that the Secretary of State's customary candour has got her into difficulty. Her Department made a decision about the £2.2 million cost, and then said that cost was not an issue when plainly it was an issue in making the decision about MOD helicopters. That may then have provoked her to look for other helicopters elsewhere, or she may already have been doing that, but that is an issue, as it was in the dispatch of the Fort George, a decision that was not made until 3 March.

Dr. Tonge: I am not here to answer for the Secretary of State for Defence; he will answer for himself. I have made the point that whatever occurred between the DFID and the MOD caused no delay whatsoever, and that is the important point.

Mr. Duncan Smith: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Dr. Tonge: No, I will not give way again. I want to make progress.

Funding is a difficult issue between Departments, and I hope, as I am sure all hon. Members do, that Departments would always protect their budgets. However, there is no time in an emergency to sort out budgets, and a formula must be worked out in advance.

There are other problems, such as that of heavy-lift equipment. The Conservatives seem to think that one can put helicopters in a box and send them out to Mozambique to arrive the next day. That is complete nonsense. We have a problem in moving heavy equipment, which the strategic defence review addressed, which delayed matters even further. I wish that the Conservatives would recognise that.

Such issues must be worked out as part of a plan. Why do we not consult our European partners now that the major crisis is over? A European defence review is taking place. Let us do an inventory of all the equipment in Europe and find out whether it can be used in an emergency, or is that too simple?

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I agree with what my hon. Friend has said so far. Does she agree that there is a particular problem in the Indian ocean region, in that it is not easily accessible by most European navies and air forces or by the Americans? Access is slightly different from the mediterranean, the Caribbean or west Africa. Should international action be taken to deal with the specific problems of the Indian ocean, east Africa and the Indian subcontinent?

Dr. Tonge: My hon. Friend makes a good point. The Indian ocean area is very isolated in terms of military equipment and help for disaster relief. If my memory serves me correctly, many parts of that area will be subject to flooding in future because of global warming. My hon. Friend is right to say that we need to consider that area in particular and ensure that help is available when it is needed.

Mr. Duncan Smith: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Dr. Tonge: No, I will not. I have given way many times and I have almost finished.

I would have thought that, without any international structures in place, the Ministry of Defence should have made an offer of help for Mozambique, rather than waiting to be asked.

Mr. Duncan Smith: Will the hon. Lady give way on that point?

Dr. Tonge: Just once, as the hon. Gentleman is so persistent.

Mr. Duncan Smith: The hon. Lady has now twice alleged that no delay was incurred and therefore no lives were lost, and then she said twice that the MOD was guilty of not responding in time. She said earlier that the MOD was asked for help on the Saturday but did not respond until the Monday. Does she know for certain that the answer to the question asked by DFID was not given on the Sunday?

Dr. Tonge: The hon. Gentleman had a very late night, and I will have to read his question in *Hansard* tomorrow to make head or tail of it. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) has just intervened on the hon. Lady, and he ought not then to start making comments from a sedentary position.

Dr. Tonge: Let us make sure that a United Nations or European Union rapid response disaster task force is in place the next time that a country needs us.

The third stage of the disaster in Mozambique is the country's reconstruction. In three weeks, the country has been set back 10 or more years. It has an estimated public debt of $6.4 billion. To its credit, our country has already announced total debt relief on all bilateral debt and export credit guarantees. There was good news from the Paris

Club yesterday that France and Italy are to reduce Mozambique's debt commitment to them by two thirds, which means that, in total, 40 per cent. of the country's debt will be wiped out. The remaining 60 per cent. is with the USA, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. In the medium and long term, can the Government assure us that they will do all in their power to ensure that Mozambique's debt commitment is wiped out?

When will the UK achieve the target of devoting 0.7 per cent. of gross national product to development? That figure fell under the Conservatives. They seem to have forgotten that in all the kerfuffle today, but it is another thing that they must be very proud of. Despite our economic success, progress is still too slow.

The British public have been as generous as ever in their response to the disaster in Mozambique. While the TV cameras are there, the money pours in, but once they have gone, people no longer see the need to contribute some of their income to people who have nothing. Who now remembers the famine in the Sudan? Hurricane Mitch has been mentioned, but it is rarely talked about. Who remembers the Turkish earthquake or Montserrat? It is no good our snatching new-born babies from trees in front of TV cameras if they are then left to suffer a slow and painful death from disease and starvation. We must do more for the developing world.

2.28 pm

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley): I was there. I was one of four hon. Members, including a Conservative Member, from the Select Committee, who visited Mozambique during the crucial period that we are discussing. I am sorry that Opposition bovver boys have left the Chamber in droves, because I should like them to hear the truth about what went on in Mozambique at that time.

We were supposed to go into Mozambique from Swaziland by road. We were unable to go in on Sunday 20 February because the weather was too bad and the road was already flooded, so we had to fly in over a vast area of the country, which looked like a great sea. It was impossible to say what was land and what was water.

I have listened to the criticisms made of my right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for International Development and for Defence, and I do not recognise the picture being painted by Conservative Members.

People in Mozambique were congratulating the British Government on their quick action and on the fact that they had tents and other emergency equipment on the ground during the time that we were there. We saw those supplies being taken off the ground by two helicopters that were working in rapid rotation, carrying the food and tents that had come from the United Kingdom to people who had been without food and shelter for four days.

While we were there, we met representatives of the aid agencies who were working on the ground, members of the Government of Mozambique, and the Prime Minister of Mozambique, who thanked the British Government for their rapid action and for the assistance that they were giving to the country.

I heard no criticism at all while I was in Mozambique. Everyone knows that I am not an apologist for the Government. If I have criticisms to make, I will make them. That is the honest truth: I did not hear any criticism while I was there.

Mr. Streeter: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way on an important point. Can she confirm that she left Mozambique on 24 or 25 February, and that the period that we have been discussing is primarily from Friday 25 and Saturday 26 February? That was when people were stranded up trees. What does she make of the comment by the spokesman for President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa, who said:

> In any case, the British have responded very late and almost grudgingly.

Was he wrong?

Ann Clwyd: I used a different quote in the Select Committee meeting the other day. I certainly did not see that comment in the speech. Given the knowledge that we gained while we were in Mozambique, I cannot believe that that criticism was made.

The aid agencies were obviously working under a great deal of stress, even during the period 20 to 24 February. There had already been extensive flooding in the country. When we arrived in Maputo, we were taken immediately by one of the aid agencies to see the damage to roads and houses and the flooded areas where poorer people lived in the city. People were already queueing at stand-pipes for water and living under extremely difficult conditions. That was before the period to which the hon. Gentleman refers. Flooding was already a problem in Mozambique when we were there.

We went to one of the briefing meetings held by the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs, which is an umbrella organisation responsible for co-ordination with Governments of host countries in disaster situations. We heard the representative from the Department for International Development, who at that time seemed to be co-ordinating the aid agencies. We also heard someone from South Africa, who was responsible for running the helicopters, speak about his situation. I came away from that meeting feeling that OCHA was extremely laid back. No sense of urgency was transmitted to me or to the hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan), who was also there.

If blame is to be apportioned, we must bear in mind that we all have the same aim—to bring relief to people who are hit by a crisis—and we want to do that better next time. We should look carefully at the role of OCHA.

We as a Committee visited OCHA in Geneva in December. We have our own view of how it operates. OCHA has been continually monitoring and reporting the situation in Mozambique since the rains started on 26 January 2000. Since that date, it has issued about 16 situation reports on the emergency.

Following the very heavy rains from 4 to 7 February, OCHA organised the five-member UN disaster and co-ordination team to Mozambique. One of the questions that I asked on the Select Committee and which I hope we will ask the OCHA representative next week is why OCHA withdrew its team at a particular moment. The first team's tour of duty ended, apparently, on 24 February. A second team was not dispatched to Mozambique until 29 February. That was a crucial period in the operation.

The Department for International Development was being told by people on the ground what was needed at a particular time. I believe that the Department was presented with a rather confused picture. It was not clear at various times what assets were needed, so DFID sent tents, clean drinking water and basic survival items. That is what was being requested at the time.

[Ann Clwyd]

Watching the two helicopters working, it was clear to us that they could not get the food and tents off the ground fast enough. They were working in rapid rotation, with 10 to 15 minutes between taking off and landing. They were not switching off the engines, but getting the food and tents stuffed into the helicopters straight away.

Why were not more helicopters taking part in the operation at that time? Why was the UN telling us that it was worried about the funding of the five helicopters that apparently were in Mozambique then? I believe that those five helicopters were funded by the Nordic countries. When DFID realised that there was a problem with the funding, it stepped in and agreed to fuel more aircraft the following week.

As soon as DFID knew what the problem was, it responded rapidly. It was OCHA that underestimated the gravity of the situation and left as the new cyclone came, at the key moment between 25 and 29 February, when people were at their most desperate, when people on roofs and up trees were being shown on film. That was when there was a gap in OCHA's coverage of Mozambique.

There were obviously failures in communication and in responsibility, but it is not fair to blame the British Government, who have done more than any other country to assist during the crisis in Mozambique. People on the ground said that. Oxfam, Christian Aid and the Save the Children Fund said so. We were there and we heard them say it, then we came home and heard my right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State heavily criticised, despite the fact that they had already responded as they thought appropriate at the time. That is grossly unfair.

I agree that the international response was slow. It was hesitant and unco-ordinated. However, the responsibility for co-ordination lay not with my right hon. Friends, but elsewhere. It is easy to say that the Government of Mozambique did not do enough. They were elected in December and started work in January, in one of the poorest countries in the world. It is not surprising that they did not respond in the way that some critics think they should have responded.

I pay tribute to the Red Cross and to Medecins sans Frontiers, which as usual were at the forefront of the response. To blame the Government of Mozambique is unfair. The infrastructure of the country was severely damaged and roads were cut off. We went 30 miles outside Maputo, and the road was not there any more. It was just a huge current and a vast expanse of water. People were coming out of the area with their possessions on their heads. I remember a man who came to me with a packet of biscuits which he had carried while trudging through half a mile of water. On the roadside, he offered me a biscuit. When I refused, he said, "Why not?" I said, "Because you have not eaten and I have."

Within a very short time I became aware of the great resilience and dignity of the Mozambique people. They are exceptional people to have pulled themselves up so rapidly after such a long civil war. They have played by all the rules and they saw their economy growing by 10 per cent. in the space of two years. I think that it was the only country in the world to see its economy grow in such a way. These are people of determination and resilience, who, I believe, can overcome the terrible tragedy that has hit them.

I am a great supporter of the United Nations, but as the members of the Select Committee on International Development will know, we have criticised the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in respect of Macedonia and Albania, whereas we congratulated the World Food Programme, which planned for and responded adequately to the crisis. As a result of our criticism of the UNHCR, some things have improved. When we see an agency not doing what it should do, it is useful to put some questions to those who represent it, and we shall be able to do so here next week.

The cyclone has destroyed roads, rails, schools and health centres. Thousands of people have no homes, thousands are in reception centres and thousands will be without food for a long time. Many people are looking for their relatives because they do not know whether they were lost in the floods or whether they are at a reception centre. There is much that will have to be done for Mozambique. The scale of immediate need is immense, with about 1 million people having left their homes and lost their livelihoods. Their food has gone, as has their crop of maize. Seeds and tools will be immediate needs once the land has dried out.

We must provide reconstruction aid swiftly to help rebuild Mozambique's infrastructure. The World Bank told us on the spot that it was prepared to give money for that purpose. I hope that all countries acknowledge the United Kingdom's lead in cancelling Mozambique's debt, which some other countries have followed.

In such circumstances, there are always many lessons to be learned. The international community must be able to give humanitarian assistance on time. That must be provided on the basis of need and not in the interests of media coverage. Similarly, political or economic interests should not be involved.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence has heard me say that I think that the military has an important role to play in these disasters. When I saw the military at work in Macedonia and Albania, I recognised that it soon brought order to considerable chaos. When we are talking about disaster preparedness, there is a need for institutions and response mechanisms that can adequately address the likelihood of an increasing number of similar emergencies in the coming decades.

The Government deserve a great deal of credit for assisting Mozambique. Perhaps things might have been done better in some instances and faster in others, but the UK was the lead country in bringing help to people faced with devastation and loss of life. Credit must be given where it is due.

2.44 pm

Mr. Bowen Wells (Hertford and Stortford): I am delighted to take up the remarks of my colleague on the Select Committee on International Development, the hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd), who speaks with the knowledge that she gained from the Committee's visit to Mozambique, Malawi, Zambia and South Africa. She knows what was going on. If matters had been left to my Committee, I am sure that we would have been able to advise the Secretary of State for International Development when we were in the area in the week of 20 to 24 February that helicopters were already needed and that there was a need for more.

Nobody can be happy about the loss of life in Mozambique. We do not know exactly what the figure is because we were not able to deploy sufficient helicopters

to get people to safety in the middle of an exceptionally large flood in the week of 26 February. Certainly the number of dead must run well into thousands. We must contrast that with the number of people who died in the equally exceptional flood that overtook Bangladesh only a year ago. There, we believe that only three lives were sacrificed. That is because Bangladesh has built up capacity both in its Government and non-governmental organisations, as has the international community, to anticipate floods and to get the right equipment into the right places at the right time to save people from the disasters that flooding can bring. That is not the position in Mozambique, and that is why there has been great loss of life.

We must turn to the calendar to address these matters sensibly and to recognise the problems to which the hon. Member for Cynon Valley has drawn attention. The rain began exceptionally late in the season in Africa. However, it started with exceptional severity. It must be remembered that it began between 10 and 26 January. That led inevitably to flooding in the Limpopo and Zambezi valleys in the central provinces of Mozambique.

We should have appreciated—I do not think that we did—that that rain flowing down the rivers after an exceptionally dry and hot period would lead inevitably to serious difficulties in and around Maputo in the Limpopo estuary. However, the Department for International Development understood the position. It knew that some homes would be flooded and got into position with tents, blankets and food so as to be ready to help people inundated by floodwater. The supplies were in place and being distributed when the Select Committee visited.

During the week of 20 February, helicopters had already been deployed by the South African Government. They were fuelled by Norway and the Netherlands because President Mbeki said that he did not have enough fuel. Only two of the helicopters had winches to take people off the top of trees and out of the floods. We heard that there was not enough fuel for the following week. The Secretary of State for International Development stepped in and provided the fuel to keep the five helicopters flying.

My only criticism is of the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs, which on 12 February deployed to Maputo. It wrongly assessed the situation and severely underestimated it. It should have asked the international community—I am sure that the Department for International Development would have responded quickly that week—for further helicopter reinforcements to stand by for the possibility of additional flooding.

I am speaking with hindsight, which is easy, but I think that OCHA made a wrong assessment, and certainly a miscalculation, when the main team left. After launching an appeal on 23 February, it went home on 24 February. The difficulties were therefore underestimated, and we could have got more helicopters in place and saved more lives if that assessment had been more accurate. That is not easy to do, but the criticism has to be made.

For a fortnight, five helicopters were working. They were reinforced in the following week by five more helicopters, which the Department for International Development chartered. Three had winches to help remove people from flooded areas where their lives were at risk.

We were a bit late, but we were there, and DFID was very supportive. Only South Africa put more into the disaster than the Department. That remains the case. The Department's financial contribution has well overtaken that of South Africa. That was the position until the floods began to abate and we needed to get more helicopters in place to save more lives.

Let us consider the Ministry of Defence, which was late in assessing the position. If I understood the evidence that the Secretary of State for Defence gave the Select Committee on International Development correctly, planning started as late as 28 February and then accelerated fast. As the Secretary of State for International Development said, the Department did not have helicopters that could have reached the crisis area in Mozambique in time to save lives in the last week in February.

The helicopters arrived in the Antonov on 5 March, and RFA Fort George reached Beira on 11 March. Those helicopters and that support will help with the third phase of reconstruction and avoiding the serious threat of death through disease such as cholera, and lack of shelter.

Mr. Hoon: The hon. Gentleman is making a careful and thoughtful case. I query only one point. When should the Ministry of Defence have begun the planning to which he referred?

Mr. Wells: The answer partly depended on the assessment of the United Nations Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs, but I would have hoped that, after the Ministry of Defence had realised that South African helicopters were deployed in the second week of February and that the South African armed forces knew that there was a crisis, it would have started planning. The Secretary of State sent out a recce party on his own initiative on 29 February. I should have liked it to have been sent a couple of weeks earlier.

Mr. Hoon: The hon. Gentleman is Chairman of the responsible Select Committee. Did he raise the matter with the Ministry of Defence, or any Minister?

Mr. Wells: No, at the time, I was visiting Mozambique, Zambia and Malawi with the hon. Member for Cynon Valley. I was therefore not in a position to raise those matters personally. It should have occurred to someone in the Ministry of Defence to consider ways of supporting the Department for International Development.

Mr. Duncan Smith: If that is my hon. Friend's view, does he believe that the Ministry's action depends on it being requested to make that calculation and devising a plan? In his opinion, at what stage was the Ministry asked to do that?

Mr. Wells: That question goes to the heart of the problem that I would like to consider so that we can react better next time. The Ministry of Defence should fulfil the second objective to which the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) referred and support the Department for International Development in deploying military equipment when a humanitarian disaster has occurred. Rightly, the MOD is being built up and has an

[Mr. Wells]

impressive helicopter capacity. However, that capacity is expensive and not tuned to working in difficult circumstances that require an immediate response.

Clare Short: Getting to the truth of the matter is important, and I respect the hon. Gentleman's attempt to do that. However, there were two stages of the emergency. The big floods did not happen until 25 February. People might have sent helicopters, but they were not needed in the early stages. They are expensive and when people had simply gone to higher ground, they needed help but not through helicopters. When the massive flood occurred, and people were trapped up trees and on roofs, helicopters were essential to rescue them. That necessity did not arise until after the big flood and cyclone Eline on 25 February.

Mr. Wells: As the right hon. Lady said, the highly dangerous period was between 25 February and the following week. As she knows, the helicopters, albeit only two with winches, from South Africa were working in the previous week to rescue people. We should have deployed earlier. However, that depended on the assessment that had been made. That assessment was not available to the Secretary of State for International Development, or the Secretary of State for Defence.

Mr. Blunt: We have military and air attachés in South Africa. In that period, they must have reported the deployment of the South African air force. That should have triggered some form of planning in the Ministry of Defence. Perhaps the Secretary of State can outline the telegram traffic from South Africa and say whether the defence attaché reported on it and what action the Ministry took.

Mr. Wells: That is the point that I am trying to make. The South Africans deployed their helicopters in the previous week and, as the hon. Member for Cynon Valley described, were beginning to rescue people because the floods were continually rising. The crisis happened the following week. The Secretary of State for International Development was right to say that we had to get the helicopters there in a hurry and that we hired five additional helicopters as well as fuelling the South African helicopters.

The Ministry of Defence must be in a position to carry out its military and humanitarian tasks. There is a difference. The operation must be cost-effective. The MOD cannot make a military deployment and ask DFID to pay for it. As I understood the evidence that was given to the Select Committee, the military deployment involves a huge amount of support staff. The figure was 100, but the original suggestion was that 140 people would service two or three helicopters. The South African deployment had 10 support staff. As the Secretary of State for International Development told the Committee, all those people get in the way and need to be accommodated. They also need to have jabs before their departure from the United Kingdom to fulfil Ministry of Defence rules and regulations about deployment of personnel. All those matters delay deployment and add to the cost.

A problem has haunted the Ministry of Defence for 20 years. At base, it is a Treasury problem. When there is no emergency, officials and Ministers need to agree a price for deploying military equipment in a humanitarian emergency. The calculations suggested to the Select Committee were absurd in a time of crisis. The Department for International Development needs to know where it stands and how much a helicopter costs before it asks the Ministry of Defence to intervene. We need to establish, both in this country and worldwide, a rapid reaction force to tackle humanitarian disasters and I support the suggestions of the hon. Member for Richmond Park.

In giving evidence to the Select Committee, the Secretary of State for International Development also said that we are too slow to organise ourselves internationally, and that OCHA is too slow to react. We have to put money in place to enable those agencies to take command because things can change when people take command. When the OCHA representative arrived on 29 February, he began to sort things out and made what was required clear to Ministry officials, who could then react much more quickly. That is now happening.

De-mining, and the reconstruction of roads, schools and hospitals, all of which have been lost, need to take place as rapidly as possible as the floods recede. I pay great compliment to the military personnel and the non-governmental organisations undertaking that difficult work. People have been displaced from their farms in their hundreds of thousands and they have to be helped back to plant their crops. They must be given seed, fertiliser and every assistance with planting so that they do not starve in the coming year. All the personnel of the RFA Fort George—who are well equipped to help with that in the Beira area and are, I understand, moving south to the River Save—will add hugely to Mozambique's ability to recover from this terrible disaster. They should be thoroughly congratulated and thanked for keeping Britain's name at the forefront of those who are willing and able to assist in these terrible tragedies.

3.1 pm

Mr. Tony Worthington (Clydebank and Milngavie): It is a pleasure to follow the previous three speakers, who work from the basis of knowledge. They have respect for the people of Mozambique and have considered how the crisis developed. It is an enormous tribute to the Secretary of State and the Department for International Development that we expect it to be a world leader and top of the class in a former Portuguese colony more than 5,000 miles away.

Let us consider the chronology—I shall try to omit issues that have already been covered—which is of course easy to do with hindsight. However, no one has told me what will happen in Mozambique next week, which is what we need to know. The problem has not gone away and the rumours are that more rains are to follow. Remember, this is not a Mozambique problem, but a regional problem for southern Africa. When I was there with the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells)—the Chairman of the International Development Committee—and my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd), the concerns were the floods in South Africa and the suffering in Botswana. When we came back, we found out about the events in Madagascar. We did not know that the situation would be as it is in Mozambique, but we had to try to prepare for it.

Everyone is obsessed with helicopters, but they are not the issue. People on the ground who died from cholera or malaria or from starvation are just as dead as people who drowned in the trees. Far more people were in danger on the ground than up trees and we had to respond to that. Remember, the press went to Mozambique not because of the catastrophe, but because of the pictures that they could take. They had never had to photograph people in danger in trees before, so that was news, but the danger for the people of Mozambique—malaria, dysentery, cholera and diarrhoea—was on the ground. That was the crisis to which we had to respond and we did so.

The problem occurred on about 10 February. UNICEF appealed for $1.2 million. What did we do? Immediately, we were there with $400,000. Switzerland provided $65,000 and Norway $100,000. The Government wanted $2.7 million and we were in there with clean water, materials for schools, cooking utensils and tents. There was no call for more helicopters at that time. The UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the UN Disaster Assistance Committee said that the problem was fuel—the South African helicopters would run out by 20 February. What did we do? We provided the fuel, which was the right thing to do.

UNDAC wanted boats. What did we do? DFID sponsored a team of 38 people and 100 boats and life rafts from the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, United Kingdom fire and rescue services and the International Rescue Corps. We were asked for boats and we provided them because that was right at the time. Those were the first groups to go in from the outside world. By 18 February, responding to the assessed need on the ground, the United Kingdom and DFID had given and delivered twice as much as any other country to meet the threats of starvation and dysentery. That is financially and statistically correct, and that was our early reaction.

As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said, on about 25 February the receding threat increased as flooding reoccurred. According to OCHA, the priority need from about 25 to 26 February was to rescue stranded people by air. That is when OCHA said that helicopters were the priority. I would like the hon. Member for South–West Devon (Mr. Streeter) to tell me whether I am wrong: according to the World Food Programme, three days later—after 26 and 27 February—there were 14 helicopters flying in Mozambique. Seven were from South Africa, fuelled by us, and seven, provided from local sources, were hired by OCHA. Is that correct?

Mr. Streeter: How many helicopters had winch capacity and the ability to lift people off trees?

Mr. Worthington: I do not know the answer, but it was given earlier by others. There were 14 helicopters, some with winches, flying and delivering food. Food can be delivered without winches and every one of those helicopters was supported by DFID. I shall resume my seat to allow the hon. Gentleman to tell me whether that is correct.

Mr. Robathan *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Has the hon. Member for Clydebank and Milngavie (Mr. Worthington) finished his speech?

Mr. Worthington: No, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I take it that I am correct. One country—the United Kingdom—was responsible for every helicopter flying in Mozambique at that time. The rest of the world community failed to find or fund helicopters, which is extraordinary, and we funded the 14 in the air. That number rose to 50, and we have added four Puma and four Sea King helicopters to what we provided earlier. We are now responsible for the funding of 22 helicopters, because of DFID.

We intimated that we would make available substantial money for the poverty reduction programme in Mozambique and gave the lead on bilateral debt cancellation. I should like to hear from the Conservatives again. Does the hon. Member for South–West Devon agree that the leadership on cancellation of bilateral debt came from the United Kingdom?

Mr. Robathan *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I call Mr. Robathan.

Mr. Worthington *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Clydebank and Milngavie must not keep jumping up and down. If nobody is seeking to intervene on him, the Chair is entitled to assume that he has finished his speech and call another speaker.

Mr. Worthington: Thank you for that guidance, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I like to give hon. Members the chance to contradict what I am saying, but I note that they have not done so. We have given, and other countries are following us on bilateral debt cancellation.

The response by other organisations was not as good as it should have been, and two of them in particular should examine their performance. No one says that it is an easy job. Since October 1999 there have been 30 natural disasters world wide, many of which hon. Members will not have heard about, and with which OCHA dealt in an unspectacular way. For example, not many people know about the snowstorms in Mongolia, but that was a natural disaster with which OCHA dealt. Its job is to play the leading role in the co-ordination of international emergency assistance following natural disasters. One can see from the early OCHA press releases and bulletins that it did not play that role in the early stages of the Mozambique emergency. It was only when Mr. Ross Mountain visited the area on 29 February that the quality of the response started improving. OCHA should have played a leading role in identifying the need for helicopters and getting them to the area.

There was a need also for heavy-lift planes—which has been shown in emergency after emergency—but the western world again failed miserably. Why did the MOD have to go to a Russian commercial concern to hire an Antonov to transport helicopters? Where were NATO and the Americans with their heavy-lift facilities? After all the fuss, suddenly six C130 aircraft have been made available. The key aircraft is the C17, which can move anything, but none has been operating. We should ask the

[Mr. Worthington]

Americans and NATO why facilities to transport helicopters and other goods cannot automatically be made available.

Mr. Streeter: I can now tell the hon. Gentleman that, of the 14 helicopters flying in the second week, only five had winch facilities. Does the hon. Gentleman think that was enough?

Mr. Worthington: Of course not. The ideal would be 14 helicopters with 14 winches—but while the UK found 14 helicopters, the rest of the world found none. As in Macedonia and Albania, a UN organisation failed to lead in the initial stage of a crisis. In the case of Macedonia and Albania, UNHCR failed to provide leadership at an early stage and it has accepted our criticism. Authoritative leadership was not evident either in OCHA.

ECHO is the European Union's alleged emergency response body in respect of humanitarian affairs. I say, as a supporter of the EU, that ECHO has to sharpen its act. ECHO did not feature, as a co-ordinating body, in any of the bulletins and statements about who was doing what in Mozambique. At an early stage, ECHO gave 1 million euros in an unspecified way—just cash, which was not a sensible thing to do. It should have worked with OCHA and other bodies to get the money to where it was needed immediately, for a specific purpose.

At the end of February and beginning of March, European Commissioner Poul Nielson visited the area; suddenly, aid of 25 million euros was to be made available. That response was inadequate because the money would not have gone to Mozambique. It may only arrive there months after the crisis began. Those two organisations ought to examine their performance.

I am proud of the role that DFID played and of the UK's improved response to emergencies. I remember the promise of aid to Somalia by the Minister at the time. Eight months later, that aid had not turned up. It was alleged that it had reached Somalia but it was stuck in a warehouse in Mombassa. Throughout the whole of 1995, no Government Minister made a statement about Ruanda. We stood on the sidelines during the worst humanitarian disaster of recent times. The then Government's response was to turn their back on Ruanda and pretend that disaster was not happening.

We have now a first-rate Department, brilliantly led, with a co-ordinated response that is leading the world. I am proud of that.

3.15 pm

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for calling me a second time. I do not agree with everything that the hon. Member for Clydebank and Milngavie (Mr. Worthington) said, but I am the fourth member in a row of the Select Committee to speak. It is a dreadful Committee because there is a depressing amount of consensus among its members. We all get on well together. When everybody agrees in politics, usually something is terribly the matter.

I first visited Mozambique in 1974, before the Portuguese revolution. The Government of Mozambique are doing a good job but it is patronising to say, "Poor things. They went to the Soviet Union and returned with a Marxist-Leninist policy that they pursued to terrible effect from 1974 until the mid-1980s." Those concerned must share responsibility. They are adults. We must not patronise them. Machel and his Government were dreadful, whatever was done by Renamo—who was equally dreadful.

I visited Mozambique with the hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) in the first phase of the floods, which were described as the worst for at least 50 years. We saw terrible devastation, including the only proper road north completely taken away. The railway lines—the lifeblood for moving goods around the country—were covered in sand or had been washed away, but we also saw astonishing resilience among the people of Mozambique. They are used to flooding, which is part of the natural scheme of things for them. When the land floods, it becomes much more fertile. This time, the inhabitants had lost their homes and roads but there was still remarkable resilience, to which I pay tribute.

After we left, the situation grew very much worse. We have all seen the dreadful pictures and I will not dwell on them. I agree with the Secretary of State that there is anecdotal evidence of global warming. El Niño—or the girl child, as they call it—has brought terrible devastation. There have been droughts in Zimbabwe and Kenya; now there is flooding worse than in living memory or on record. That matter should be debated at length at a later date.

We met the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Mozambique, who were both, in my opinion, good people; but when we interviewed the Secretary of State it was depressing to learn that medium-lift helicopters were already available for charter in-country. I blame the Government for much but not for failing to know about that before the Government of Mozambique did. The capacity in Mozambique is limited and the necessary structures do not exist. Nevertheless, the Government of Mozambique must take responsibility. There has been much criticism of that country's president for flying over the disaster area and not doing anything but, in general, I will be onside with the Government of Mozambique.

Zimbabwe, next door to Mozambique, has a large helicopter fleet in its armed forces. I am not sure how many helicopters it has but I understand they number at least 24, of which three were available for dealing with flooding in Zimbabwe and two for ferrying the press and the president around—while the remainder were engaged in fighting a particularly unpleasant war in the Congo. Again, I deplore cross-party consensus, but there is clearly a problem—a problem that needs to be sorted out—when a Government with such a tragedy on their doorstep can waste money and lives by causing disruption in another country.

Mr. Wells: Malawi, which has two helicopters, gave 50 per cent. of its helicopter force to help in the emergency.

Mr. Robathan: I did not know that, but it is a good point.

South Africa was doing well in this regard—it was South African helicopters that we saw initially—although it threatened to stop flying them because it did not have the necessary funds. South Africa is a poor country, although not everyone there is poor, especially gold miners—at least, Anglo-American gold miners.

The Secretary of State will be astonished to learn that I support the Department's long-term contribution to combating poverty in Mozambique. I admire the work that we saw there—although we could not see it all because we could not fly north. I welcome the support given to the HALO trust. At the risk of destroying the trust's standing with the Secretary of State, I must tell her that I am a trustee. I hope that that will not influence her decisions when she is allocating money. The trust is the largest de-mining organisation in the world, and is doing enormously good work in Mozambique and elsewhere.

Mr. Roger Gale (North Thanet): Like my hon. Friend, I visited Mozambique fairly recently—just before Christmas. The problem of mines is impressed graphically on anyone who goes there: evidence of maiming and death is all around. I agree with my hon. Friend that the Secretary of State has done very well, but when I questioned her a couple of weeks ago and suggested that the floods would have moved the remaining land mines, making agriculture dangerous, she appeared to dismiss my suggestion.

Does my hon. Friend agree that there is a role for our sappers in the aftermath of the floods? Could they not speed up the process of de-mining and establish where the mines are now?

Mr. Robathan: I raised that issue with the Secretary of State for Defence on Tuesday. I think there is a role for the sappers, and I suspect that they would enjoy the training, if they did not all catch malaria.

Clare Short: I hope that I did not dismiss the question asked by the hon. Member for North Thanet (Mr. Gale). I said that we had been asked by the Mozambique Government to clear Zambesia province, and that it was virtually clear and unaffected. HALO, in fact, led on that. A United Nations team is currently trying to identify the areas to which the mines have moved. We tend to use the trust because it contains a number of former military personnel, and we can use it more flexibly and more cheaply than we could use our armed forces.

Mr. Robathan: I think everyone would agree that there is a problem with mines, which has been exacerbated by the floods. Those of us who have seen pictures know that huge chunks of land have been washed away, and on the land were some anti-personnel mines.

I also support—this is awful—the Department's work with institutions, particularly its work with customs out there. I thought that that was very positive.

We met two former Army officers, Gilbert Greenall and someone called, I believe, Howard-Williams. They were working for OCHA; they were civilians, but had been drafted in as replacements by the Department. Notwithstanding what was said by the hon. Member for Clydebank and Milngavie, they seemed to be doing very well and to be creating some co-ordination in the face of what might otherwise have been chaos. The work of the Department's personnel based in Maputo also struck me as positive and sensible. I congratulate those personnel—it would be too easy to allow them to be blamed when others are accused.

I pay a depressingly traditional but nevertheless heartfelt tribute to the military personnel—particularly those in the RAF—who are doing what certainly appears to be a very good job. Having served in the forces, I know that most of the personnel would have been longing to get out there. They are very keen to help, like the South African airmen we saw. I am delighted that helicopters and boats are now in the regions.

Helicopters, however, will remain an issue for some time—weeks, perhaps months—until the infrastructure is repaired. Although we may not be rescuing people from trees, there are no roads, so stuff cannot be shifted by lorry; any movement of goods must be by air. Mozambique will need a great deal of help in rebuilding its infrastructure, its economy and its agriculture.

There is a problem in the Government's reaction to the crisis—a problem relating to joined-up government. The Secretary of State is a genial and well-meaning person, but those of us who were in the Chamber to hear her speech detected a definite problem between her and the Minister for the Armed Forces. I understand that the problem goes back a long way; there may be some personal antipathy.

Clare Short: I saw the reports in the press as well. They are entirely untrue. I said in my speech that we had been in touch with the MOD, and that it had said that it had no assets within 3,000 miles. I think that my hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces expressed surprise at that, but there was no difference between us. We would have discussed the matter, but my hon. Friend had to speak in the Chamber.

The fact that reports appear in the press does not mean that they are correct. There has been no argument of any kind between my hon. Friend and me—that is the truth.

Mr. Robathan: I understand that on the streets of Birmingham people say that there has always been antipathy between the Secretary of State and her hon. Friend, going back to left-wing problems in the days when the right hon. Lady may have been of a slightly different political hue. However, the right hon. Lady has denied the reports and I do not question her integrity—although I note that she was quoted in a newspaper a couple of weeks ago as saying, "I can speak out in Cabinet, but the penalty is that I am not allowed to speak out in public as a result."

Clare Short: That is my ministerial responsibility.

Mr. Robathan: Indeed, but—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I have already had words with hon. Members about sedentary comments.

Mr. Robathan: I was intending to make a point about one or two of the things the Secretary of State said earlier.

As my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter) pointed out, the amount of aid appears to be falling. I hope that the Secretary of State will be able to tell us that it is not falling from a proposed £76.5 million to £70 million over the next two years.

The real crisis in Mozambique has nothing to do with flooding; it is to do with HIV and AIDS. The black death is stalking Africa, at least sub-Saharan Africa. I know that the Secretary of State is aware of that, because her Department does a great deal.

[Mr. Robathan]

Thousands have been killed in the floods. Mozambique has a population of more than 18 million, of whom probably 4 million are infected with HIV, although it is difficult to tell.

Dr. Tonge: The black death was, in fact, the bubonic plague, which stalked Europe in mediaeval times. If the hon. Gentleman was referring to the colour of the skins of people who suffer from AIDS, let me remind him that the disease affects those of all colours.

Mr. Robathan: I am rather surprised by that intervention. I think the analogy with the black death is very valuable, because this disease is likely to have the same impact on sub-Saharan Africa as the black death had in Europe in the 14th century. As the hon. Lady must know, Africans, regrettably, have been particularly susceptible for a number of reasons. That is well known. If she does not want to call it the black death she can call it something else, but I think that "black death" is an emotive and analogous description.

Approximately 4 million people in Mozambique will probably die of HIV/AIDS in the next five or six years, and the rate is increasing. We have inadequate data, but the infection rate is horrendous. We do have data for 1994 and 1996. In Maputo and Chimoio, both rates doubled—to nearly 20 per cent. in Chimoio. If that can happen in two years, God knows what the situation is now. As the Government know, the position is similar in Mozambique.

Why is the rate rising to such an extent? Access to health care in inadequate. It is hopeless as there is no infrastructure to convey it to people. The provision of drugs is not the main problem, although such supplies would be helpful. The main problems are ignorance, resistance to condom use for a number of reasons and astonishing promiscuity, linked with poor hygiene and a high rate of sexually transmitted disease. It is behaviour that needs to change. Education is desperately needed in that regard.

Elsewhere in Africa, the situation is also extremely bad. I shall not go into all the details, but this is a problem that the world must face. It is so enormous, however, that the world is turning its back on it.

The impact has a disproportionate effect on key members of society, such as teachers and doctors who have travelled more. The result is schools without teachers and hospitals without doctors. *[Interruption.]* I notice that there is certain amount of pressure on me to sit down. It is a responsibility of the indigenous Governments, but it is important that we direct our response more towards that enormous crisis than towards anything else. Millions there will be affected by that, whereas the flooding crisis is, proportionately, affecting very few.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): I call Mr. Iain Duncan Smith—*[Interruption.]*

3.30 pm

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for not being ready to rise. I was expecting you to call someone else.

I pay fulsome tribute to the volunteers and members of the armed forces whom the Secretary of State mentioned. Conservative Members pay tribute to them for their hard work and the physical risk that they run. They are saving lives and no one is shooting at them, but that does not mean that, during those dangerous activities, they may not lose their own life.

This is not a witch-hunt. I wish to make it clear—the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter) seems to have been taken wrongly by the Secretary of State—that the objective is to figure out what went wrong, so that lessons can be learned and so that, next time, it is possible that things can go right.

The hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) made a typically knowledgeable speech and raised some important points. She said that, in almost all these circumstances, the military has a big role to play. I agree. With operations of that scale, it is almost inconceivable that a national effort will not at some stage involve the military, at least discussing with it how to run the operation.

The lesson that the hon. Lady mentioned is that some things could have been done better. She said that Britain had taken the lead. If we look at the figures on the amount of aid, there is no question but that Britain is the most significant player in Mozambique. No one criticises that. We are all saying that that badge of honour should be worn by this country. Had the whole operation stopped in the early stages, there is no question but that it would rightfully have been worn by the Government, but that is not the whole question.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells), the Chairman of the Select Committee on International Development, made a good speech. He said "We were a bit late, but we were there." That is not a bad comment, but some of the real criticism stems from the fact that we were a bit late, certainly in the second half of the operation.

My hon. Friend maintains—I am interested in the matter—that helicopters were needed at least from 20 February. The Secretary of State for International Development probably agreed with that, although I did not hear her say it. My hon. Friend said that the early response was good. Again, I believe that that is important. The question is about the second half of the whole project: how good was that? He was right to say that OCHA should be criticised for leaving the area early, given what happened after it went.

My hon. Friend said that it was a Treasury problem. There is something in that. He was critical of the MOD. I am not entirely in agreement. I do not fully agree that it bears even 50 per cent. of the blame; I think that it bears far less, if any.

The hon. Member for Clydebank and Milngavie (Mr. Worthington)—I think that that is how the constituency is pronounced. *[Interruption.]* My apologies, I did not know how to pronounce it. It is not as bad as the pronunciation of my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies), who persists in mispronouncing Scots names.

Mr. Worthington: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Duncan Smith: I will not.

The hon. Gentleman dealt with the early part and glossed over the later critical period. He dealt with the early aid in detail and said that it was well done but,

when he got to the critical bit about the MOD's involvement and what happened, he quickly glossed over that. I do not criticise him for doing that—I would if I were sitting on the Back Benches—but that is not the whole answer.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan) talked about communication problems and said that there should have been better communication between the Departments. I agree. He is fundamentally right. I was in the area at the time that Samora Machel was—I am tempted to say it—on the throne in Mozambique. As we all know, the running of the country at that stage was a complete and unmitigated disaster. Obviously, a number of parties bear responsibility for that.

Much of what we see is a result of that, but we also need to ask what happened to those from Zimbabwe. Where were they? The answer is that they were fighting a war somewhere, probably protecting their president's investments in another country. The shame that they carry is the shame that happens when people get their priorities wrong. I hope that they sort that out in due course.

Questions arise; that is the key point. The Secretary of State for Defence should answer some specific questions. The problem is that the impression is that the Secretary of State for International Development and the Defence Secretary did not engage in conversation or discussion about the matter at an early enough stage.

I place most of the blame for that on the Secretary of State for International Development, because I do not think that she grasped the significance of the MOD from the outset. It behoves her to contact the MOD and to say that it is required. If she had said after the Thursday Cabinet meeting just before the weekend in question, "Come over here. What can we do? What can you do for me? What options are there on the table?", I have no doubt that the MOD would have responded immediately with a range of options. That is the nature of the MOD, but it was not asked those questions. That is the key issue.

For example, we have the wonderful mess over exactly when the Department for International Development was meant to have contacted the MOD. I read with great interest the verbatim account of the Select Committee proceedings. Mr. Holden, the official, was asked when the contact happened. He said:

> I think it was 25/26th at about 8 o'clock at night.

There is the problem, because we are not certain even when the MOD was contacted. The MOD's version was different. It said that it was

> On Saturday 26 February at around 2 o'clock,

so we have a difference of a day. No one seems to have a record of exactly when the Department contacted the MOD.

The other important point is that the Department asked the wrong question. It seems that the only question that it asked the MOD was: "What have you got in the area?", to which the answer came, "What we have is 3,000 miles away and is on board a ship." That is a straight answer to a straight question. I have no criticism of that. Surely the question should have been, "What could you do to project helicopters down to Mozambique to put in some support?" Had the Department asked that question, it might have got a responsible answer, but it did not.

Another question is, exactly when was the Secretary of State informed about the answer from the MOD? She said:

> that was my understanding from advice that I received from the Ministry this morning—[*Official Report*, 28 February 2000; Vol. 345, c. 23.]

However, she told the Select Committee:

> The answer on the Saturday was that they—

the MOD—

> had nothing within 3,000 miles.

If the Department knew on the Saturday that the ship, which may have been available, was 3,000 miles away, why did it not decide, there and then, whether it required it to be moved? Had it taken the decision then, the ship would have been on station pretty close to the time that the Department finally had to ship the helicopters down for the following weekend. That is the key point. Early information was there, but nothing was done.

Then we got into the unseemly dispute about money. Again, it is unseemly for the MOD to have to go into a bidding war with the Department for International Development over how much the operation could cost, but we have to be slightly fair to the MOD—I know that the Secretary of State will be worried by that comment: such operations cost money. What the figures are is a secondary issue. The MOD said that it would cost so much. The Secretary of State simply noted that and walked away.

A decision should have been made at that point—if money was not available, why did not Ministers immediately get on the telephone to the Prime Minister or to the Chancellor and say, "This is the problem. This is what it will cost to deal with it, but the Department cannot afford it. Can we cover that cost?"? Perhaps the Secretary of State for Defence himself could have done that. The point is that DFID Ministers knew that they could do that. The Ministry of Defence offered them an option, but they did not take it. That is the reality, as shown by the evidence.

The Prime Minister must have known about the situation the week before the problems became apparent. Although I appreciate that Thursday Cabinet meetings now last for only about 20 minutes—the Prime Minister does not need to know what everyone in Cabinet thinks, because he thinks it for them—the Prime Minister must have already known about the situation. He must also have approved plans for Britain to start taking serious action in Mozambique.

The Prime Minister was supposed to be taking a direct interest in the matter, but where was he in dealing with the subsequent problems? Why did he not say, "Pack up the arguments. Here's the solution—send the helicopters. That is what you're going to do." I suspect, however, that no one even bothered to contact him about that, and his advisers did not want him involved in it because it was looking a bit nasty and shabby. There was no Executive decision-making.

I believe that the MOD was more sinned against than sinning in the matter. Eventually, the Department was asked for information. The Department provided that information, but there was no response to it until it was too late. DFID bears very much of the blame for that delay. Let us not beat around the bush: for three to four days, there was delay in which no decisions were taken on what to do.

[Mr. Duncan Smith]

I should also like to know from the Defence Secretary—as the Minister for the Armed Forces is sitting on the Treasury Bench next to him—whether the spat between the Minister and the Secretary of State for International Development that occurred during the statement by the Secretary of State for International Development on Monday 28 February was caused by the fact that DFID had probably already received a list of options from the MOD, although DFID had not directly requested those options? On Monday 28 February, was not DFID provided with those options, which were developed by the Minister for the Armed Forces? DFID must have received the options. If it had not received them, it could not possibly have asked questions, on Tuesday 29 February, about the figures.

Mr. Robathan: My hon. Friend may be right in his analysis of events, but I think that the delay occurred partly because of the personal antipathy—which has been denied—between the Minister for the Armed Forces, the hon. Member for Warley (Mr. Spellar) and the Secretary of State for International Development, and partly because of the Labour party's history in Birmingham. Although the Minister for the Armed Forces says that such an antipathy is rubbish, in the Birmingham Labour party, they talk of little else.

Mr. Duncan Smith: My hon. Friend has made that point absolutely clear.

As my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Devon and hon. Members on both sides of the House have said, if the Secretary of State for International Development wants to think of this inquiry into the matter as a witch hunt and to take it personally, she may do as she pleases. However, we have to know what went wrong. The buck must stop with her if the Government had decided that Mozambique was a priority; if DFID chose not to tell the Secretary of State the answers that it received from the MOD; and if the MOD provided requested information, but that information was not acted on. She can delegate as much as she likes, but, ultimately, delegation is only an extension of the responsibility of the person at the top—she is the person who makes the final decision.

Far too often, the Secretary of State for International Development was kept out of the loop. Therefore, far too often she failed to take a timely decision. Surely she could have asked the MOD earlier for a range of options, and it would have provided it. I do not believe that the MOD should automatically present such options. If she really thought that she needed some options, she should have asked for them earlier, so that she could have acted more quickly.

As my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Devon said, DFID tried to get out of the situation by spin, counter-spin and re-presenting the sums that it would pump into Mozambique. Again, however, it was only a silly game in which DFID tried to gain credit, whereas the Department was without credit in the matter.

Today, all we heard from the Secretary of State was a history lesson, followed by an appalling geography lesson, yet we want to know the real lessons to be learned. Had those lessons been learned earlier, it could have saved the lives that were lost because of delay.

3.45 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): I should like to start by making some straightforward, but fundamental points which are relevant to the debate, not least because there has been a complete contrast between the two speeches by the Opposition Front Benchers and every other speech in the debate.

The hon. Members for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter) and for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) have failed to get any hon. Member, even any other Conservative Member, to speak in support of their motion. Neither the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells) nor the hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan) spoke to the motion, but I leave that to the internal management of the Conservative party to resolve.

The fundamental points are these. First, the United Kingdom's contribution to the relief effort in Mozambique has been, and continues to be, a success. Both military and civilian personnel are making a real difference there.

Secondly, there has been no dispute between the Department for International Development and the Ministry of Defence in putting that contribution together. The two Departments have worked together to ensure that, as the crisis developed, the United Kingdom's response was, at each stage, the most appropriate and most effective available.

Thirdly—despite much media excitement, and the forlorn efforts of the hon. Member for South–West Devon to generate some excitement in this debate—there was no question of haggling over costs at the expense of delivering the assistance required. It is entirely right and completely consistent with the practice of previous Governments that the Department with the policy lead should make the judgment about how best to allocate the available resources.

Given the nature of the debate, I shall try to set out the sequence of events in some detail. The House has heard from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development that her Department was involved in the flood relief efforts in January, from the moment that they began. That has been confirmed by my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) in an excellent, thoughtful and well-considered speech. I thank her particularly for her comments on the contribution made by the armed forces.

A massive surge of water, over the weekend of Saturday 26 February, caused the situation to deteriorate still further. Although further flooding had been anticipated, its sheer scale took everyone by surprise, including, of course, the people of Mozambique. It would also have taken the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford by surprise. I was a little surprised that he criticised the Ministry of Defence for failing to plan before that date, because at no stage when I gave evidence to the International Development Committee did he raise that matter with me. Moreover, the criticism that he made dealt with a completely different time frame from the one complained about by the Opposition spokesmen.

Mr. Blunt: What advice was the right hon. Gentleman receiving from the defence attaché at the British high commission in South Africa and from the high commission in South Africa on the course of the crisis and on the involvement of the South African air force,

which by that stage was already flying in Mozambique, supported and paid for by the Nordic countries? At some point, we took over the responsibility of paying for that.

Mr. Hoon: The point that I shall be making, in response to the criticism by the Opposition spokesmen, is that the acute need for helicopters followed on from the flood surge that occurred over that weekend. Therefore, although we were receiving advice about the general situation, it confirmed the type of advice that we heard about today from my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley. As I said, the judgment on the type of response was necessary was made by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development.

Mr. Wells: Of course the flood was greater than any of us foresaw. However, the fact is that surges of water down rivers such as the Limpopo do not happen overnight. The surge was caused by the very considerable rainfall inland. As the hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) said, the Committee was in the middle of that, and we knew that the surge was coming down. It should have been anticipated.

Mr. Hoon: I could have given the hon. Gentleman a fuller answer if he had made that criticism when I appeared before the Select Committee the other day. I feel bound to point out that he did not raise it when he had that opportunity.

I was trying to set out the sequence of events. The Department for International Development approached the Ministry of Defence and others to ask whether the United Kingdom had any people or equipment in the region that could be of assistance. Unfortunately, we did not. The Department was told that the nearest appropriate people and equipment were 3,000 miles away in the Persian gulf. As a result, the Department for International Development continued to look locally for assistance. It successfully guaranteed the funding to ensure that South African air force helicopters could continue saving people, as well as hiring other helicopters nearby that could commence operations immediately.

At the same time as the Department for International Development was searching southern Africa for more practical assistance, the Ministry of Defence looked at whether there was anything that could be done from further afield. On Monday 28 February, my hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces asked officials to look into the possible options to help further the effort already being made by the Department for International Development.

Officials were able to identify three suitable options: first, four Puma helicopters with support personnel and equipment; secondly, a detachment of Royal Marines with hovercraft and boats; and, thirdly, the RFA Fort George, which was part of a naval task group operating in the Gulf. At the earliest opportunity, Ministry of Defence officials held discussions with their colleagues in the Department for International Development to establish whether the deployment of any of those assets might be of assistance.

Mr. David Heath: The right hon. Gentleman knows the value that I put on the Royal Fleet Auxiliary ships. Does he agree that the enhanced role that the RFA could play in humanitarian relief should be considered? Will he look in particular at the future role of RFA Fort Grange?

Mr. Hoon: I agree that we can use those ships in that role, but one of the dilemmas that we faced on the deployment of Fort George—it would have been the same for the deployment of any ship—is that it would take nine days to get where it was needed. A certain amount of clairvoyance is needed to determine whether the problem will be the same after nine days. That has to be taken into account.

Work on those options was carried forward urgently. Contingency plans were drawn up, personnel were placed on standby, equipment was prepared, an Antonov aircraft was reserved and a reconnaissance team was deployed to Mozambique in advance of a final decision. Those are all standard military procedures, designed to maximise readiness and avoid delay.

Given the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Clydebank and Milngavie (Mr. Worthington), it might be helpful if I explain why we decided to hire a commercially chartered aircraft to transport the helicopters to the region. It was the only aircraft big enough and readily available to do the job as quickly as we wanted. We decided that the use of the RAF's C130 aircraft, which was mentioned during the debate, was not appropriate, because it would have taken longer to dismantle the helicopters, longer to fly them to Mozambique and longer to reassemble them at the other end. It would also have required a fleet of aircraft—one for each Puma helicopter and another one for additional equipment. That answers my hon. Friend's point. I look forward to his vigorous support in ensuring that the United Kingdom has its own heavy lift capacity in due course.

Despite the lack of suitable heavy lift aircraft, it is important to emphasise that the British Government were the first from outside the immediate region to have military helicopters operational and contributing to the relief effort. Where, therefore, was the delay that people are complaining about?

Mr. Duncan Smith: The answer to that lies in an earlier point that the Secretary of State made. Will he confirm that the Department for International Development knew the location of the nearest Ministry of Defence resources by Saturday and that the Secretary of State for International Development should have known that the Minister for the Armed Forces was already working on alternative proposals, including flying out helicopters?

Mr. Hoon: I have set out the sequence of events clearly. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development rightly wanted to ensure that helicopters were available locally as quickly as possible. That inevitably meant that she was going to look for helicopters in the immediate vicinity. When the problem became clearly more serious than was initially anticipated and no further helicopters were available locally, it was appropriate to look further afield. The hon. Gentleman knows the enormous effort involved in transporting helicopters from the United Kingdom to Mozambique. That was the sequence of events and that is why the decisions taken at each stage were right.

[Mr. Hoon]

Once the Department for International Development had satisfied the requirement for immediate assistance in the region, it was then important to consider other, longer-term actions. The decision to deploy the RFA Fort George was made on Thursday 2 March, in the knowledge that it would take around 9 days—3,000 miles of sailing—to get there. However, in advance of a final decision, the captain of the Fort George had undertaken preparatory work to ensure that the ship would be properly equipped in the event of a deployment. The ship was already heading south. It is a specialist supply vessel with five Sea King helicopters on board. It was decided that their greater radius of operations and their mobile operating platform would give the ship an advantage over ground-based helicopters, particularly in the event of serious flooding in northern Mozambique. That and the ship's load of 1.5 million litres of aviation fuel give it a vital role in the longer-term relief effort. I am sure that hon. Members on both sides of the House agree that that was an example of forward thinking and planning for the likely situation in Mozambique once the waters had receded. Conservative Members should congratulate my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development on anticipating the problems that were likely to arise.

Mr. Robathan: Would not HMS Illustrious have been faster and a better platform for helicopters?

Mr. Hoon: Fort George is part of the task group that also has the aircraft carrier involved with it. It is a supply vessel and was packed with food, fuel and water and was able to call in to take on extra medicines. That is the equipment that my right hon. Friend judged would be vital once the flood waters began to recede.

There has been a great deal of comment about costs, but also a great deal of wilful misunderstanding of the reality. Hon. Members understand that the Department for International Development takes the lead on the Government's response to any overseas natural disaster and its budget reflects that. The defence budget is approved by the House for carrying out defence tasks. It does not contain provision for overseas disaster relief. It is therefore entirely appropriate for the Department for International Development to make a judgment about the best use of its funds for disaster relief at an appropriate stage in any disaster.

To enable the Department for International Development to make an informed decision, the Ministry of Defence had to provide an outline of the estimated costs. The Chairman of the International Development Committee accepted that point when I gave evidence. It is accepted practice for any Department to charge the Department with the funding and the policy lead the additional no-loss costs of providing equipment and personnel for disaster relief operations.

There is no doubt that the armed forces can make a significant contribution to disaster relief operations. It is clear that the public expect well trained, well organised military personnel to be able to deploy quickly and effectively to assist in such situations. However, the fact remains that substantial costs are involved in deploying personnel and equipment over distances of several thousand miles. In many cases it will be quicker and cheaper for the Department for International Development to locate and fund sources of assistance from nearby countries. It is for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development to consider all the options and judge which offers the most timely and effective response.

The UK has deployed more military helicopters and got them from further afield into the region more quickly than any other nation. That is clear testimony to the determination and self-discipline of the crew and support personnel in preparing the aircraft, the equipment and themselves for deployment at the earliest opportunity.

I should also mention the excellent work of the South African air force. During the initial rescue effort, its air crews worked flat out for days on end and saved many thousands of lives. They are a great credit to their country. We have particular reason to be grateful to the South Africans. Without their assistance on the ground and their permission to use their base for maintenance, we would not have been able to participate in the international relief effort as quickly or as effectively.

In conclusion, the facts are that the UK has delivered the largest bilateral contribution of support on the ground, that the Department for International Development responded immediately once the scale of the catastrophe had become apparent and that only South Africa and Malawi had helicopters operating there before those from the UK. We have provided more military, and funded more civilian, helicopters than anyone else. We have people here and in Mozambique who have worked and who continue to work around the clock to provide assistance to people in real need under very challenging circumstances.

Question put, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 125, Noes 310.

Division No. 115] **[4 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*	Duncan Smith, Iain
Amess, David	Evans, Nigel
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James	Faber, David
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*	Fabricant, Michael
Baldry, Tony	Fallon, Michael
Bercow, John	Flight, Howard
Beresford, Sir Paul	Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Blunt, Crispin	Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Brady, Graham	Fox, Dr Liam
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter	Fraser, Christopher
Browning, Mrs Angela	Gale, Roger
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*	Gibb, Nick
Butterfill, John	Gill, Christopher
Cash, William	Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*	Gray, James
	Green, Damian
Chope, Christopher	Grieve, Dominic
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*	Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*	Hammond, Philip
	Hawkins, Nick
Collins, Tim	Hayes, John
Cormack, Sir Patrick	Heald, Oliver
Cran, James	Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Curry, Rt Hon David	Horam, John
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*	Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Day, Stephen	Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen	Hunter, Andrew
Duncan, Alan	Jack, Rt Hon Michael

Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith,
Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Major, Rt Hon John
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. John Randall and
Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blair, Rt Hon Tony
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brake, Tom
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cable, Dr Vincent
Caborn, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies
(NE Fife)
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chidgey, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr Lynda
(Edinburgh Pentlands)
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry
(B'ham Hodge H)
Dawson, Hilton
Denham, John
Dowd, Jim
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr Evan
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howells, Dr Kim
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie
(Welwyn Hatfield)
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny
(Wolverh'ton SW)
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McIsaac, Shona
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'd Heeley)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moore, Michael
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John
(Aberavon)
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
Organ, Mrs Diana
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom

Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchese, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Rendel, David
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Shipley, Ms Debra
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Willis, Phil
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Mike Hall and
Mr. Graham Allen.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments) and agreed to.*

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House commends the Government for its speedy and effective response to the humanitarian crisis in Mozambique.

Future of Rover

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Madam Speaker has selected the amendment standing in the name of the Prime Minister.

4.13 pm

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): I beg to move,

That this House calls upon the Government to report to the House the terms under which they brokered a rescue package for BMW/Rover in June 1999; further calls upon the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry to confirm that the application for Regional Selective Assistance will be sanctioned as a matter of urgency and that he will respond to the Competition Commission Report on Car Pricing as a priority; regrets that the future of Rover has been undermined by recent announcements by BMW; and urges the Government to clarify its future strategy in respect of Rover.

The Opposition decided, in light of the developments this week on the future of Rover, that it was important that the House had an opportunity to debate the issue and to seek answers from the Secretary of State. The House will know that in 1994, when BMW purchased Rover, it was a profit-making company. It was remarked at the time by BMW that the United Kingdom was a good place to manufacture and produce motor cars.

Today's announcement, and the run-up to it, has meant that there is now a significant question mark hanging over the future of Rover and particular concern about the Longbridge factory and the many tens of thousands of people who work for Rover itself, for subsidiary companies and for those that supply Rover. The whole House recognises the importance of that company and that sector to the midlands in particular and to the whole economy of this country.

Last June, the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry stepped off a plane, held a photocall and press conference, and announced a new deal that he had brokered with BMW for the future of Rover at Longbridge. We were not favoured with a statement in the House on the subject. Indeed, the Government have not brought the subject of Rover to the Floor of the House since the Secretary of State held his press conference. It was left to my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Miss Kirkbride) to raise the matter in an Adjournment debate in Westminster Hall in January.

To set the scene of the Secretary of State's announcement last June—to which we gave our public support—I remind the House of what he said at the time. The matter involved the first such application for state aid that he had dealt with since becoming Secretary of State—as the press reported—and he said:

I was not prepared to deal with this in the traditional way by simply making a substantial payment to BMW. Instead, I wanted the Longbridge agreement to be one which heralded a new approach to Government assistance to industry, which reflected a long-term commitment and not a quick fix. That is why I sought guarantees on productivity targets, raising skills and substantial investment from the company itself. Guarantees have been given in all these key areas.

The Secretary of State said that because new ground was being broken, the negotiations were complex and detailed, but they are now a matter of public record. The details include the £2 billion of investment put in by BMW and the £129 million of regional selective assistance and the

local grants, which amounted to some £152 million of public money and which the Secretary of State put on the table in the deal that he brokered with BMW in June.

Had we had the opportunity to question the Secretary of State at the time, we would have asked many questions. Indeed, together with colleagues in this House and in the other place—and other Members of Parliament, including Labour Members—I have tabled a series of questions in the months that have followed to seek clarification of the nature of the deal that the Secretary of State brokered.

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield): I have been looking at the questions tabled in the past few months and I cannot find the hon. Lady's name or those of her colleagues on questions mentioning Rover or BMW. Can she give us chapter and verse, or should we conclude that hers is a very late enthusiasm?

Mrs. Browning: I am about to read those questions out, including correspondence that I have exchanged with the Secretary of State on the subject. As the hon. Gentleman will know, it was the Conservatives who initiated the only debate that has been held, in which I made a substantive contribution from the Front Bench. I have yet to see a Secretary of State from any Department contributing to any debate in Westminster Hall, but that is not the approach that we take. If a debate is important, and Rover is important, I do not delegate the matter to a junior—I put my views and those of my party on the record. The hon. Gentleman should go on a PDVN course and learn to access information a little more accurately. However, I shall not be diverted by such trivial interventions, because this is a serious issue.

Many jobs are at stake in an important sector of the economy, and we demand information and answers from the Secretary of State about his own role in the deal that he brokered, what has happened since and why—just eight months later—the deal has not lasted a year, let alone the century that the Prime Minister claimed it would.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): Will my hon. Friend confirm that it was the Secretary of State's attempt to gerrymander the regional aid map that delayed and prevented any agreement coming from Brussels for the important aid package to help investment? Would she confirm that the Secretary of State thought he could waive the rules, only to discover that the EU had strong rules that it did not like having ignored? Is not that why, when it comes to shares in the Secretary of State, it is all sellers and no buyers?

Mrs. Browning: My right hon. Friend makes a pertinent point about where to draw the line on the map of delay. It is a matter of grave concern that the £152 million—a key component of the deal—has been delayed. Even today, there has been no assurance that the money will be on the table.

I remind the Secretary of State of the words of the Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce, who answered the debate in Westminster Hall:

> I am in no doubt that without the offer of support, BMW would have taken its investment elsewhere. It needed to go ahead with the investment for strategic reasons, but it did not need to come to the UK. The prime consideration for BMW was the impact of the additional investment on the company's overall financial position.—[*Official Report, Westminster Hall*, 26 January 2000; Vol. 343, c. 89WH.]

When the Secretary of State announced the £152 million, there had been some brief contact between the Department and the EU's Competition Commissioner, Mr. van Miert, and his officials. However, it soon became apparent that the Secretary of State had not done his homework. He had not taken the trouble to make sure that what he was putting on the table in the negotiations would be in compliance with EU regulations. That is why, after many months of difficulty and uncertainty for Rover, that money has not been forthcoming.

Within a week of the Secretary of State's announcement, Mr. van Miert told my office that he was not inclined to think that the money would be approved automatically. He thought that it would take time and investigation before he would be convinced that the Secretary of State's bid for the money complied with EU regulations.

Mr. Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield): With the group of Labour MEPs representing the west midlands, I met Commissioner Monti, who is responsible for the EU's competition policy. I do not know whether the hon. Lady has met him. We asked him whether the British Government had not answered any questions, and he said that there were no questions that had not been answered.

Articles in the *Official Journal of the European Communities* have made it clear that the problem with the deal was not the delays that it suffered, but the alleged haste with which it was put together. How does that fit with the right hon. Lady's argument? Does she—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. That is a long intervention, and I know that the hon. Gentleman is seeking to catch my eye.

Mrs. Browning: It is not the pace of the deal that matters, but whether it will hold together. Surely the Secretary of State should have done his preparation and homework, given the importance of the £152 million in the negotiation that he brokered with BMW.

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Stephen Byers): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way on what is an important point. She seems to imply that I should have received European Commission approval before I put the deal to BMW. Will she give me just one example from the Conservative Government's period in office when a regional selective assistance deal was agreed between the European Commission and the Government before the deal was struck with the company involved?

Mrs. Browning: No, and the reason is that the Secretary of State raised expectations on what was a false prospectus. Given how he described his role in brokering the deal, he should have been much more sure of his ground in terms of compliance. The important thing was not that the deal had been made, but his ability to deliver a watertight guarantee that he would get the money, which was a contingent element in the BMW deal. If the

[Mrs. Browning]

company has reneged on its part of the deal today, it must be because of deep disappointment that what the Secretary of State announced last June has not been delivered.

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove): I attended the debate in Westminster Hall at the end of January, as did my hon. Friend. Not only did the Secretary of State not check the rules before he announced his bid, but does she recall that the Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce could not tell hon. Members who attended the debate when she or her officials had last spoken to the Commission about the bid's progress?

Mrs. Browning: My hon. Friend is right. There seems to have been general complacency with regard to the matter over the summer months. I tabled some questions to the Secretary of State, as I wanted to know the details and conditions of the package that he had negotiated. He had put £152 million of public money on the table, but we wanted to know what he had got in return. We received the answer that the conditions of the aid package were "commercially confidential". It is therefore a question of whether the Secretary of State secured a good deal, or whether BMW have reneged on that deal. The relevant information has not been made available.

Mr. Byers: The hon. Lady says that I answered her questions by saying that the details were commercially confidential. Will she give one example of details of regional selective assistance being made available to the House under the previous Government?

Mrs. Browning: The Secretary of State must be used to batches of questions from me by now, but he failed to answer one in the batch about the BMW deal. He told me on 28 June that he would write to me with the answer, but he has failed to do so. In August, I was so worried at the lack of information about the deal that I wrote to the right hon. Gentleman and reminded him that he had not written to me as he had promised a month earlier.

That is indicative of the Secretary of State's laissez-faire attitude. He had his photocall and announced the good news, and then the matter was put in the pending tray. That is where Rover sat for most of last summer. When he eventually wrote to me on 2 September, he said:

> You may be assured that I and my officials will be maintaining close contact with DGD4, and we will be seeking every opportunity to press for an early and successful outcome to the case.

That was nearly six months ago, and the money is still not forthcoming.

Mr. Jim Cunningham (Coventry, South): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Browning: I will give way just once more, as this is a short debate. Many hon. Members of all parties have a local constituency interest in the matter, which is why I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman. I shall make some progress after his intervention.

Mr. Cunningham: The hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) is, like me, a member of the Select Committee on Trade and Industry. Has the hon. Lady not consulted him? We were in Europe three weeks ago, and were told by officials that there was no problem with the aid package.

Mrs. Browning: If there is really no problem, the Secretary of State should announce today that it has been secured. According to the announcement made today, a company called Alchemy is to take responsibility for Rover. That company must know whether the money is still on the table. I hope that the Secretary of State will tell the House.

If the money is still on the table, what will it be used for? In the past, Ministers have indicated that £150 million of public money was to help the development of the R30 car. I have studied the BMW press statement and it is not clear that the R30 will be developed by Alchemy. Indeed, there is very little reference to it at all. If that is what the money was targeted on, clearly there is a question mark over whether the Commission will release that money if, for example, the R30 will not be developed in this country after all.

Mr. Byers: If the grant to BMW is so important in terms of its decision today, can the hon. Lady confirm that BMW's announcement and the comprehensive press release that followed it do not mention the grant as one of the reasons for this decision?

Mrs. Browning: I can only quote the Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce, who said at the end of January how important that grant was. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Lady, but I think that the House will gain more respect outside if this debate is conducted without sedentary barracking.

Mrs. Browning: The Secretary of State and the Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce have assured not only the House but the country that the deal they brokered and the £152 million on the table were going to secure the future of Rover. That was endorsed by the Prime Minister. Before the Secretary of State intervenes on me again and asks me questions, let me say that we are looking not for questions from the right hon. Gentleman, but for answers that we could rightfully have expected eight months ago when he made his first announcement.

The Government have carried out a go-slow policy with regard to the expedition of the grant. Furthermore, in the ensuing months, Government intervention has had an impact on all manufacturers, including car manufacturers and Rover in particular. Since 1994, when BMW stated that this was a good country in which to build motor cars, taxation on business has increased and it faces an additional £10 billion of regulatory costs. *[Interruption.]* We have seen the Secretary of State heading the "Rip Off Britain" campaign, which has stifled the retail sales of cars for more months than the car industry deserves.

The Secretary of State will recall that several months ago, during Trade and Industry questions, I urged him to make his views known on the Competition Commission report on car sales before the W registration mark came in, because retail sales are down by 12 per cent. this March compared with last year.

Mr. Sheerman: As they are in France and Germany.

Mrs. Browning: The market has been affected by a Government soundbite in which the Secretary of State and

his friends in the Cabinet thought that they could be the consumer's friend by persuading everybody that they were being ripped off. There may be a case for examining car pricing and the way in which cars are retailed in this country. I have no quarrel with that, as I have said before. However, it is totally indefensible for the Secretary of State, or any Minister, to set up an inquiry, pre-empt the outcome before the analysis has been made and then, as they have done with the retail and supermarket sectors, damage, for the sake of a quick-fix soundbite, an industry that is already under pressure because of the Government's running of the economy. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman) is a senior and respected Member of this House. He should conduct himself accordingly.

Mrs. Browning: In December, Rover announced that 2,500 jobs were to go. I believe that it was as a result of that that my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove initiated her debate.

The Government deny the House the opportunity to ask pertinent questions on matters of great importance to an industry such as this and to the overall good of the United Kingdom economy. I believe that this Secretary of State, in particular, would do well to recognise that it is his duty to share information with the House. It is no good coming eight months later and saying, "Nothing to do with me, guv" when, in front of the television cameras, he took credit for what he thought at the time was a bit of good news, only to sidle off into the shadows when the news is not so good. Were it not for the fact that the Conservative party changed the subject of the Opposition day debate this afternoon, I suspect that he would be giving out yet another press release to deal with this, rather than standing at the Dispatch Box, telling the House what he believes the future of Rover will be and answering many of our questions.

BMW has said this afternoon that it will retain Land Rover, but has the right hon. Gentleman any concerns that it might be doing so simply to sell it on to another third-party purchaser? Is it his understanding that Alchemy intends to develop any further models under the Rover brand, or does he believe that when the existing models have been exhausted, it will revert to the MG brand, and the name Rover will disappear from British cars altogether? Will BMW retain the development of the R30 and, if so, where will it be developed? Will it be in this country or in Germany?

The Secretary of State presides over a Department that is in an absolute shambles. What we see today adds to the belief that nobody on the Treasury Bench understands business, let alone is capable of brokering a deal on behalf of business. The Secretary of State must make up his mind. Will he be a Secretary of State who, as he claimed on television only a couple of weeks ago, does not believe that the Government should pick winners or losers? With regard to his competition policy, will he intervene or not?

The Secretary of State seems all over the place, as is his Department. He is all over the place when it comes to competition policy and when it comes to saving British industry, in which he believes he can intervene successfully. He is all over the place in bringing legislation before the House. The Utilities Bill is a shambles and the Committee considering the Postal Services Bill has been suspended because the Government have not marshalled their amendments. This is all indicative of a Government who could not even run a whelk stall.

4.37 pm

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Stephen Byers): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

welcomes the actions of the Government that support the car industry, including delivering stable inflation and low interest rates, boosting support for supply chain activities and acting on the Foresight Vehicle Programme; welcomes the Government support for the Longbridge plant given through the offer of Regional Selective Assistance; understands that the major losses that BMW have suffered on Rover have put great pressure on BMW with respect to Rover; and congratulates the Government for playing its role in working closely with the company and the workforce to try to ensure there is a future for Rover.

This has been a very important day for Rover and for the Government's relationships with major multinational companies such as BMW. I want to report to the House on the decisions that the supervisory board of BMW has taken today, and I want to explain the circumstances surrounding our offer of grant aid in June of last year.

First, it is important to inform the House of the decisions that have been taken by the BMW supervisory board today. I also want to share with the House some additional information that I have received from Professor Milberg, the chairman of BMW, following the supervisory board meeting that was held earlier today.

The supervisory board has decided that production of the new Mini, which originally was to be based at the Longbridge site, will go ahead but will be developed at the Cowley plant in Oxford. The new Mini will be launched, as originally planned, in the early summer of 2001. Production of the Rover 75 will continue at the Cowley plant in Oxford, but it will be produced on behalf of Alchemy Partners, the new company to which BMW has decided to dispose the Rover and MG brands. Sales and distribution of the car will also be handled by Alchemy Partners.

The body pressing facility at Swindon will be retained as part of BMW. The Hams Hall engine facility in Birmingham, which is a very important project, will be completed and will enter operation as planned, as part of BMW.

Today's major announcement affects the future of the Longbridge plant in Birmingham. BMW's decision to dispose of the Rover and MG brands to Alchemy Partners will have clear implications for Longbridge. I have spoken today with Jon Moulton, one of the new owner's principal directors. I pointed out the importance of Longbridge and the belief of many people that it has a viable long-term future as a car production facility. I stressed the importance of Longbridge and the way in which the work force have responded over some months to changed circumstances by improving productivity and raising skills. I stressed the plant's strategic importance for Birmingham and the west midlands as a whole.

Mr. John M. Taylor (Solihull): I thank the Secretary of State for recognising the great importance of Longbridge, but he has not yet mentioned the destiny of

[Mr. John M. Taylor]

Land Rover, which is in my constituency. Will the Secretary of State comment on rumours currently circulating that it will be sold to Ford Motor Company?

Mr. Byers: I shall when I come to the discussions that I had with Professor Milberg after the supervisory board meeting. He specifically addressed Land Rover's position, and I hope to answer the hon. Gentleman's point a little later.

On Longbridge, Mr. Moulton said that he wanted to retain car production, and that Alchemy Partners was not in the business of asset stripping. He said that the company intended to develop the MG brand at Longbridge. Clearly, however, many questions remain to be answered for the people who work at Longbridge and for the whole west midlands. I shall meet Mr. Moulton later today to discuss further Alchemy's detailed intentions. I shall stress both the important part that Longbridge can play and that car production should be retained. I hope that Alchemy Partners will recognise its responsibility as the new owners of Longbridge to a work force who have been flexible, who have improved productivity and who believe, as the Government and I do, that Longbridge has a viable long-term future.

Mr. Redwood: Does the Secretary of State agree that his mishandling of the whole regional aid map discussions with Brussels has left him powerless to intervene and caused endless delay? Does that not show that the warranty he offered to Rover workers was time-expired on the day that he gave it? He must have known that he had filed an illegal map and that there would be endless delay. When will he sit down with the Commission to reach agreement?

Mr. Byers: The right hon. Gentleman tries to divert us to an issue not related to BMW's announcement today. I spoke to Professor Milberg yesterday, asking whether, given the difficulties faced by BMW—a loss of £740 million this year on top of the loss in 1998 of £550 million—our grant of £152 million over five years would make a great difference. He said that in the context of the difficult decisions that BMW had to take today, the grant was not an issue. Opposition Members may want to make an issue of that, but it is a red herring. *[Interruption.]* I shall come on to grant aid shortly.

The right hon. Gentleman likes to say that he understands business. He should realise that losses of £1.3 billion over two years are far more significant than a grant of £152 million over five years.

Mr. Redwood: At the time the Secretary of State tried to negotiate grant aid, he and his colleagues thought that it was important; so did BMW, and so did the people of the west midlands. We knew that we could lose the whole transaction because of the delays created by the Secretary of State. Is he saying that he will not bother to sort out his row with Brussels, and that if a future owner of any part of our motor industry wants aid he will not care less and none will be available?

Mr. Byers: The right hon. Gentleman cannot resist talking about rows with Brussels. They are the entire raison d'etre of his political life. [HON. MEMBERS: "Answer seriously."] It was not a serious question.

The issues surrounding the grant did not affect the decision taken today by the BMW supervisory board. The House is concerned with the consequences of that decision. We have had discussions today with Alchemy, and during my discussion with the new owner this evening I will ask whether the grant is significant as far as it is concerned. The situation is clear. The grant related to a deal struck with BMW for investment at Longbridge. If that investment does not go ahead, the grant will go by default.

Mr. John Butterfill (Bournemouth, West): When the Secretary of State met the director from Alchemy earlier, did he ask how Alchemy imagines it may be able to cope with losses of the scale that have been sustained by Rover? If he did not, will he discuss that point with the director later?

Mr. Byers: I spoke to Jon Moulton earlier, and will meet him later. I shall wish to raise that point with Mr. Moulton. We do not want the new owner to give false hopes to those who work at Longbridge if it will be unable to develop a viable car production facility there.

The hon. Member for Solihull (Mr. Taylor) made an important point about the direct effects on his constituents. Land Rover has been a highly successful car production facility in Solihull, and BMW is seeking an alternative owner. Land Rover will be a desirable car production facility, and other car manufacturers will be interested in acquiring it. Professor Milberg did not mention any particular company when I spoke with him about an hour and a half ago, and there is some speculation about who the new owner might be. We shall discuss this whole matter with a number of manufacturers over the coming hours and days. That will clearly include any particular interest in Land Rover.

Mr. John M. Taylor: I am grateful to the Secretary of State, but he has given me a certain sense of deja vu. When I first came to the House, I was involved in stopping the sale of Land Rover to General Motors. I shall have to look out my papers, as we seem to be in the same position all over again.

Mr. Byers: I hope that, whatever happens, people will realise that Land Rover is an excellent facility, manufacturing a product that is profitable and desirable. As Secretary of State, I intend to make that case.

The events that occurred at the supervisory board today are a great disappointment to the Government. We had an understanding—an agreement—with BMW, to which the work force had signed up. It was that there would be changes in working practices, that productivity would be improved, and that investment would be made—especially in the Longbridge facility. BMW accepted that, until 2002, a loss would be incurred by the Rover group in the UK, but that it could live with that. The company intended to break even by 2002.

Today's decision by BMW goes against the understanding that was reached last year.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): Towards the end of last year, in some of the more authoritative parts of the British automotive press, stories were circulating that BMW had lost interest in Rover and had been in discussions with

Volkswagen about carving up the various plants. Was the Secretary of State aware of those reports? If he was advised of them by his officials, what action did he take to check them out with BMW to find out whether the company was already preparing an exit strategy?

Mr. Byers: My Department and I have close links with BMW and have been in dialogue with the company about many issues. Over the past few days, it has become clear that a small number of BMW's directors have adopted a new business strategy—that was revealed today.

The business strategy towards which BMW was working was the one that was agreed during last year: to retain Rover—in its totality—in the UK, and to invest in areas such as Longbridge in the future. As a result of the escalating losses incurred by BMW, which today declared losses of about £140 million last year, the company felt that in order to protect its total viability, radical decisions had to be taken. We are seeing the effect of those today.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Byers: I cannot give way because I need to make some progress. The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) raised some important issues about grant aid that I want to address. It will take me a little time to do so and I want to enable many hon. Members to take part in the debate.

Since 1994, BMW has made a significant investment in Rover. At Solihull, new lines have been developed for Land Rover's Freelander and Discovery models. BMW has put £400 million into a new line at Cowley, incorporating state-of-the-art technology and new working practices. That has enabled the introduction of the Rover 75. The new engine facility at Hams Hall has received an investment of £400 million to produce engines for Rover and BMW.

Changes have been introduced, and a large investment has been made by BMW. However, even with that investment, the losses incurred by BMW have escalated year after year. Over the past two years, they amounted to £1.3 billion. BMW informed me that it was the scale of those losses that led to today's decision.

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury) *rose—*

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham) *rose—*

Mr. Byers: I want to make some more points.

The Government are disappointed that BMW has decided to adopt a different business strategy to the one that was agreed with us last year. We regret that.

Specific points were made about grant aid applications.

Mr. Tom King (Bridgwater): The Secretary of State pointed out that BMW found it necessary to change its strategy. Given the scale of the losses, any board would consider doing that. On what assumptions about exchange rates was the original strategy based? Does the Secretary of State know about that?

Mr. Byers: The right hon. Gentleman will have to raise that issue with BMW. The company makes decisions based on its own estimates.

Dr. Cable: Will the Secretary of State confirm that the exchange rate assumption used by BMW—not only for its private affairs, but as the basis for the Government grant application—was DM2.40? Was the DTI aware of that detail when the application was approved?

Mr. Byers: It would be better for BMW to confirm figures that may be regarded as commercially confidential. *[Interruption.]* It is an important point. Opposition Members will be aware that when regional selective assistance applications are made, and the Government and companies enter into deals, that is confidential. I should be happy to reveal the information if BMW gave me approval. However, I shall not put at risk the relationship between the Government and those companies which approach us, in confidence, for RSA by disclosing that information to the House. That would be wrong; I do not intend to do it.

I want to move on to the important points on grant aid—the subject of most of the comments made by the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton. She raised a number of important issues about the way in which we have dealt with grant aid to BMW. I want to address them each specifically, and I shall compare how a grant application from Rover-BMW was dealt with under her Government, when she was a Minister, with how we have dealt with this particular application about which she has been so critical.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): What is the right hon. Gentleman going to do?

Mr. Byers: I know that the hon. Gentleman does not like to face the facts, but, on this occasion, he will have to, because I am going to go through them.

The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton would not answer my intervention about the number of occasions on which the Conservative Government had disclosed commercially confidential information. On no occasion was commercially confidential information revealed—not once. On how many occasions were discussions held with the European Commission before an offer was made to a company, and on how many occasions were the principles agreed in advance with the European Commission? Not on one occasion—that is the reality of the situation.

Today's serious announcement from BMW about the future made no reference to the grant aid being made available. No reference was made because for BMW it is not the big issue.

Let us consider two grant applications: the £152 million on which the hon. Lady has concentrated and the regional selective application for £22.5 million for the Hams Hall engine facility, which was also for Rover-BMW and was dealt with under the previous Conservative Government. On the £152 million grant that we intended to make available to Longbridge, the deal was struck with BMW on 23 June last year. We notified the European Commission on 20 August, which was just under two months later.

The application for Hams Hall was far smaller.

Mr. Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Byers: I will give way in a second, but I want to go through the facts.

[Mr. Byers]

The application for Hams Hall was a lot smaller—£22.5 million. The deal was struck by the Conservative Government on 15 November 1996, but it was notified by this Labour Government because the Conservatives did nothing about it while they were in office. It was not until 7 May 1997 that notification was given to the European Commission, and it was not until 22 January 1998 that approval was finally given. There were 14 months between the deal being struck and the grant being approved.

On Longbridge, the deal was made on 23 June 1998; on 20 August, notification was given to Europe; and Commissioner Monti agreed on 20 December that a decision would be taken within six months. Within a year, we would have learned the outcome—a year compared to the 14 months for the application for Hams Hall. We were moving far more quickly on the grant aid for Longbridge than had ever happened before.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): The Secretary of State is certainly putting a brave face on his own crass ineptitude in this matter. Is he seeking to play down the significance of the grant aid package because he recognises what was stated in *The Economist* this week by an unnamed official? It reports that, when the Secretary of State spoke in Brussels on 7 March this year, the response from Mr. Monti was, as the unnamed official said, a polite two fingers.

Mr. Byers: I know that the hon. Gentleman has a remarkable memory, but I think that he will find that the 7 March reference was to a conversation that the Prime Minister was supposed to have had with the Commission. He did not speak to Commissioner Monti about this particular issue. I think that the hon. Gentleman will find that that is the case.

Commissioner Monti has agreed to put this application on a fast track, and that is exactly what he is doing. We have maintained a close relationship with BMW over this period and we have put suitable pressure on the European Commission. As a result, it is dealing with this application far more quickly than it has dealt with similar applications. That is the position.

Mr. Gibb: Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm again that the formal notification to the Commission took place in August, and not in December, because the Commission and all the press coverage indicate that the Commission received formal notification of the state aid in December?

Mr. Byers: That is wrong. The Commission was formally notified in August. On 22 December, the Commission decided to launch an investigation into whether the grant should be made available. Between August and December, we were providing the Commission with information, and in the light of that it decided that an investigation was needed. That is the policy that Commissioner Monti has adopted with every grant aid application for cars that has landed on his desk.

Mr. Geoffrey Robinson (Coventry, North-West): I support my right hon. Friend in rebutting the Opposition's attempts to turn the matter into a party political issue. There is no question—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Gentleman. He has been given the opportunity to intervene, and he should be heard.

Mr. Robinson: I am grateful, Mr. Deputy Speaker. There is no question but that the Government, and my right hon. Friend himself, have given the maximum support to a normal application for aid under the EU treaty. That is not an issue. The issue today for a major part of British industry and for those who can put this matter ahead of party political matters is surely that BMW has reneged on its undertaking to the Government and the British motor manufacturing industry and all its workers. It may be beyond the point of recall, but it still has to be stated that BMW came in, cherry picked what it wanted and walked out when things got too expensive. Although my right hon. Friend tried very hard, does not this hold the lesson for all of us that, even in a global economy, ownership is terribly important?

Mr. Byers: I am sure that my hon. Friend is correct. There is a real sense of disappointment at BMW's decision.

Serious issues have been raised about grant aid being dealt with slowly. A comparable case concerned Volkswagen's application for aid. It notified the Commission last July, a month before we notified the Commission about Longbridge. The Commission opened proceedings last November, as opposed to December for Longbridge. We have already had notification in the *Official Journal* of the EC of the Longbridge proceedings being started, whereas the Commission has not, as yet, even notified the *Official Journal* about the Volkswagen case. That clearly demonstrates that the Commission is dealing quickly with the Longbridge application.

On grant aid, the position is that commercial confidentiality has applied to every application for regional selective assistance under this Government and the previous Government. In no case has approval been given by the European Commission before a deal was struck with the company concerned. Longbridge is being dealt with under a fast-track procedure because of the pressure that the Government have put on the European Commission. That is the reality.

It is worth comparing that with the record of the Conservatives when Rover was privatised. Under the previous Administration, illegal aid was paid to Rover on privatisation, and it had to be repaid with interest. The Conservative Government had to repay a total of £84 million because they had got their aid procedures wrong. It was as simple as that. That is the Conservatives' record on securing European approval for aid.

Mr. John Butterfill (Bournemouth, West): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Byers: No, I will not. I have given way plenty of times. Members with a constituency interest want to take part in the debate—

Mr. Butterfill *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The Secretary of State has made it clear that he is not giving way.

Mr. Byers: I have given way on many issues to Conservative Members.

Mr. Butterfill: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I had to run out of the Chamber to get some important information about Alchemy—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is an experienced Member of the House. He knows, even from those few words, that that is not a point of order for the Chair; it is a point of debate.

Mr. Byers: I am grateful, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

BMW has been content with the way in which we dealt with the state aid application. That was not mentioned once in the statement with regard to the reasons behind the decision that has been taken today. The matter is a red herring, which has been introduced by the Conservative party.

Mr. Butterfill *rose—*

Mr. Byers: I am not giving way. I want to make progress. There are important issues still to be addressed.

It would be wrong for people to think that because of the difficulties being experienced by BMW, the car industry in the United Kingdom is facing similar problems. Since the Government took office, more than £2.4 billion of new investment has been made in the UK car industry, creating 8,750 new jobs.

Earlier this month, Audi announced a £45 million investment in its engineering subsidiary, Cosworth Technology, to expand its sites at Northampton, Wellingborough and Worcester, doubling its work force as a result.

Increasing capital expenditure is going into the industry—£128 million since April last year. That capital expenditure has brought 1,700 new jobs and safeguarded 4,700 jobs, many of them in the west midlands.

Today's announcement by BMW is regrettable. It is a great disappointment. It creates uncertainty for workers at Rover, their suppliers and their families. We must ensure that those people have opportunities and are given some hope for the future.

Miss Kirkbride *rose—*

Mr. Byers: That is why, later tonight, I am meeting Alchemy Partners, the new owners of the Longbridge site. We need to find out from Alchemy what its proposals are with respect to Longbridge. We will be asking difficult questions, to which Alchemy will need to give answers.

Miss Kirkbride *rose—*

Mr. Byers: Today, our thoughts must be with the workers at Longbridge, their families and their community. In Government, we face many difficult questions, but we must never lose sight of the fact that those are human questions, the answers to which will affect individuals, their families and their communities.

Miss Kirkbride *rose—*

Mr. Byers: The Government will discharge their responsibilities to the people of Longbridge and the west midlands. We will do so, even though the Conservative party will criticise us and introduce diversions.

Miss Kirkbride: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Byers: We recognise that the interests of the workers of Longbridge and the west midlands will be served by the Government. We will not return to the days when tens of thousands of manufacturing jobs in the west midlands were lost because of the Conservative Government's policy. We will continue to campaign for Longbridge. We believe that it has a viable long-term future. We will not be diverted by the Opposition, and we will discharge our responsibilities.

5.8 pm

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): I start by echoing the Secretary of State's closing words. All our hearts should go out to the thousands of men and women, many of whom have highly specialised skills, who must be in a state of high anxiety. That is probably common ground among all of us.

I sincerely hope that those workers will be well looked after by their new employer, Alchemy. I hope that they fare a little better than the outstandingly able secretary who works in my constituency office. Until a year ago, she worked in an operation that was subject to an Alchemy buy-out. She was made redundant and now works for me. That may be an unfortunate personal example.

Mr. Butterfill: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. Is he aware—and is the Secretary of State aware, before he meets Alchemy tonight—that Alchemy's investment preferences, as stated in its entry in the "British Venture Capital Association Handbook", is a maximum investment of £50 million? Its average current investment size is £15 million. Its total funds invested to date at cost are £304 million, and the total funds that it manages or advises are £255 million. In the light of that, one must ask how Alchemy will manage an operation of the size of Longbridge.

Dr. Cable: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is asking the right question. It is clear that there is no experience of volume car making. The enterprise for which my secretary worked was a German brewery. The synergy between that and the car industry is not immediately obvious.

The motion is rather innocuous. I doubt whether any of us is opposed to clarifying the future. The Opposition are probably attacking the wrong Minister for the wrong reasons. I read the comments of the Conservative spokesman, the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning), in the press this morning. She said that

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today there would be cross-party demand to guarantee the future of Longbridge. I think that the hon. Lady knows—*[Interruption.]* She wants to clarify the matter.

Mrs. Browning: I do not know where the hon. Gentleman read that, but they are certainly not words that I said yesterday.

Dr. Cable: I am delighted to hear that. Perhaps the *Financial Times* should take down the hon. Lady's comments rather more carefully in future.

I shall move on. There is a crucial area of policy and it is not that the Government are responsible for guaranteeing the future of Longbridge. No Minister can do that. We are discussing a competitive industry and a company that is in a difficult set of circumstances. However, the Government can guarantee macro-economic stability, and that is what they should be doing. The Labour amendment accepts that implicitly. It begins by saying that the Government have created low inflation and low interest rates. The first point is certainly true. The second is true only if we disregard what is happening in the euro zone, where interest rates are 2 per cent. lower than in the UK. That is rather important in this context because Rover is competing with European car manufacturers, which have the benefit of these conditions.

The real problem is the exchange rate, which neither the Conservative spokesman nor the Secretary of State mentioned. It is a serious issue that cuts across party boundaries. The hon. Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill) is not in his place, but only yesterday the Select Committee on Trade and Industry, which he chairs, produced a devastating report about the impact that an appreciating exchange rate is having on manufacturing industry. That includes not only the car industry, but Harland and Wolf, which was in trouble earlier this week, the coal industry, the steel industry and agriculture. All those sectors have been affected in precisely the same way.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): I am sure that the hon. Gentleman agrees that the problem is not an appreciating pound but a depreciating euro. It is clearly the job of the European central bank and our partners to do something about that.

Dr. Cable: That is entirely incorrect. I received a fax today from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, which has calculated what it calls, in economic jargon, the real effective exchange rate. That is, Britain's exchange rate against the exchange rates of the rest of the world, and not only the euro, allowing for changes in inflation. Since the low point in 1996, the pound has appreciated against allcomers. It has not done so against the dollar, but it has risen against currencies in general by more than 30 per cent. Since the Government came into office, it has appreciated by 15 per cent. That matters enormously in the context of the debate. BMW has argued that, for every pfennig by which the pound appreciates against the German currency and against the euro zone, it has been losing £8 million.

Mr. Geoffrey Robinson: Why is it that BMW, through the 1960s, the 1970s and the 1980s, lived with an appreciating deutschmark? The answer is that it increased productivity and quality. Why could it not have done that in the UK? It is a simple question.

Dr. Cable: The answer to the hon. Gentleman's question, which is a perfectly fair one, is that BMW has inherited a plant that, because of its low productivity and history, is exceptionally dependent on price competitiveness. Commodity production depends on price competitiveness. BMW says openly that one of the major sources of its losses is the exchange rate.

Mr. Robinson: BMW lived with that for three decades, from the 1960s to the 1980s. Indeed, it built up a company that was a glittering success, with productivity and quality to match it. All we asked is that it did that at Rover. It failed to do so because it did not put in the necessary effort.

Dr. Cable: I think that the right hon. Gentleman is failing entirely to grasp that the conditions in the car industry now are wholly different from those that applied in the 1960s, when there was rapid growth and a need for new investment in the industry. The crucial feature of the European car industry in which BMW and, on this side of the channel, Rover are having to compete is excess capacity. Price competitiveness is severe and losses are sustained because of the exchange rate. BMW has said that it is losing £200 million or £300 million because of the exchange rate. It is passing some of that back to its suppliers, many of whom have been forced to move on to euro contracts so that small manufacturers around the west midlands have absorbed the losses. That has been a key factor in BMW's decisions.

As I said in an earlier intervention, much of the optimism about proposed investments at Longbridge and in the Rover group was based on a wholly unreal assumption about the exchange rate. At some point, BMW would have to decide that conditions had changed and that it would have to respond to that.

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): Is not the hon. Gentleman concerned by the Government's complete inability to realise that the exchange rate and the strength of the pound constitute a problem? Not only the car industry, but all United Kingdom manufacturing industry and farming are haemorrhaging. If the Government talked to dairy farmers as often as they talked to the automotive industry, they would receive the same message.

Dr. Cable: The hon. Gentleman is right, but the problem also applies to the Conservative party. The Leader of the Opposition is travelling around the marketplaces of England and talking about poor, unfortunate Europeans who are suffering from a weak currency, apparently unaware that most of their manufacturers are laughing their way to the bank. That is a problem for both sides of the House. However, it is important to tackle that complex difficulty.

Macro-economic management, trying to achieve stable inflation and a lower exchange rate, is not easy. It is linked to our entry strategy for the euro. Until we get the policy right, not only the car industry, but many other traded-goods industries in agriculture and manufacturing will suffer the same torment. That is the main point, and why I say that the wrong Minister has been targeted.

Dr. Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak): Some Labour Members accept that the strength of sterling is a

problem. However, it is mainly a problem in relation to the weakness of the euro. Will the hon. Gentleman explain his perception of the cause of the strength of sterling and how he would reduce it?

Dr. Cable: Statistics suggest that the difficulty is not only caused by the euro, although it constitutes a large part of the problem. We are considering a European market, and the euro-sterling exchange rate matters in that context. The hon. Lady asked what we could do about that. I had already begun to develop the argument—*[Interruption.]* The Liberal Democrats, perhaps uniquely, because we have a commitment to entering the euro zone, believe—

Mr. Geoffrey Robinson *rose—*

Dr. Cable: Let me finish the answer to the previous question. We have a commitment to the euro zone and we believe that it is the Government's responsibility to define a competitive exchange rate for the British economy at an early stage. They should do that by building on evidence from the International Monetary Fund and other organisations in recent months, and beginning to work towards their objective as quickly as possible through the Bank of England.

Mr. Robinson: If we accepted the hon. Gentleman's prescription for our problem—it is unique for a Labour Government to have an exchange rate that is too high—and we entered the euro and reduced our interest rates and our pound accordingly, the consequences for inflation would be catastrophic. Surely the hon. Gentleman appreciates that.

Dr. Cable: The Government missed the boat two years ago and our discussion is slightly academic. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman knows perfectly well that the consequences for inflation of a realistic exchange rate will have to be paced through monetary policy. The Government could and should do many other things to tackle inflation, for example, acting through the property market—stamp duty and property taxation—to deal with the inflated asset market. That supplementary policy should be adopted.

The hon. Member for Coventry, North-West (Mr. Robinson) seems to be totally blind to the fact that there is a real problem. I am not pretending for a minute that there is a simple solution, but there is a solution—or a complex of solutions—that would put the economy on a more stable basis in relation to its external exchange rate. However, simply pretending that the problem does not exist is myopic in the extreme and very damaging. He may think that that is a joke, but a large number of his constituents and many British manufacturers think that the Government have severely neglected their undertakings.

The Chancellor has told the House on many occasions that having a stable and competitive exchange rate is a Government commitment. It is not remotely competitive. If it is not competitive, why have they committed themselves to that policy objective? If they have no idea of how to realise it, why promulgate it as an aim?

Mr. Robinson: What would the hon. Gentleman do?

Dr. Cable: I have already explained to the hon. Gentleman what I would do about that.

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): The hon. Gentleman is making an extremely interesting point, but does he recognise that the inescapable inference is that early entry to the euro, which is the policy advocated by his party and which would inevitably build in permanently the disadvantage that we are suffering from the present exchange rate, would be a disaster for this country?

Dr. Cable: The early exchange rate with the euro would have been based on the average of the two years previous to 1997, which would have been relatively competitive. We now have a problem. We have to navigate our way back to that point, but it will be some years before the British exchange rate reaches a level at which we can once again contemplate entry. That is the challenge that we have to face. Labour Members who pretend that that is not an issue and Conservatives who believe that we can have a floating exchange rate against the euro zone indefinitely are dodging a fundamental issue of national importance.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Dr. Cable: I am happy to debate this matter indefinitely and my hon. Friend wants to do so as well.

Dr. Harris: Will my hon. Friend accept from me that my constituents who work at the Oxford Cowley plant feel tremendous solidarity with, and concern for, the people who work at Longbridge? They will be anxious that the Conservative party wants to play politics with the exchange rate and that Ministers have refused to answer the point about the effect of the high exchange rate consequent on their policy of appeasing the tabloid press over the euro, rather than putting the interests of British manufacturing first.

Dr. Cable: That is an effective coda to this part of the debate and I shall leave it at that. May I move on to two areas that are specific responsibilities of the Department of Trade and Industry?

Mr. Peter Snape (West Bromwich, East): Will the hon. Gentleman give way before he moves on?

Dr. Cable: Happily.

Mr. Snape: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that, for 30 years until the mid-1990s, Britain's exchange rate—compared with those of virtually the rest of the world—continued to decline, yet this country's manufacturing industry also sadly continued to decline? He is long on problems, like most of his party. Has he any solutions?

Dr. Cable: The hon. Gentleman has totally missed the point about history. Of course the exchange rate declined, but British inflation was relatively high. The real exchange rate, which is what matters for competitiveness, was uncompetitive for much of that time, as he knows perfectly well.

Let me move on to the two issues that concern the DTI. One is the European Commission. The Government have argued that the apparent or prospective failure of the bid was not central to BMW's decision, but there are important issues here. This country has been remarkably conceited about European policy on state aids. There is a

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widespread belief, which has been echoed in interventions from around the Chamber, that our manufacturers observe the rules and the rest of the European Union does not. Over the years, Governments of both parties have clamoured for a state aids regime that is honest and tough, and a Commissioner who reflects those values. In this context, it is abundantly clear that Mr. Monti is both and he is exercising his toughness by casting a beady eye over the application.

I draw that point out again because in an Adjournment debate two months ago I was censured by a Minister for questioning the validity of the argument about the Hungarian migration. I was told that that was scaremongering and a dangerous line of argument that would imperil this crucial state aid application. We need to register clearly that whatever comes out of this, the European Commission has handled the episode entirely correctly and in the way that any British Government would expect of a commission concerned with stamping out damaging state aids.

The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton raised, in a partially correct way, the issue of DTI responsibility and the relationship with the Competition Commission inquiry into car prices. She was correct that there is a problem of joined-up government. The Government, for good reasons, embarked on an exercise to protect consumers. It is becoming clearer, as time passes and prices are more transparent, that car prices in Britain are significantly higher than in Europe, which is wrong, and that monopoly profit has been earned somewhere along the chain.

It may or may not be true that that depressed car sales last year. It is true that, when a competitive market for cars is introduced, a substantial profit margin will be taken from somewhere else. Some of that profit margin will be taken from many British companies that purchase company vehicles on the cheap, but a large part will be taken from the profit margins of the car industry, which has benefited from that regime.

I do not criticise the Government for embarking on that exercise. They were absolutely right to place emphasis on consumer protection. However, they should have been aware that the inquiry would significantly undermine the profit forecasts of many British manufacturers, including Rover.

Our primary concern should be for people in the west midlands, whose future is placed in peril by imminent decisions. I hope that we will quickly move on from the debate about who lost Longbridge to a more forward-looking debate about how we provide structural help to a region that has become overdependent—as Clydeside and the coal-mining areas did before—on an industry whose prospects in the current European economic environment are not good.

5.27 pm

Mr. Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield): Yesterday in Prime Minister's questions, I said that the entire midlands area was holding its breath, waiting on the BMW board meeting that was to take place today. We now know the result. The responsibility for what looks like befalling Longbridge and other large parts of the Rover group is that of BMW. The day after the announcement in 1994 about BMW taking over Rover, I met its then chairman, Bernd Pischetsrieder. He assured me that BMW was in for the long haul, knew the investment requirements of Rover and would make the company a success. I believe that Bernd Pischetsrieder was being straight with me but I know also that, from that day on, every time there was speculation about the future of Rover and BMW not being in it for the long haul, BMW assured me personally, the Government and—most important of all—the people who worked for Rover and its suppliers that BMW was in for the long haul and had a long-term commitment to Rover and to Longbridge in particular.

We know that BMW faced difficulties, but in negotiations over two years, it struck me that there were three essential elements in Rover having a bright future—and BMW did not disagree. First, workers at Longbridge and the other Rover plants needed to change their working practices and adopt greater flexibility. The workers delivered ground-breaking agreements on working practices. They have done everything that BMW asked of them and more.

Secondly, the whole process had to receive the backing of government at all levels in the UK. That has been delivered as well. Local partners—from Birmingham city council to the chamber of commerce and the training and enterprise council—got behind Longbridge and put together a package negotiated with BMW to deliver their side of the bargain. Despite what has been said by Opposition Members, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has behaved impeccably and has shown commitment on behalf of the Government by delivering the £152 million package and showing faith in the Rover group and BMW.

The third element was BMW itself. It is true that, in the first years of its involvement, it made a major investment in the Rover Group: about £500 million a year. It is also true that BMW committed itself to a further £1.5 billion of investment at the Longbridge plant. That commitment, however, has not been honoured, and the responsibility lies with BMW and with BMW alone.

I do not think that we should allow any evasion, and I was disappointed that Conservative Members tried to shift the responsibility. Let me take up some of the issues that they raised. First, let me deal with the European Commission, and the reference to the grant.

It is regrettable that the European Commission takes such time over applications—I have a less sanguine view in that regard than the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable)—although it must be said that it has taken less time over this application than over others. We should remember, however, that the European Commission agreed and announced in December that it would embark on a formal inquiry. At that stage, we wanted to know what time scales were involved. There was speculation; it could take up to 18 months. The Commission said that it would take up to six months. That was clearly regrettable, but there was no suggestion then, and there is no suggestion now, that it constituted a fundamental barrier to BMW's continuing its investment and standing by Longbridge. In implying something else, Conservative Members are being disingenuous, or else they have lost the plot in regard to what is going on with BMW and Longbridge.

The strength of sterling was also raised. Anyone who represents a manufacturing area—anyone who knows companies involved in exports, particularly to Europe—

is aware of the difficulty that that is causing to our manufacturers, but it is no excuse for what BMW has done. The losses announced at the BMW board meeting were not a bolt from the blue; they had been predicted for months.

If BMW or anyone else argues that the strength of sterling was the make or break element for BMW, it should be remembered that BMW prides itself on being a pan-European company. That means that it produces in Germany as well as in the United Kingdom, and that it benefits from the weakness of the euro when importing its vehicles to the United Kingdom and when exporting them to the United States. Perhaps BMW could have been more aggressive and dynamic in exporting classic cars such as the Rover 75 to the United States: if it had done that earlier, the cars would have sold very well.

It grieves me to say this, because I have been supportive of BMW for years, but it has a responsibility for what has happened, and that needs to be recorded.

Mr. Geoffrey Robinson: Does my hon. Friend agree that production of cars in the United Kingdom is some 40 per cent. lower than it is in Germany? Does that not more than negate the exchange-rate argument?

Mr. Burden: My hon. Friend makes a good point.

I hoped that we would be able to secure a degree of cross-party agreement on the important issue of how we could get behind Longbridge and plan for the future, but if Conservative Members are going to criticise the way in which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has handled the grant application, or the way in which he has handled the matter overall, they will be sitting in some rather fragile glass houses. It was they who sold off the Rover Group to British Aerospace for a song. It was they who, when the company had an asset base worth in excess of £250 million, wrote off debts totalling £800 million. The company was declaring a pre-tax profit of £65 million, and how much did they sell it for? They sold it for £150 million. That was crass incompetence and against European rules; the previous Government were found out about that.

Mr. Butterfill: Were the previous Government trodden down in a rush by alternative buyers prepared to pay more?

Mr. Burden: The hon. Gentleman would perhaps do well to read—I hope that it is still in print because it is a classic document—the National Audit Office report entitled "Department of Trade and Industry sale of Rover Group plc to British Aerospace plc". One of the issues mentioned in the report is that the previous Government went straight to British Aerospace and did not look around for other potential partners.

The impact of today's decisions is real enough. As the Secretary of State said, the impact is not on a theoretical plant, or theoretical people, but on real people and real livelihoods in the west midlands and elsewhere. It has been estimated that, just in the midlands, about 50,000 jobs depend on the Longbridge plant. Birmingham city council estimates that, if Longbridge were to close, the total cost to the public purse would be about £317 million. If there were a major slimming down of Longbridge, the cost would be £178 million. Total jobs lost from a complete closure in the Birmingham area would be 19,370 and from a slimming down 10,850, so we are dealing with a very serious issue for the west midlands and for motor manufacturing in this country as a whole.

Today, we have heard the news that Alchemy Partners is in negotiations with BMW and that BMW has said that it wishes to dispose of the majority of Rover Cars to Alchemy. We do not know much about Alchemy at this stage, but we must say clearly that, if it ended up as an exercise in asset-stripping, that would not be acceptable to my constituents or to the west midlands as a whole.

Statements have been coming out of Alchemy today about its launch of the MG car company. It says that it wants to retain motor manufacturing at Longbridge and that it is committed to motor manufacturing in the west midlands. I am pleased that it is saying that, but, as the Secretary of State said, we must ask it some serious questions.

We have to examine exactly what model range Alchemy anticipates producing and how all that will be financed. We need to examine whether other partners are involved. Production and design of new models involve considerable financial firepower. If Alchemy is to take over Rover Cars, we have to be assured about what it will do with it and of its commitment.

I hope that my fears about Alchemy are unfounded. If it is committed to the west midlands and can bring the firepower to bear not just to save Longbridge, but to ensure that the commitment of the work force to the plant continues and that the potential of the plant is realised, no one will be happier than me. For that to happen, it will need a critical mass behind it. It has to explain how it will put that critical mass together.

There is a longer-term issue that goes well beyond Longbridge and the Rover Group. Throughout Europe and, indeed, elsewhere, there is over-capacity in the motor industry. We have known about that for some time. The consequences are beginning to be felt. We need a long-term strategy for the motor industry. We know of the devastation that was inflicted on coalfield communities as a result of the acts of industrial vandalism by the previous Government. There have been integrated strategies to regenerate those areas. We need similar—in fact, greater—creativity in our industrial areas.

We need to look 10 and 20 years hence, think about where the motor industry and manufacturing will be, and get ahead of the game in working with components' suppliers and manufacturers, so that we can decide the strategies necessary to make the best use of our great powers of innovation and great industrial base and to meet the challenges of the future.

Some examples are available, such as the British motor sport industry. Although that is a hobby-horse of mine, it is a relevant example. Everyone knows about motor sport, but not many people know about the multi-million pound motor sport industry. The industry is essentially composed of quite small firms, but they are clustered, bringing together communities of knowledge that, although highly competitive, are highly co-operative. The arrangement has been a success story not only for the industry, but for Britain.

I do not claim that the lessons of the motor sport industry can simply be picked up and dropped into mainstream motor manufacturing—they cannot—but some lessons can be learned from it. I hope—I am sure

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that it will happen—that my right hon. Friends and other Ministers will get together with partners in the regions, such as the regional development agencies and local authorities, to implement a strategy to ensure not only that Longbridge survives next year and the year after, but that British motor manufacturing lasts well into this century and beyond. It has the potential to do so.

Although it is no excuse for BMW to blame the exchange rate for its decision today—the responsibility for the decision is with BMW, and BMW alone—the exchange rate is an issue for manufacturing industry. I do not dispute the Bank of England's right to set interest rates. As far as I know, under their current policy, even Conservative Members do not dispute the Bank of England's right to set interest rates—*[Interruption.]* They have done another U-turn. I cannot keep up with their policy shifts.

The Bank has a responsibility to consider the long-term health and stability of the British economy, but a healthy manufacturing base is both a short-term issue and a long-term issue. Although the Bank has the right to set interest rates, it perhaps needs to examine more closely its responsibility for ensuring the long-term health of manufacturing industry.

The lessons of the past 24 hours will be remembered in the west midlands for a long time to come. Now, however, is the time for us not only to lay the responsibility at BMW's door, but to move on—to work with Alchemy to ensure that it can deliver what it says it can deliver, and to ensure that we develop and implement the strategies that can revive our industrial areas and allow British motor manufacturing to achieve its potential.

5.43 pm

Sir Norman Fowler (Sutton Coldfield): I should like to speak briefly, like the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Mr. Burden), and I shall come back to one or two of the points that he made.

The first thing to be said is that this is potentially a vast tragedy. The decisions now being taken are vastly important to the west midlands and to constituencies such as mine. Literally thousands of jobs are at stake, and I approach the debate in that spirit.

Although many newspapers lovingly remember "Red Robbo" and the days of industrial anarchy at Longbridge, those days are long over. They were 30 years ago. It is as absurd to judge Rover in that light as it would be to judge national newspapers on the basis of the old Spanish practices that used to go on there. In Rover, there has been a transformation of industrial relations. The vast majority of the work force are dedicated men and women. As someone who will not be standing at the next general election, I say that there are few better people in this country than those living and working in the midlands.

Over the years, one of the things that we have suffered from is the way in which some London-based commentators and, sometimes, politicians have written off Rover and the midlands. There has been all too little recognition of the recovery efforts that have been made and little recognition that, by 1994, the company was progressing well, particularly in its partnership with Honda. That partnership may well have offered the best chance of success. Honda was certainly deeply offended by the manner in which the partnership was broken up and the sale to BMW took place, but that is history.

When BMW took over Rover, I am sure that it wanted to develop the whole company. I do not subscribe to the theory that it was always interested just in taking Land Rover. BMW deserves credit for its management effort and the vast resources that it has invested. However, I find it strange that in such a professional organisation, some very strange steps have been taken in the past 12 months. No one doubted that the launch of the Rover 75 was vital to the success of the company. I cannot understand why the launch ceremony was accompanied by a public lecture on poor productivity in the company by the then chairman. That overshadowed the launch, which is exactly what should not have happened.

A climate of uncertainty has plagued Rover over the years. It does not need a marketing genius to work out that if there is uncertainty over the future of a company, it will have an effect on the sales and the products. That is what has happened.

The most amazing U-turn is now being executed. Only a few weeks ago, the new chairman of BMW was talking of his commitment to Rover and its development. I reiterate the point made by the hon. Member for Northfield—that the people of the west midlands took that commitment at face value. The Government amendment refers to the major losses that BMW has suffered and the great pressure put on the company. I agree that it has suffered heavy losses, but it always said that that would be the case. There is no surprise in that. The strategy was to move through that period and bring the company to profitability. The Government should not be too timid in pointing out that the strategy has altered out of all recognition.

However, I have some sympathy for BMW. It offered to invest £1.5 billion in modernising Longbridge. The Government offered another £150 million, doubtless after some negotiation. I am not sure that the Secretary of State can say that that £150 million was of no particular relevance and not a crucial amount. On 23 July, when announcing the agreement to provide £152 million of aid, he said:

> This is great news for Longbridge, the West Midlands and the country as a whole. The future is an exciting one and I look forward to Longbridge taking on its competitors, winning and becoming a world leader.

We cannot renege on that important decision.

My concern relates to the process of examination. The hon. Member for Northfield made the point. There has been a nine-month delay and a six-month delay. The Secretary of State said on the radio this morning that six months is speedy—I think that I quote him correctly—by European Commission standards. He may well be right, but that prompts the question of whether it should be the case.

It is unacceptable that such an investigation at such a crucial moment should take so much time. I do not agree with the Secretary of State's contention that it was not a factor in the BMW decision simply because it was not mentioned in the press release. That is not my information. I fear and suspect that it had a disproportionate impact on the change of strategy in Munich. BMW saw a company sustaining losses of £700 million a year, but it was prepared to invest a further

£1.5 billion. The company saw that £150 million was offered by the British Government, but that the Commission could not make up its mind in six months—or, to be frank, much longer. That does not seem a particularly sound process by which these matters are decided.

I do not take an extreme view on Europe, but the Government—and, perhaps, everyone—should take note that middle England is becoming more and more disillusioned with the bureaucracy, delay and regulation that seem to characterise the EU as it is presently constituted.

We can all seek to diagnose what has gone wrong, and acres of newsprint have been devoted to that this morning. However, the real issue is what now can be done. Part of Rover, self-evidently, has a future inside BMW. We are unclear about where Land Rover will go or what its parent will be, but we can foresee that it will have a good future, wherever that may be. We may want to come back to debate the details of that.

The press today has written off the prospects of the other part of Rover—the car-making part, which makes the Rover 75 and the other Rover vehicles and which now, we understand, includes MG. I suggest that that should not necessarily be written off, and that there could be a future—although there is a big pit to climb out of. However, it is not mission impossible, and I shall draw an analogy to prove it.

In the mid-1980s, the van business of Leyland was to be sold off to General Motors; one or two colleagues might remember our debates then. The DTI argued at the time that this was the only course open to be taken with the company, although the plan envisaged the closure of the Birmingham plant. One or two of us did not agree with that diagnosis and the sale did not take place. The company was given its management independence; the company survives, and it prospers.

I cannot say whether that will be the outcome on this occasion, but I plead not for more and more money from the Treasury, but for public support and media understanding for any efforts that are made to turn the car-making part into a viable business. That is what we want. We are good in this country at dismissing effort and writing obituaries. We need support for any efforts that are made to achieve recovery.

5.52 pm

Mr. Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Hall Green): I take no pleasure in participating in this debate; this is a sad day for the west midlands. We have heard that if Longbridge closes or substantially cuts back, that would cost about 9,000 jobs, and the multiplier effect might result in a further 40,000 jobs being lost across the west midlands. Some 20,000 of those will be in Birmingham, many in my constituency. We could see unemployment in Birmingham rising to 15 per cent. if the worst scenario is played out. Over 2,000 companies in the west midlands in the automotive supply chain are vulnerable to a substantial shutdown at Longbridge, and it is estimated that they could lose about 30 per cent. of their business as a result.

It is true that Birmingham has been able to diversify following the earlier job shocks of the 1980s recessions, and that financial, professional and business services are rapidly emerging as Birmingham's main earners. None the less, Longbridge continues to play a vital role in the life and livelihoods of Birmingham people. I agree with the policy director of the Birmingham chamber of commerce, who said only yesterday that

> it could be a huge disaster for the region, particularly if it goes to a buyer from outside the automotive industry.

Consequently, like many other hon. Members, I think that we need urgent information about Alchemy Partners. We have had some information from the hon. Member for Bournemouth, West (Mr. Butterfill), but that only added to my worries. We need to know what the company's plans are and whether another car company is waiting in the wings.

We also need to know whether Alchemy Partners intends to run Rover production at about 250,000 units, as suggested in today's *Financial Times*, which is about a quarter of present capacity. I notice that Jon Moulton is quoted as saying that he looks to exit as quickly as possible, within at least three years. That is hardly an encouraging signal for the workers at Longbridge. After all, he is the man who sacked 120,000 workers within days of taking over Parker Pens.

Mr. Ian Bruce: Is it not strange that BMW effectively gave 48 hours' notice of its intention to get rid of the plants? Does the hon. Gentleman think that BMW wants Rover cars to be in competition with it in the future, or does it simply want a fire sale to close Rover down as quickly as possible?

Mr. McCabe: None of BMW's recent announcements have been well timed or helpful. Since BMW's acquisition of Rover, there have been persistent rumours about BMW's real intentions, and it has specifically been suggested that it wanted to get its hands on the Land Rover four-wheel drive technology and the other profitable parts of the company. I wanted to believe that BMW was telling the truth when it denied those rumours and I initially interpreted its investment at Longbridge and the development of the new Mini assembly, as well as the promise of £1.7 billion of investment, as evidence that it was acting in good faith. However, it appears today that that trust was misplaced.

I do not deny that BMW has experienced problems at Longbridge. It is an old plant, as everybody acknowledges. However, the treatment of the people who work for Rover has been a disgrace. The workers have given all that they can. They accepted BMW's new and much less favourable working conditions, they have come to terms with huge job losses and they have put their faith in the promises and assurances of the BMW executives. However, the workers have been let down.

Unfortunately, the recent experience is not new. It is part of a much longer trend for which the Opposition have to take some of the responsibility. In 1988, when they were in Government, they sold Rover to British Aerospace for £150 million, in clear breach of EU rules. That was just the start of what has proved to be a succession of shoddy deals at the workers' expense, especially those at Longbridge. Although BAe was later forced to pay back a large part of the sweeteners that it received, it still made a profit of £400 million on a company that it had held on to for only five years.

In fact, as part of the initial giveaway by the Conservative Government, BAe was not allowed to relinquish control of Rover for five years on pain of

[Mr. McCabe]

incurring financial penalties. BAe waited five years and six months before selling Rover to BMW, and it is clear that BAe never had any commitment to Rover. The Conservative Government must have known that, even when they were going out of their way to flog the company on the cheap. *[Interruption.]* I am not quite sure what the hon. Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce) said, but the point is that Rover was flogged on the cheap in breach of European rules. As my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Mr. Burden) said, if one reads the NAO report, the criticisms are clear. Indeed, the report from the Select Committee on Trade and Industry contains damning criticisms. There is no doubt about what was intended.

Mr. Ian Bruce: The hon. Gentleman did not hear what I said, which was that the Secretary of State has just given £500 million to British Aerospace, the company that the hon. Gentleman has been criticising. Is he saying the right hon. Gentleman has got that wrong as well?

Mr. McCabe: The problem with the hon. Gentleman's position is that my right hon. Friend made money available as part of a negotiated deal. I am talking about a deal on the cheap that was in breach of European rules, over which the previous Government were criticised by the National Audit Office and by a Select Committee of this House. The two sets of circumstances are pretty different.

The matter did not end with the fiasco of the sale to British Aerospace. When that company then decided to offload Rover to BMW, the right hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine), the then President of the Board of Trade, said that it was part of a strategy to help British industry win. Some strategy, some win: I do not think that people at Longbridge feel that they have won today.

There have been several comments about BMW's suggestion that the problems stem from the strength of the pound. Yet that ignores the facts—that BMW's sales in the UK benefit from the strong pound, that the company has already screwed down its UK suppliers to the tightest possible margins, and that it has even proposed paying them in euros. I therefore do not know how much weight should be placed on that argument.

The strength of the pound has contributed to Rover's problems, but UK car output last year reached its highest level for 27 years. That was largely due to increased export sales, with two out of three cars going to the overseas market. During the same period, Rover car sales fell by nearly 25 per cent. That must in part be due, as the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) said, to the persistent sabotaging of the product by BMW's untimely speculations.

Sadly, BMW is pulling the plug at the very time when sales have stabilised and even begun to rise, especially in mainland Europe. It is difficult to understand the company's strategy.

The Opposition have tried to blame the Government for the recent turn of events. Perhaps they should reflect on the fact that the previous Conservative Government initiated the chain of events that have finally done for Rover. Moreover, while the Government were negotiating grant aid for BMW last year, the former shadow trade and industry spokesman, the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood), who is no longer present, opposed the Government's offer of grant aid to Longbridge. He is on record as saying that he is opposed to large public investment to help regions hit by job losses. I think that the people in Longbridge know whom they would rather have to depend on in a crisis such as this.

I have some sympathy for BMW in one respect—I agree with the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield about this—and that is with regard to the actions of the European Commission in dealing with the grant inquiries. I do not accept that the European Commission's investigation was vital to BMW's announcement, but we are entitled to wonder what its true purpose was.

Commissioner Monti said originally that the Commission merely wanted to look at the proposals. It may be that BMW always intended to undertake the asset stripping in which it has now indulged, and that the company's earlier pronouncements were merely a blind. We shall probably never know, but the Commission's actions have not exactly helped matters.

I want to know what Commissioner Monti really meant when he talked about transparency. Was he simply ensuring that, having announced investigations into two very different grant proposals involving Volkswagen and Fiat, Britain's proposals also had to be investigated so as not to upset other member states? I think that it is reasonable to know what exactly was intended. As others have said, the Commission has not exactly endeared itself to the Longbridge work force by its actions.

We are left to deal with the legacy that BMW has bequeathed. We need to know urgently what Alchemy's real intentions are. We need to know exactly what BMW has agreed, and if we can trust its word this time. Above all, we must do all that we can to rescue the economy of the west midlands and the livelihood of its people, and to secure a strategy for long-term, modern automotive production in the west midlands, particularly in fields such as the telematics industry.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. My understanding is that the wind-up speeches will begin at 20 minutes to the hour. It will therefore probably be possible to have two Back-Bench speeches on either side if hon. Members speak for less than 10 minutes apiece.

6.6 pm

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove): I begin by paying tribute to my Front-Bench colleagues, who rightly changed the subject of today's Supply day debate so that we might discuss the serious events at Rover. I doubt whether Ministers would have been prepared to make a statement tonight. We are not used to Ministers being forthcoming about important information that affects our constituents. Therefore, I want to say how right I think it is that the Conservative party believed it appropriate to discuss today's extremely important announcement.

It is a shame that the Secretary of State has left the Chamber because, although I have a personal regard for the right hon. Gentleman, I thought it discourteous of him not to accept an intervention from someone whose constituency includes part of the Longbridge plant—the plant's location is shared between my constituency and that of the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Mr. Burden). I would not have expected such a discourtesy from the right hon. Gentleman.

Perhaps the Minister who is replying to the debate will pay due heed to what I wanted to ask the Secretary of State. I listened very carefully to BMW's announcement today and the right hon. Gentleman's interpretation of it. His remarks contained no guarantees about the level of employment that would continue at the Longbridge factory. There was not even a guarantee that the Longbridge factory would continue to produce cars. In fact, when the right hon. Gentleman said that he would be speaking to Alchemy this evening about the plant's prospects and future, he said that cars "should" continue to be produced there. I find that a worrying use of language.

I would be grateful if the Minister could shed any light on what guarantees there are for employment at the factory. As the hon. Member for Northfield and others have said, many people are facing the potential loss of their job at the factory. *[Interruption.]* I am not taking any interventions, because of the discourtesy shown to me and also because of the limit on time.

I want to talk about the 9,000 jobs that are at stake—we hope that they will not be lost—as well as the wider midlands perspective that takes in 50,000 jobs, and the suppliers that face the loss of their contracts. There is no doubt that, despite the barracking of Labour Members, this is a very sad day for the midlands. It is a sad day for my constituents and for many others who have had a rollercoaster ride over the future of the Longbridge factory ever since I became the local Member of Parliament in 1997, and before that. They must have spent the night worrying about today's announcement, and I feel sorry for them. Despite today's announcement, their worries will not have ceased, because we simply do not know what the future is, irrespective of what has been announced. We know some details, including, sadly, the fact that Longbridge will lose the exciting prospect of production of the Mini to Cowley.

Alchemy, and, one presumes, Longbridge, will continue to make the MG. That is exciting, and a piece of good news, but anyone who knows anything about car production knows that the MG is an exciting niche car, not a mass-produced one, which makes it unlikely that its production at Longbridge, or anywhere else, would employ the number of people currently employed at Longbridge.

If I understood the statement correctly, the R30—the smaller version of the Rover 75, which will continue on licence at Cowley—which would have succeeded the soon-to-be outdated Rovers 25 and 35, will not be sold to Alchemy along with the Rover name. BMW will produce it in some form somewhere else under a name we do not know. But that car is extremely important to the Rover range's place in the volume car market. The fact that the brand does not go with the sale worries me.

It is hard not to be gloomy. Indeed, my gloom is shared by the unions—an unlikely alliance, perhaps—and every midlands Member must be feeling the gloom at present. The Longbridge work force do not deserve it. They had a reputation in the 1970s and before for being somewhat difficult, but they are experienced and their willingness to accept changes in practices in the past few years has been exemplary. They have done all they can to show good faith in the production of cars at Longbridge and have tried to maintain their jobs by showing the flexibility required of a modern car production factory. After all that willingness to change and to accept the new world of car manufacturing, today's announcement is a kick in the teeth. Their good will has been resoundingly rejected by the BMW board, and we wait to see what Alchemy will bring.

I was extremely alarmed when my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth, West (Mr. Butterfill) described Alchemy's investment profile. We all know what venture capitalists are. They go in and out on property speculations of different sorts.

Mr. Butterfill *indicated dissent.*

Miss Kirkbride: Perhaps my words are a little over-anxious.

Mr. Peter Luff (Mid-Worcestershire): Venture capitalists can be like that.

Miss Kirkbride: My hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Mr. Luff) comes to my rescue. Venture capitalists can be like that.

Clearly, Alchemy's track record to date makes it hard to see how it can take on responsibility for Longbridge. Earlier this week, the plant was considering investment of £1.7 billion in new car production facilities for the smaller range of the Rover 75. It is hard to see how Alchemy can begin to harness the optimism that we had just a few days ago. The record is worrying and we must wait for more information.

I wanted to put those remarks on the record. We must consider the feelings and thoughts of the work force and their families. How will they pay their mortgages if things go pear-shaped at the plant?

Political flak has come at us from Labour Members, but it was outrageous for the hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr. McCabe) to claim that all the problems arose from decisions taken by the previous Conservative Government. His statement has no credibility. The problem is huge; many people have been involved. There are demand difficulties in the international car market; we realise that. Larger issues are at stake.

However, Labour Members, including the hon. Member for Northfield—who has left the Chamber—must accept that at least a scintilla of blame attaches to the Government. BMW has had to contend with the exchange rate during the past few years. Any Member who represents a midlands constituency, or has dealings with BMW, is only too aware that the company regards the exchange rate as one of its principal problems.

We also know that Rover is not the only company to suffer—although it seems to have taken the fall. There is a problem with the exchange rate, and there have been problems with the grant in aid and with the European investigation. Those matters have been raised by other hon. Members, so it would not be fair to go into them further.

Labour Members must grow up. They must realise that the situation is difficult, but that they have responsibility for their actions—it is not always the fault of somebody else. It would be nice to hear a little more reality in the subsequent contributions of Labour Members.

6.16 pm

Mr. Terry Davis (Birmingham, Hodge Hill): Unlike the hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Miss Kirkbride), I not only represent people who work at Land Rover and Longbridge, but I drive a Rover car.

What was significant about the speech made by the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) was not her attempt to blame the Government for the crisis at Rover, but what she did not say. Only a few years ago, Conservative Members would have blamed all the troubles at the Rover group on the people who work there. It is significant that we have not heard that today. Indeed, the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) paid tribute to the people who work for Rover. For the first time in my political life, I agree with him. He is right; the people who work at Rover have transformed industrial relations there. The present crisis at Rover cannot be blamed on those who produce the cars.

Fifteen years ago, the Rover group was making a profit. What has gone wrong? My hon. Friends are right to criticise the sale of Rover to British Aerospace at a giveaway price, and to draw attention to reports from the National Audit Office, the Select Committee on Trade and Industry and the Public Accounts Committee. However, those reports were produced several years ago.

It is true that British Aerospace treated the Rover group as a milk cow to get over its short-term cash-flow problem, but that was also some years ago. Then, British Aerospace sold the Rover group and split it up. Jaguar was sold to one company. The van company, mentioned by the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield, and Leyland Trucks were sold to DAF. We were told that was a good thing. The rest of the group was sold in a package to BMW. What happened then? DAF pulled the plug on the van factory and the truck factory. The van factory has been revived—thanks to all-party support and with help from the previous Tory Government during their dying days. That company is now a success, but when it was owned by DAF, the decisions taken in the boardroom were to protect jobs in the Netherlands at the expense of jobs in Birmingham. That was inevitable because ownership had been transferred abroad. The same thing is now happening at Longbridge.

My hon. Friends and Opposition Members are correct to point out that the exchange rate is part of the problem. It is not only in the motor industry that jobs are disappearing; there have been tremendous job losses at the Dunlop factory in Birmingham—attributed by the owners directly to the exchange rate, resulting in the transfer of much tyre production to Germany.

It is not as simple as that, however, because there is another problem. The exchange rate influences our exports, but it does not account for the slump in Rover's sales in this country. The big problem affecting the Rover group is sales and marketing. I wish my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State well at his discussions with representatives of Alchemy tonight, but the big question that he should put to the new owners of Longbridge is not how they will produce more cars, but how they will sell more of them. That is a management responsibility, and that is the question that should be put to the new managers who will take over the Longbridge factory.

6.20 pm

Mr. John Butterfill (Bournemouth, West): I shall be very brief, but I want to clarify some of the remarks that I made about Alchemy in an intervention on the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable).

Alchemy is certainly smaller than the company that one would expect to take over a plant such as Longbridge. The deal that it is doing for Longbridge dwarfs anything that it has taken on to date. However, I do not want it to be thought that I was in way criticising the company. It has a good reputation and has been involved in several successful investments. According to the British Venture Capital Association's handbook, it has invested in

ESP, Goldsmiths plc, Instem plc, Paramount Hotels, Ushers of Trowbridge plc.

The hon. Member for Twickenham referred, I think, to the final company in that list.

Alchemy specialises in rescues, turnarounds and management buy outs, so it is possible that it is in serious discussions with some of the senior management at Longbridge. However, it is equally true that it does not of itself possess the resources that would take a plant, such as Longbridge, forward for the future. When the Secretary of State meets John Moulton of Alchemy Partners this evening—I am sorry that the right hon. Gentleman is not here now—I hope that he will, as a priority, discuss exactly how Alchemy intends to obtain the long-term funds to secure the future of the company.

We all hope that the deal with Alchemy is successful and that it will give the workers at Longbridge the success that they deserve following all the changes in which they have participated in recent years. However, it is important that we receive a little more detail on how that will be achieved. There is hope, because one of the main sources of funding for Alchemy's existing investments is United States and middle east investors. Perhaps, the company has a secure source of long-term funding, but it is a priority for the Secretary of State to establish that fact this evening if possible.

6.23 pm

Mr. Geoffrey Robinson (Coventry, North-West): Possibly, this has been a more significant debate than the Opposition anticipated when they tabled their motion. In seeking to gain party political advantage from it, they have unwittingly raised a major issue about British industry and British manufacturing industry in particular. They would do well to address that issue in opposition, and they will have plenty of time to do that.

The history of the motor industry and other manufacturing industries in this country is one of continual decline. Under successive Governments and successive managements, we have seen nothing but the United Kingdom losing out to European and international manufacturers in terms of market share, product development and all the things that go towards a successful manufacturing industry. It ill behoves the Opposition to try to gain party political advantage from the debate, because that is not what it is about. Arrangements were entered into with BMW in good faith.

Mrs. Browning: The hon. Gentleman talks about the arrangements that were entered into, but we do not know what deal the Government brokered. The Secretary of

State said that these deals are subject to commercial confidentiality. How can we make a judgment when we do not know the details of the negotiations?

Mr. Robinson: The hon. Lady understands nothing. It was her Government who entered into the arrangements and allowed BMW to gazump the existing arrangements. It all started some five years ago, when the Government allowed BMW to gazump Honda, much to the disgust of the Japanese, and buy Rover. Her Government were absolutely responsible for the arrangements that governed that deal. If she did not know about that, it was up to her to find out about it.

I shall tell the hon. Lady what those arrangements were. BMW committed itself to reserving the marque of Rover and to reserving Rover as a manufacturing entity in the UK. BMW said that it would continue all the arrangements that were already in train between Rover and Honda. Those were the arrangements that the hon. Lady's Government entered into.

That deal came to my attention when I was at the Treasury, when out of the blue we heard that BMW wanted to close down Longbridge. BMW did not want to know about the arrangements. It does not care about workers in Longbridge; it is concerned about workers in Munich. The hon. Lady looks distressed, but we must understand the basic fact that despite all the so-called multinational and global investment and industry, each major national company looks after its own people first, and others afterwards.

In that sense, I do not blame the Germans for pulling the plug on Longbridge, which is what they are doing. BMW says that it has made losses, but I say to BMW, "You have had this company for five years. You said that you would make a success of it. I did not doubt your word." I did not doubt BMW's word because one could look at the company's glittering success in Munich. Now decisions about the British motor industry are being made in Munich by Frau Quandt and her family. On another date in the historical calendar the situation could have been quite different.

That situation is not the fault of this Government or this Secretary of State, or indeed any of his predecessors. If any fault is to be found, it is with the British failure in manufacturing industry. The hon. Lady, who in her great wisdom initiated the debate, does not want to consider that. She says that we did not do well enough with the aid application to the European Commission, but everybody knows that everything possible was done by this Government and previous Governments to get the necessary aid. Everybody knows also that European aid has not had the slightest influence on BMW's decision today to dump Rover.

BMW has dumped Rover because it does not suit interests any more. That is fine for BMW, but what about us? What about our employers and employees? *[Interruption.]* I beg the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) to listen for a moment. In the City and everywhere else one sees that global activities are taking place and global entities are being formed, but within those entities the national interest prevails. I beg hon. Members to think about that for a moment. Let us consider the City of London—the citadel of British power where our people prevail. We are increasingly being subsumed into other, bigger entities, which are seemingly global but in reality are nationally oriented.

Returning to the car industry, one sees the motorcycle industry and machine tool industry as subsidiary, but in all those industries this country is losing out and we are not as strong as we ought to be. Obviously, it is too late for BMW even to reconsider its decision. Why has BMW taken that decision? Because it is in its interests. The national interest there is predominant. Had it been a factory in southern Germany—in Munich—that was at stake, such a clear-cut, brutal decision would not have been taken.

Who should we blame for that? We can look back to five years ago. It is not as though the decision had to be taken overnight, or the facts were not already known. It is not as though there has not been a magnificent increase in productivity and quality of product. For one reason or another, BMW chose not to manufacture it in the UK.

Fair enough. That is BMW's decision, but is it good enough? Do we, a great nation in our own right, accept that decisions are taken irrespective of our Government's views on the matter, and irrespective of what that company in Germany said when it bought into and took control of our industry? Is all that unconditionally acceptable to us?

We have nothing to be ashamed of with regard to labour productivity. The costs of production in the UK are 30 to 40 per cent. less—I am pleased to see my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) listening to this—than they are in Germany, so what is the problem?

The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton smirks, and I find that offensive.

Mrs. Browning: I was not smirking.

Mr. Robinson: Indeed, she was. Our jobs, our people—*[Interruption.]* Now the hon. Lady laughs. That is even better. It becomes her well, but we care about British industry and the British motor industry. We care about what we still have of our manufacturing industry—while it lasts.

The issue transcends party politics. It does not offend any party political dogma, or rather, it should not. It is an issue that affects us all as citizens of the United Kingdom. Unless we realise that in the case of global industry, the globally competitive aspects pertain most of all with regard to the management of it, we shall lose out. If we are happy to lose out—to sit back and see it all happen, and imagine that we will be saved by the internet or some other marvellous new technology where the English language prevails—fine. However, I say to hon. Members that that will not do. This country, and any mature democracy such as ours, must have as its basis some major industries and activities under its own ownership and managerial control.

I am delighted that the Opposition initiated the debate tonight. It allows us to highlight matters that go beyond party political issues. The Opposition will regret having raised the issue this evening. We know the issues that really matter—*[Interruption.]* Yes, jobs—very much so. Who did nothing in that regard? We have done all we can to protect jobs.

I wish Alchemy well. We must give it every support. I am sure that the Government will do so, as we did for BMW, and I hope that Alchemy will respond more positively and constructively to the support that it gets from the Government than BMW has done.

6.34 pm

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): It was a little difficult to follow the comments of the hon. Member for Coventry, North–West (Mr. Robinson). Can the House agree that it is pointless for everyone to try to find someone to blame—the Germans, the family, and so on? For many of us, there are large numbers of jobs, families and households at stake—in Oxford, East, in Banbury and in the whole of Birmingham.

My hon. Friends on the Front Bench are to be congratulated on initiating the debate, without which hon. Members on both sides of the House would not have had the opportunity of speaking on this matter today. We all have a bad feeling in the pit of our stomach about what is happening. When the Secretary of State said in his closing comments that our thoughts were with the families at Longbridge, he was right, but it was a rather funereal peroration. Perhaps we can all move away from trying to find somebody to blame and, instead, think about what we can do to improve the situation for the future.

It seems that we all agree that the people at Longbridge have done their very best to deliver. Productivity is high and anything that has been asked of the company has come across. So where do we find the problems and what can we do to improve matters?

I have two requests of the Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs and the Secretary of State. First, I ask the Government to give an undertaking that if need be they will return to this matter in Government time in the not-too-distant future. It should not be only for the Opposition to initiate debates on the subject.

We know nothing about Alchemy, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth, West (Mr. Butterfill) said. I am sure that it is a perfectly respectable company, but it has no proven track record in such a large enterprise. I hope that the Secretary of State will give an undertaking that he will return to the House to debate these matters. He says that he wants to obtain a great deal of information about Alchemy, and I hope that, perhaps on Monday, he will make a statement so that we can be kept up to date with what is happening.

I agree with the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) and others that we must recognise the impact that the strength of the pound is having on manufacturing industry throughout the country, and not only in the west midlands. There have been a number of comments from BMW spokesmen. I will not go through them because they have been listed in *The Independent* and other newspapers recently. They have said that they have been watching the exchange rate on almost a daily basis. It seems that, as much as anything, the exchange rate and the strength of the pound caused BMW to abandon its £1 billion investment in Longbridge.

This is not an issue that we can duck. If the strength of the pound is damaging UK manufacturing capability and capacity, the Bank of England Monetary Policy Committee must take account of that when setting and determining interest rates.

Dr. Lynne Jones: What would the Conservatives do about the high value of the pound? If we want a loosening of monetary policy, it is hardly appropriate that the Tories should be calling for tax cuts and a loosening of fiscal policy as well.

Mr. Baldry: I hoped for better from the hon. Lady. To engage in point scoring in this debate is pointless. If the strength of the pound is damaging UK manufacturing industry, we are entitled to say to the Bank of England that, when determining its policy, it should not focus only on inflation rates but should have regard to what is happening to the core of our manufacturing base.

The hon. Member for Coventry, North-West (Mr. Robinson) talked about what is happening in terms of the UK—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) should not be reading a newspaper in the Chamber.

Mrs. Caroline Spelman (Meriden): I am sorry, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Baldry: The hon. Member for Coventry, North-West talked about what was happening in terms of UK competitiveness and the UK manufacturing base moving overseas. Those matters should be of concern to every Member of this place and should not be used for the scoring of political points. We are talking of jobs that, once lost, will not return. I urge the Secretary of State and the Minister to accept that we must all consider, in the absence of the blame culture, how we can turn the situation round.

I am sure that there are macro-economic issues that require consideration. The Secretary of State told us frequently what had not influenced BMW in its decision. He said that it had not been influenced by a lack of grant. However, he did not tell us what had influenced the company in deciding to move away from Longbridge. I suspect that one factor was the exchange rate and the fact that it could see itself continuing to make substantial losses while the pound stayed as strong as it did. If this House continues to be totally myopic about that, we cannot be surprised if the UK manufacturing base continues to be eroded.

6.39 pm

Mr. Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton): We have had an important debate on an issue that is crucial to the British economy and vital to the jobs and prospects of 50,000 people. The Secretary of State has presided over a catalogue of incompetence. Incompetence characterised his handling of the Post Office network, the computerisation programme, and the level of the Post Office monopoly: is it £1 or 50p? He handled the Utilities Bill incompetently—it required 400 Government amendments, and the telecom and water sectors were removed from it halfway through Committee stage.

The Government's original approach to the Electronic Communications Bill was incompetent. There is confusion about competition policy and the Secretary of State made errors of judgment in his rip-off Britain campaign. I wonder how much damage that campaign has done to the sale of Rover cars in Britain and world wide? The Secretary of State now displays incompetence in his dealings with the European Commission on state aid to Rover.

The Government originally announced state aid with a flourish in March 1999 and the details were announced in June. As my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) said, between those two dates, only one meeting with the Commission took place.

The Commission was not formally notified until August 1999; the EU began its inquiry four months after that. Why did the Secretary of State take so long—six months after the first announcement in March 1999—to make the formal application? We have to wait until June this year for a formal EU decision. That is too late. Industry has to work at a different pace from that to which the Secretary of State is accustomed. However, the writing is on the wall for the right hon. Gentleman. In the row between the Secretary of State and his junior Minister over the site for the Synchrotron research facility, the Prime Minister backed Lord Sainsbury rather than the Secretary of State—another incompetent judgment.

When he opened the debate, the Secretary of State simply read out the BMW press release and the results of hours of research into previous aid notifications by the Conservative Government. His dismissal of the delay in achieving EU approval of the grant is astonishing. He now claims that the grant is irrelevant. When Rover achieves new investment, the grant is crucial and the success is a triumph for the Government, but when Rover is in difficulty, the grant is irrelevant and the problems have nothing to do with the Government.

Mr. Ian Bruce: I have just returned from watching the Chief Secretary and his constituents in Oxford on television. They were celebrating BMW's actions, yet the mood on the Floor of the House is completely different. Do we know whether the £140 million will go to Oxford rather than being lost to BMW?

Mr. Gibb: I am grateful for that intervention. It is good news for Oxford. Perhaps the Secretary of State is more concerned about that than the difficulties at Longbridge.

Mr. Burden: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Gibb: I shall not give way because we are running out of time. The hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) blamed the problem on the exchange rate; that is also BMW's view. He acknowledged that nothing could be done about the exchange rate, but he agreed with us about the damage that the rip-off Britain campaign causes.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Mr. Burden) denied that the exchange rate had any effect in view of successful exports of BMWs, even when the Deutschmark was strong.

In an informed and balanced speech, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) made the important point that a period of six months to investigate the £152 million grant by the Commission is unacceptable in this day and age.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr. McCabe) pointed out that 2,000 companies could lose up to 30 per cent. of their business if Longbridge closes.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Miss Kirkbride) rightly pointed out that, but for the Conservative Opposition, the Secretary of State would not even have made a statement. She raised the important concern about jobs at Longbridge, on which the Secretary of State was so coy.

A bigger issue is at stake. There has been incompetence, delay and dither, and the Secretary of State incompetently failed to examine the aid issue in detail. Had he done so, he would have worked out that the Commission would not accept that there was any realistic possibility of the Longbridge operation being transferred to Hungary. On the radio this morning, he also made the extraordinary statement, which he repeated in the debate, that—

Mr. Burden: Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Mr. Gibb: I will not. There is very little time left.

The Secretary of State said that the grant was irrelevant, despite boasting wildly about it when it was announced. For Conservative Members, the bigger issue is what has happened to the United Kingdom economy that has meant that, in the past month, we have faced the possible loss of Harland and Wolff shipyard and of one of our major indigenous car industries. What has happened since August 1996, when the chief executive of Siemens said:

> Our decision to build the new semi-conductor plant here in the UK is a recognition of the pro-business environment which exists?

What has happened since October 1995, when the chairman of BMW said:

> Great Britain is currently the most attractive country among all European locations for producing cars?

BMW does not think that now, so what has happened?

I can tell the House. There has been a new, damaging approach to manufacturing and to business since the Government came to power, the consequences of which we are beginning to see: £5 billion a year in extra regulatory costs on British business as a result of measures introduced by the Government; a proliferation of red tape, and new and more powerful interventionist regulations; £35 billion of extra taxes on business over this Parliament; more corporation tax; more stamp duty on business transactions; more duty on diesel; a new pension funds tax that puts up business' pension costs as well as its capital costs; the climate change levy; and IR35. All those measures are damaging to the British economy, to businesses that are trying to survive in a fiercely competitive world, to businesses large and small and to businesses that are trying to turn themselves around, as Rover was.

Damage cannot be undone by sending out an army of spin doctors to spread a different message or to manipulate media coverage. Government is about policy decisions and their effects on people's lives and prospects, not rhetoric or media handling. We need Ministers who concentrate their time and intellectual effort on getting those decisions right, rather than on worrying about the backdrop for the next press conference and the next photo opportunity. If Longbridge goes, the blame for the huge damage that will be done to the west midlands economy will lie with incompetent Ministers and an economic policy that is costly and damaging to British business.

6.48 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Alan Johnson): This issue is vital. Thousands of people face an uncertain future and thousands of families in the midlands will be extremely concerned about today's announcements. To be fair, many Opposition Members acknowledged that this is a complex matter, but it is a shame that the official Opposition—instead of coming to the House in the proper spirit and

[Mr. Alan Johnson]

seeking a mature debate—launched a shoddy personal attack on my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, which missed entirely. They also used today's sombre news to try to score a few petty political points, but failed dismally in that objective. They have demeaned the issue before us.

The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) made a convoluted point about grant aid. We negotiated that aid quickly because there was the threat that BMW might move to Hungary, and then sought clearance. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said, there is no other example of negotiating grant aid and regional selective assistance where the deal is not done first, before seeking approval. The proposal was referred by the European Commission to a full investigation; nothing unusual there. In fact, the Government recently supported that measure in relation to Volkswagen. We went through the normal process. The actual deal was commercially confidential, as are all such deals. Opposition Members know that full well.

Apart from a couple of other spurious points, that amounted to the total contribution by Opposition Members to this important debate. There is no telling whether we would have come to the House to initiate a debate but I give the Opposition one point out of 10 for initiating a debate on an important issue. It is a shame that members of the Opposition Front Bench did not contribute more constructively.

The hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable), in a thoughtful seminar on the single European currency, referred to the strength of sterling—not a point raised by the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton. I remind the House that the biggest rise in the value of the deutschmark against sterling was in the seven months leading up to the general election in May 1997. There were many interventions and contributions from this side of the House about the strength of sterling, which was cited also by the hon. Member for Twickenham in a balanced speech, but no one offered a solution. The remedy that he offered—joining the single European currency—was spurious, given current circumstances.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Mr. Burden) displayed as always his commitment to his constituents and community, together with his expertise. He rightly paid tribute to the work force. The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton did not refer once to the work force or the community in Longbridge and their concerns. It was left to my hon. Friend to do so. He pointed out that BMW has received help and assistance from government—particularly from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. He made the important point, in relation to the strength of sterling, that BMW is a pan-European operator.

I was extremely pleased that my hon. Friend mentioned the success of motor sport in this country. Any debate about taking forward the British automotive industry needs to emphasise its success stories. Motor sport is certainly among them and is a benchmark against which most automotive companies should measure themselves.

The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) made from the Conservative Back Benches the eloquent speech that should have come from the Conservative Front Bench. He spoke of the media's obsession with the days of Red Robbo, flares, tank tops and T.Rex. He spoke of how much Longbridge has changed since those days but said there was a strange tendency among the media constantly to hark back to them. I do not agree with everything that he said—he was kind enough to send me a note saying that he could not be here for my reply—but he struck the right note and made an important contribution.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr. McCabe) emphasised the vital role of Longbridge in the region and highlighted the uncertainty surrounding the move to new owners, to which I will refer in a moment. I completely understand the concerns of the hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Miss Kirkbride), as one of the two hon. Members with responsibility for Longbridge constituents. She asked whether there were guarantees about employment and the future. We are working on the basis of an announcement just made; discussions have yet to take place involving my right hon. Friend. I remind her that, during an Adjournment debate in January, she said:

> We should credit BMW for investing in the Rover group when it took over the company. At the time, it was widely speculated that BMW was interested only in Land Rover and having a four-wheel-drive product in their vehicle range, and that it might not show the same commitment to the Rover car itself. It is hard to pin that accusation on BMW.—[*Official Report, Westminster Hall*, 26 January 2000; Vol. 343, c. 70WH.]

In terms of the way in which the situation develops—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Far too many conversations are taking place.

Mr. Johnson: It is impossible to read the future, but I assure the hon. Member for Bromsgrove that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will make the points about employment opportunities at the meeting that is to be held with Alchemy Partners this evening.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Mr. Davis) made an important point about sales and marketing. Rover's sales slumped by 26 per cent. in 1999. That is to do with the way in which the product is marketed, to do with the sales, and to do with the whole management approach to promoting and selling these important products.

The hon. Member for Bournemouth, West (Mr. Butterfill) mentioned the long-term success of Longbridge, which is obviously relevant to the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Coventry, North-West (Mr. Robinson) demonstrated his long experience of the industry. The hon. Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry) said that we should not have a culture of blame, and that it was entirely wrong to apportion blame in this instance. It is a shame that he did not mention that to the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb).

BMW has not entirely removed itself from the picture. It will retain a manufacturing presence in Oxford, where the Cowley plant is producing the Rover 75, which is increasingly successful in the marketplace. It will also continue with plans for the new Mini. The forecasts for that new model are very optimistic, given that it builds on the heritage of the existing car. BMW has decided to continue with the engineering and design function in the United Kingdom, which constitutes a tremendous vote of confidence in the UK's engineering and design capability.

We will work constructively with the new owners to understand their future plans for the business, and to provide any support that may be justified and appropriate. The existing aid package cannot simply be transferred to new owners; any package will depend on the specific circumstances and plans of those new owners, and on whether they meet the proper conditions for support. I can, however, assure the House that we will do everything possible to ensure that Rover has a future in this country.

Rover is a name with which the British public strongly identifies. In the past, its fortunes and troubles have mirrored the economic and social issues of the day. It needs to get through the difficult times, not least because of the enormous effort and wholehearted co-operation of its work force over many years, but particularly since the BMW takeover in 1994.

In 1998, BMW-Rover undertook a wide-ranging review of Rover Group's activities. As part of that, BMW shared with Rover's employees its plans for the future, and explained that their success depended on the achievement of significant cost reductions and—importantly—new agreements on competitive working practices. It is to the credit of the Rover employees that they rose to the challenge, and consented to more flexible working practices and productivity agreements.

Let me tell the House what is about to happen. The Secretary of State will meet Alchemy Partners later this evening. We shall want to clarify BMW's intentions in relation to Land Rover. The Secretary of State will visit Rover sites in the west midlands tomorrow. A key issue in relation to Longbridge is whether transfer of ownership to Alchemy Partners is concerned, and what the plans for the business are. The Government will be anxious to work closely with new owners to maximise the chances of success for the Rover business, and to consider what support might be justified and appropriate. Rover wants to be part of the success story of the British car industry.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire) *rose in his place and claimed to move*, That the Question be now put.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I believe that the Minister has ended his speech anyway.

Question put, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 149, Noes 275.

Division No. 116] **[7 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Major, Rt Hon John
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
Moore, Michael
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whittingdale, John
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Wiltshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. John Randall and
Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F

Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blair, Rt Hon Tony
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Denham, John
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howells, Dr Kim
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McIsaac, Shona
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Rowlands, Ted
Ruddock, Joan
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Shipley, Ms Debra
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Kevin Hughes and
Mr. Jim Dowd.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments), and agreed to.*

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House welcomes the actions of the Government that support the car industry, including delivering stable inflation and low interest rates, boosting support for supply chain activities and acting on the Foresight Vehicle Programme; welcomes the Government support for the Longbridge plant given through the offer of Regional Selective Assistance; understands that the major losses that BMW have suffered on Rover have put great pressure on BMW with respect to Rover; and congratulates the Government for playing its role in working closely with the company and the workforce to try to ensure there is a future for Rover.

WELSH GRAND COMMITTEE

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 107 (Welsh Grand Committee),

That the Welsh Grand Committee shall meet on Tuesday 4th April at half-past ten o'clock and between four o'clock and six o'clock at Westminster to take questions under Standing Order No. 103 (Welsh Grand Committee (questions for oral answer)), and to consider the matter of the Budget Statement and its implications for Wales, under Standing Order No. 107 (Welsh Grand Committee (matters relating exclusively to Wales))—*[Mr. Clelland.]*

Question agreed to.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made and Question proposed,

That the Competition Act 1998 (Director's Rules) Order 2000 be referred to a Standing Committee on Delegated Legislation.

Hon. Members: Object.

PETITIONS

Gareth and Richard Perrett

7.12 pm

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax): Some 700 residents of Halifax have given me this petition—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. Will hon. Members who are not staying to hear the petition please leave quickly and quietly?

Mrs. Mahon: The petition of 700 residents of Halifax declares

that Inspector Gareth Perrett and PC Richard Perrett were found not guilty at Manchester Crown Court in February 1999 over an alleged incident on an aircraft in February 1998. They have since faced an internal discipline tribunal which has found them guilty, and required them to resign, therefore losing their careers and livelihoods. This is unfair. The petitioners therefore request the House of Commons to urge the Home Secretary to revisit their case.

And the Petitioners remain etc.

To lie upon the Table.

Benefit Payments

7.14 pm

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): I wish to present a petition on behalf of my constituents and other residents of North Yorkshire. There are more than 37,000 signatories, almost 9,000 of whom come from Skipton and Ripon. The petitioners declare:

We are concerned at the Government's plans to pay benefits directly into bank accounts instead of over the counter at post offices as this will have a serious impact on local post offices and endanger a mainstay of village life.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry to rethink these proposals.

And the petitioners remain, yours faithfully, County Councillor Mrs. Shelagh Marshall and others.

To lie upon the Table.

Mentally Ill People

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Kevin Hughes.]*

7.14 pm

Mr. Mike Wood (Batley and Spen): I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to initiate the debate this evening.

Estimates vary about the prevalence of mental health problems in our society, but something of the order of between one in four and one in six adults will suffer from mental illness at some time in their lives; that is illness ranging from so-called mild depression through to schizophrenia. That means that in a constituency such as mine, for instance, between 11,000 and 16,000 people are directly affected by at least one bout of such illnesses during their lifetime.

A recent survey conducted by MIND found that 90 per cent. of respondents had household incomes of less than £10,000 a year. Most people who use mental health services live in poverty, with over 80 per cent. being economically inactive. The Government's own national service framework for mental health states that unemployed people are twice as likely to suffer depression as those who work. It could just as easily have highlighted how much more predisposed they are to self-harm, up to and including taking their own lives. For that group, loss of benefits—and, often, just the threat of that loss—can have disproportionate consequences.

The issues thrown up by such illness and poverty are wide-ranging and profound, and they pose some of the most difficult problems which I and, I suspect, most other right hon. and hon. Members become involved in through constituency casework or surgeries.

In my area of north Kirklees, we are fortunate to have a mental health service that is as good as anywhere in the country's. Last year, for instance, it received from the Prime Minister the first NHS Nye Bevan award for joint working between mental health and social services. However, even here, mistakes occur, and people fall through the net.

In the belief that care is not just about health, but about all aspects of a person's life—including housing, employment and, crucially, income—I want to draw on the experiences of three of my constituents and how they, as mentally ill people, fared in the very specific area of accessing and sustaining a claim for benefits. Those people were entitled to the benefits, just like any other citizen, but were denied them because, I would contend, our benefits system is far too inflexible, and is often inadequate, especially when confronted by the myriad problems that the mentally ill present.

I would like an assurance from my hon. Friend the Minister that the matter is being treated seriously within the Department. I would like also a possible outline of the practical steps that are being taken to improve the kinds of situation that I am about to describe, and I would like to know that the Department is doing this work in liaison with other relevant agencies.

Constituent H is a paranoid man, living alone, who lost his job due to his illness. He quickly became so ill that he could not or would not leave the house, and therefore could not make a claim for benefits. The Benefits Agency

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was eventually convinced by his family to send a home visitor whom, of course, the man would not admit to his home. Having gone to those lengths, the Department contended that there was nothing more it could do.

In the end, after months of keeping him, the man's extended family could afford to do so no longer and, essentially, had to abduct him from his own home, frogmarch him to the benefit office and guide his hand as he applied for the benefit for which he was so obviously eligible and which he now receives. Surely in such a case—where there was ample medical evidence of the man's condition and its prognosis—it should not have been necessary for the family to have to act in that way to access resources that were needed to care for him.

The second of my constituents, Miss C, suffers from depression. Her benefit was ended owing to a periodic review of the so-called all-work test. She received an initial letter that baldly stated that her benefit was under review, which had a profoundly adverse effect on her already frail mental health. As I said earlier, MIND found that just the threat of loss of benefit does harm, but at one of MIND's day centres close to my constituency some 80 per cent. of the people who attend have had that experience.

Miss C was eventually convinced to undertake the required medical or review. However, like many people suffering from mental illness, she cannot articulate well the problems that her illness poses for her in her daily life. So-called medicals or reviews that exclude carers and that are conducted quickly and brusquely—so quickly and brusquely that the claimants cannot do justice to themselves—would, I am sure, be condemned by the Minister, but they happen, and often to the mentally ill. That exacerbates the fact that the tests are designed more for those suffering a physical illness than a mental one. The answer to the standard questions, "Can you dress yourself? Can you feed yourself?", might well be yes for a mentally ill person, but the person asking the questions would not necessarily understand the amount of supervision that might be needed to get the mentally ill person to eat, or how much motivation might have to be generated to ensure that the person gets dressed.

I realise that the Government intend to replace the all-work test, but whatever comes next must be run by people who have a much greater insight into, and much more training in, the problems of the mentally ill if we are to see the real improvement in service that is needed. I would like to make a bid for the process to be predicated much more on helping people, some of whom have very profound problems, than on cutting corners or saving money.

Sadly, each year in England alone, some 4,000 people commit suicide. My third constituency example is just such a case and shows how mental illness plays a part in many of those—often preventable—deaths. My constituent, Mr. T, died in tragic circumstances and his death and the inquest featured extensively in the local and national media. At this point, I wish to place on record my thanks for the intelligent and sensitive way in which my local papers, not least the *Batley News*, dealt with those sad and harrowing circumstances. That was of enormous comfort to his family, most of whom now live in New Zealand, who still suffer from the shock of their relative's death and have many unanswered questions about how and why their loved one died in such circumstances. In passing, I realise that it is not the responsibility of the Minister, but their shock was compounded when they were required to pay more than £235 for a transcript of the inquest, which they wanted to learn what lessons had been learned from his death.

Mr. T was an honours graduate in his forties who had suffered from schizophrenia for some years. He was hospitalised late in 1998 under the mental health legislation for reasons of self-harm. He was starving himself, and his weight had dropped from 16 stone to under 10 stone. During his period in hospital, his benefit was stopped and it was either not restarted on discharge or stopped again soon after. Because we have no access to the transcript, we cannot know for sure.

Within a matter of months, the man had starved himself to death with 9p in his pocket. When his body was discovered some weeks later, a scribbled note that lay nearby suggested that he believed that the authorities had killed him. If the hospital had notified the Benefits Agency of his discharge, or if there had been sufficient liaison between the two about the severity of his illness, my constituent would at least have had available to him the cash that was his due. It is stating the obvious to say that care in the community failed that man.

I believe that the policy introduced by the previous Government was developed for the wrong reasons, and then not properly resourced. However, the failings in what is fundamentally the right policy for mentally ill people have to be remedied quickly if more lives are not to be lost so needlessly.

At the inquest, the coroner was appalled by Mr. T's death, and suggested that there should be special DSS rules for those suffering from mental illness. I am sure that all hon. Members would welcome that, but in the meantime it might be possible to encourage relatively minor changes in staff attitudes, and to alter departmental procedures. Both could happen much more quickly, and have some effect.

We certainly need the introduction—perhaps I mean the reintroduction—of much greater discretion for staff in local DSS offices. Ministers in the Department, too, would have to have greater discretion, as too often they seem unable to intervene to right an obvious wrong in individual cases.

Not before time, society is beginning to accept the need for extra provision to improve access for citizens with physical disabilities. At most benefit offices these days, a ramp to the front door is a standard feature, but where are the ramps for people suffering mental illness? That illness is just as debilitating and life-limiting as the more obvious—and possibly more acceptable—physical illness.

Finally, I should like to place on record my thanks to organisations such as the Mental After Care Association, MIND, and my local authority welfare benefits office—especially to that office's first-rate staff members Lisa Drake and Robert Finnegan—for the help that has been extended to me in presenting this debate.

7.27 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Angela Eagle): I should like to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Mr. Wood) for the opportunity to respond to the very

important issues that he has raised this evening. He will know that not all the matters that he raised lie within the remit of my Department, but I shall make sure that I pass on the important observations that he has made.

My hon. Friend referred to three cases in his speech. One was especially tragic as it resulted in a death. I should like to begin by expressing my sorrow at the case and offering my sincere condolences to the family of my hon. Friend's constituent who died. It is clear that his constituent suffered because of a failure by the Department of Social Security and other agencies to provide the support that any of us would expect to be available for a person in the circumstances that my hon. Friend described. It is my intention to see that the necessary steps are taken and the relevant loopholes closed to ensure that that tragic circumstance will not be repeated, and that the lessons will be learned.

I know that my hon. Friend has been corresponding with the chief executive of the Benefits Agency and Her Majesty's coroner about this case. I am pleased that, as a direct result of that tragedy, new procedures have been created and adopted locally. They will shortly be adopted nationally by the Benefits Agency when it deals with people who have a history of mental illness. I will come to those new procedures in a moment.

However, I do not think it appropriate for me to discuss on the Floor of the House the details of an individual's claim for benefit. My hon. Friend raised the matter in a very proper way, and I should be more than happy to talk to him outside the Chamber about the specific people and events mentioned in his speech. In addition, there are some general comments that I can usefully make with regard to the issues raised in the debate.

It goes without saying that those who suffer any form of mental illness require special help when dealing with large, complex organisations—for example, when they want to establish their entitlement to benefit with the DSS. As my hon. Friend has pointed out, it is sometimes difficult to identify those who have a severe mental illness. Such illnesses can fluctuate and it is not always obvious who requires extra help, so I would like to explain some of the measures that the Department has undertaken to address the problems that this vulnerable group faces when claiming benefits.

The DSS and the Benefits Agency recognise that people with mental health problems must be treated sensitively. We are working closely with voluntary groups at a national and local level to address this issue in a practical and effective way. The Department tries to take into account the specific needs of people with mental illness.

Many of the measures that are in place to deal with these people have been developed in conjunction with the mental health lobby and make use of its experience and expertise. As a result of consultations with such organisations, many arrangements are in place to make the claims process easier. For example, people can request assistance from a third party to help complete claim forms for benefit or for support when being visited by Benefits Agency staff. The Department has worked with the Royal College of Psychiatrists and welfare groups on the design of the all-work test questionnaire and the format of the test for people with mental health problems.

Specialist training is given to staff who visit people receiving disability living allowance as part of the periodic inquiry process. The aim of the inquiry is to ensure that all clients are receiving the correct amount of benefit. This can be particularly helpful to those who have a mental illness and, because of their difficulties and the complex nature of our benefits system, may not have explained their complete circumstances when making the original claim. In addition, we have appointed Pauline Thompson from the Disablement Income Group to help us deliver the training for Benefits Agency staff who visit these clients.

We try to identify those with severe mental illness early on in the claims process. Whenever appropriate, we will exempt people with a severe mental illness from having to undergo a medical examination to establish whether benefits are payable.

At a local level, we have developed close links with local authorities, welfare groups and voluntary organisations. These are valuable in helping us to assist many of the vulnerable groups to which we pay benefits. My hon. Friend has referred to cases in which such arrangements do not yet exist or have broken down. Despite this, there are many instances of good local liaison between the DSS or the Benefits Agency and non-governmental organisations, helping people to receive all the benefits and support to which they are entitled.

Audrey Wise (Preston): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Mr. Wood) for initiating the debate. His presentation concentrated on adults with mental health problems. May I draw the Minister's attention to issues relating to children and young people? Most people working in the field worry that problems among children and young people are increasing. Their families can be plunged into poverty because of the extra tasks and problems involved. Has she considered any special problems that might arise in relation to children and adolescents?

Angela Eagle: Obviously, I am prepared to do so and to take on board my hon. Friend's comments. If she has more specific instances that she wants to discuss with me—again, not on the Floor of the House—I will be happy to listen to her and see what lessons can be learned.

As a direct result of the awful circumstances described by my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen, Calderdale and Kirklees district Benefits Agency has adopted some new procedures. It encourages people to seek advice and advocacy support if they receive letters of requests that they do not understand. It has established a close liaison with the social services department. Where Benefits Agency staff know that a social worker has been assigned to a claimant, they are encouraged to keep in contact with that social worker. It has appointed a liaison officer to improve connections between the Benefits Agency and the psychiatric unit at the local hospital. It has instigated a new procedure to ensure that no decision will be made to withdraw benefit without the case being referred to a manager. I am pleased to say that new procedures will be adopted nationally by the Benefits Agency.

My hon. Friend may also be aware of the ONE service that is currently being piloted. All personal advisers involved in ONE have been given disability awareness training, including on mental illness issues, to help them provide an appropriate service to people who come into

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contact with the ONE service, including those who have particular mental health problems. Many of the key disability organisations, such as MIND and the National Schizophrenic Fellowship, were consulted when the training programme was being developed. Those groups have also helped to draw up guidance for personal advisers.

I believe that many benefit recipients with mental health problems will welcome that new personalised help, which is being piloted in 12 areas. We can create a system that will be less daunting for many people who can find the current system frightening, confusing or a source of anxiety. The personalised service will also be central to the new agency announced earlier today by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister.

The Department of Social Security provides incapacity benefits to a large number of people with mental health problems. Procedures for doing so have been well developed and are generally regarded as successful. There is no room for complacency, of course. The issues raised by my hon. Friend demonstrate that work remains to be done in dealing with particular difficulties that people with mental illness may present to the DSS and other systems, such as social services departments, local help and health services. We must go further to ensure that people with mental health problems receive the service to which they are entitled. They must not fall into gaps between provision, being handed on from one institution to another with no one taking responsibility.

I believe that we can work to reduce the chances of another tragedy of the sort that befell my hon. Friend's constituent. The Benefits Agency's decision to ensure that the changes made in Calderdale and Kirklees are established nationally will go some way to achieve that end. We shall continue working until we close all the loopholes.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I apologise for troubling the House so late, but I seek your assistance. I was this evening due to receive a battery of replies to written questions on the conduct of the Metropolitan police, the security services and a gun runner to Sierra Leone. The answers were not available for me in the Members' Lobby. I have since discovered that they are available for journalists in the Press Gallery, and that, although I had telephoned the Minister's private office for them, they are in the Library. I have access to them, but the person most entitled to them would have been denied them had I not ferreted around, and, indeed, trespassed in the Press Gallery where I am not supposed to go. Could the matter be looked into? All hon. Members are disadvantaged when Ministers' offices are tardy in this way.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): The hon. Gentleman must know that the Chair cannot control the answering of parliamentary questions. He will be aware, however, that Madam Speaker has made plain her strong view that Members should receive good service, and that it needs to be improved following some recent instances. I am sure that what the hon. Gentleman has said will have been heard by those on the Treasury Bench. We must hope that the matter will be rectified. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for drawing it to the attention of the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-one minutes to Eight o'clock.

House of Commons

Friday 17 March 2000

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Safeguards for Children

[Relevant documents: Report and Summary of the Tribunal of Inquiry into the abuse of children in care in the former County Council areas of Gwynedd and Clwyd since 1974—Lost in Care (HC 201); Local Authority Circular 99/33—The Quality Protects Programme: Transforming Children's Services 2000/01; The Government's Objectives for Children's Social Services, Department of Health, September 1999; Explanatory Notes to the Care Standards Bill [Lords] and Children (Leaving Care) Bill [Lords].]

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Robert Ainsworth.]*

9.33 am

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Hutton): Promoting the well-being of children in our country, and protecting them from harm, are fundamental responsibilities of all hon. Members. We can—we frequently do—disagree on many things, but not, I hope, when it comes to safeguarding children. Children may make up only 20 per cent. of our population, but they represent 100 per cent. of our future.

Safeguarding children has been one of the Government's top priorities since taking office. The approach that we have taken has recognised that the physical health and mental well-being of all children is closely linked to wider issues of poverty and disadvantage. It has recognised the need to ensure that all children, wherever they are, get the best possible start in life. It has also involved major reforms of the public care system, and, in the framework of criminal law, provided better protection for children from those who would harm them, either physically or sexually.

All those reforms have been developed and implemented in partnership with a wide variety of organisations in the public, private and voluntary sectors. Safeguarding children can never be the sole preserve of any one organisation. It is the responsibility of us all to discharge the obligation that we owe to our young people. The Government intend to discharge our responsibilities to the fullest possible extent, and to work with everyone who shares our ambition to create a safer and more secure environment in which children can thrive and prosper.

Our objectives must always be clear and well focused. First, we must never allow the appalling situation that occurred in north Wales to happen again.

Secondly, we must ensure that the statutory agencies effectively protect children from harm at all times and in all places. To do that, children's social services must be of the highest quality, well managed and staffed by well-qualified people working to the best models of both practice and policy. The standards currently set by the best must become the norm, not the exception.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): The hon. Gentleman has, so far, identified exclusively north Wales as an area where very great damage has been done to children. Does he accept that there are other areas—sadly, even in my own county of Cheshire, and in the adjacent county of Staffordshire—where similar events have occurred?

Mr. Hutton: I accept that. In a few minutes, if the hon. Gentleman will bear with me, I shall comment on the wider situation. He may know that, in England, there are 32 on-going police inquiries into aspects of child abuse, including physical abuse. The situation in England is very serious, and I shall be dealing with it later in my speech.

I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will agree that we have to ensure that the standards of the best become the norm, rather than the exception. That is certainly the objective both of the Department of Health and of the entire Government.

Our third objective is to ensure that those who harm children are punished severely and prevented from working with children again.

If we are to succeed in implementing those changes, we will need a powerful change in the culture of children's social services, so that the pursuit of excellence becomes routine and second best will never be good enough. Although I think that that process of change is well under way, more progress obviously still has to be made. I shall return to that theme in a few moments.

There is nothing revolutionary in this approach, or in the principles by which we are working. Those principles are the building blocks for a successful life—which is what we as parents try to give our own children. I am sure that all hon. Members subscribe to those basic principles.

We must nevertheless compare those basic principles with the tragic childhoods recorded in Sir Ronald Waterhouse's report, "Lost in Care". His report bears witness to childhoods filled with fear, abuse, violence and misery—to childhoods destroyed by betrayal of trust and by administrative incompetence. We should, therefore, begin this debate by reminding ourselves of the key findings of the Waterhouse report on the abuse of children in care.

In Clwyd, there was widespread sexual abuse of boys, and to a lesser extent of girls, in local authority and privately run children's residential establishments and schools and in a national health service psychiatric unit. There was no evidence of persistent sexual abuse in Gwynedd. However, many children in children's residential establishments in both Clwyd and Gwynedd were subjected to physical abuse. Sexual and physical abuse occurred also in a small number of foster homes in Clwyd and Gwynedd. That disastrous catalogue of neglect and abuse is the reason for today's debate. Together, we must ensure that abuse on that scale can never happen again.

We owe our thanks to Sir Ronald Waterhouse and his team for their determination to document so meticulously the mistreatment of children in north Wales over so many years. We must also acknowledge that all of us have failed those children and the many others who have suffered in

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care elsewhere. Too sadly, we know that that case was not unique, and that, across the country, police forces and social services departments are investigating allegations of past abuse. The Government are determined to learn the lessons of the inquiry. We shall do all that we can to stamp out child abuse and create better safeguards for children.

Sir Ronald Waterhouse has made 72 recommendations. Many of them echo those made by Sir William Utting in "People Like Us"—his report on the review of safeguards for children living away from home. The Utting review was commissioned at the same time as the Waterhouse inquiry.

"People Like Us" made 20 key recommendations and more than 130 other recommendations, with the principal aim of improving protection for children living away from home. The Government published their response to "People Like Us" in November 1998, setting out a detailed and comprehensive programme of policy and management changes across Government to deliver a safer environment for all children living away from home. We are pursuing that programme with vigour. We are already taking forward many of the recommendations in the Waterhouse report through existing legislation, such as the Protection of Children Act 1999, which my hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge (Ms Shipley) played such a crucial role in taking through the House, and through new legislative initiatives such as the Care Standards Bill and the Children (Leaving Care) Bill, as well as through the quality protects programme and the children first programme in Wales. I shall describe all those initiatives briefly in a few moments.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): The Minister will be aware that many arguments have been made about advocacy. The Waterhouse report recommends that an independent advocacy service should be available to any complainant or affected child who wishes to have it. When will that be in place?

Mr. Hutton: The right hon. Gentleman has drawn attention to an important aspect of the Waterhouse recommendations. I am not announcing the Government's response to the recommendations today. We hope to do that early in the summer. I hope that he can wait until then for the details. The Waterhouse report did not call for the creation of a statutory right to advocacy, but we are reviewing the complaints procedures under section 26 of the Children Act 1989 and the Local Authority Social Services Act 1970 for adult social services.

That is part of a continuing programme in the Department. We shall need to consider it carefully in the context of what Sir Ronald Waterhouse has said. We are looking carefully, in the context of quality protects and children first, at how we can encourage local authorities to develop more effective advocacy services for looked-after children. That work is under way, but we shall respond more fully to Sir Ronald Waterhouse's recommendations when we publish our response early in the summer.

We are also fully involving the ministerial task force on safeguarding children in considering all 72 of the report's recommendations to see what further steps we can take to safeguard children. The task force is helping us to identify where further action is needed and to establish key priorities. It has already met twice since the report was published and has identified the following priority areas where further action is needed: first, on a commissioner for looked-after children; secondly, on complaints procedures; thirdly, on independent advocacy services, which the right hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley) referred to; fourthly, on human resources issues; and fifthly, on the future role of residential care as a placement choice.

Further work is being done on all those areas and I am liaising closely with my ministerial colleagues across Government to ensure that our response to the report is comprehensive and cohesive.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley): Six children from my constituency were at those homes and were sexually abused. I am particularly concerned about the role of the insurers in suppressing two major reports—the Cartrefle report and the Jillings report. Had they been published, that abuse might have been discovered much earlier. The role of the insurers in suppressing that information was a disgrace.

Mr. Hutton: I am sure that my hon. Friend is aware that the Waterhouse report made some specific recommendations on that aspect of the tragic events in north Wales. I assure her that the Government are looking closely at those parts of the recommendations. Our response on that will be part of the full response that we publish in the summer. I am conscious of the broad consensus of concern that has been expressed on that aspect of the terrible events. I assure my hon. Friend and the House that we take those concerns very seriously.

We took two immediate steps on the day of publication of the Waterhouse report. First, we extended the Department of Health's consultancy index—the list of individuals deemed unsuitable to work with children. That enabled Ministers to include on the index a number of individuals named in the report who had been convicted of offences against children or against whom a clear finding had been made and who had not already been referred to the index by previous employers. Some of those individuals should have been referred to the index many years ago.

Secondly, we took immediate steps to check that those individuals named in the report who had been convicted of offences against children or against whom a clear finding had been made and whose current whereabouts or employment status were not clearly known were not currently working in regulated services with access to children.

In the days immediately after publication, the Government distributed many copies of the report to ensure that it was easily accessible to all those who needed to read it. Copies have been sent to all local authorities, chief constables, health authorities and NHS trusts.

Ms Debra Shipley (Stourbridge): The consultancy index is clearly important. The provisions of the Protection of Children Act 1999 allowing for the updating of the index are not yet operational, because many things need to be done first. I understand that it is hoped that they will come on-stream in the summer. Will my

hon. Friend tell us when? Will the index be updated before the Department for Education and Employment's pilot schemes for summer activities for young people are under way?

Mr. Hutton: I pay tribute again to the work that my hon. Friend did in ensuring that the Protection of Children Act 1999 reached the statute book. She has raised two issues. The first is when the Act will become operational. There are a range of measures in the Care Standards Bill designed to extend protection to vulnerable adults, based on the provisions in the Bill that she took through the House. We are trying to ensure that the new protection of vulnerable adults and the Protection of Children Act measures are consistent. I am afraid that it is likely that the implementation date for the Protection of Children Act might slip a little into the autumn, because we need to ensure that the two measures are consistent.

The second issue is the updating of the names on the list. That work is well under way. I am sure that my hon. Friend is aware that, as part of her measure, we agreed that it was appropriate to review all the existing names on the list to ensure that they were suitable for inclusion on the new list that will be maintained under the terms of the 1999 Act.

Ms Shipley: I am grateful for that clarification. There are implications for the pilot schemes for outdoor activities run by the Department for Education and Employment. I hugely welcome those excellent schemes, which are the way forward. I fear that if the Department for Education and Employment is not able to draw on the measures in the 1999 Act, it will have insufficient powers to conduct proper vetting. The 1999 list and the Department for Education and Employment's measures go a long way to protecting children in such situations, but some people will not be covered. I should be grateful for clarification on that.

Mr. Hutton: We may need further discussions on that within the Department and with Ministers at the Department for Education and Employment. When I said that there might be a slight delay in implementing the Protection of Children Act, I was trying to be candid with my hon. Friend and tell her how things were going. We may be able to implement the Protection of Children Act slightly earlier, but at the moment it is not entirely clear whether or not that will be possible. However, given the obvious need for synergy between provisions in the Protection of Children Act and measures for the protection of vulnerable adults in the Care Standards Bill, it is important that we try to get it right. Guiding us throughout is our determination to make the protection of children our top priority, as I have said this morning. The concerns that my hon. Friend has raised will be taken seriously in the Department of Health and the Department for Education and Employment.

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge): Will the Minister clarify that he is saying that in the summer, or perhaps after a short delay in the autumn, the Protection of Children Act will be fully operational and that certificates from the criminal records agency will be available?

Mr. Hutton: I am not sure that I can be quite that specific this morning. We still need to resolve a number of issues. My hon. Friend's Protection of Children Act may need to be amended in the light of discussions in another place about the scheme for the protection of vulnerable adults. I am trying to be as honest as I can with the House, but I cannot go quite as far as the hon. Gentleman is inviting me to do. We certainly hope that the main provisions of the Act will be implemented in the autumn, but obviously we are keeping the situation under careful review.

Our immediate actions on the publication of the Waterhouse report were necessary to safeguard children from individuals who had been found to have harmed children in north Wales in the past, but those actions in themselves could not solve all the problems described in the report, which are bigger than any one individual or group of individuals. They are rooted in systematic failure. The tragedy is that we know that the children in north Wales were not alone in suffering in this way.

The clear evidence is that too many children in the past were failed by the very services that should have been there to help them. There has been too much inconsistent quality and poor management in children's services. We know from reports such as "People Like Us" and "Lost in Care", and from the shocking testimony of young people who have suffered abuse in children's homes, that the risks for children living away from home in the 1970s and 1980s were seriously underestimated.

We cannot dismiss these as problems of the past, however. In the 1990s, evidence from social services inspection and joint review reports of children's services show continuing problems—and not only in children's homes.

Social services inspectorate reports and joint reviews have demonstrated inconsistencies, both within and between authorities. They have shown poor assessment, planning and case recording, which has led to very unfocused work with families; decisions about who gets a service are often made on a haphazard basis; and poor planning for looked-after children has resulted in unnecessary delays and inappropriate placements.

That is why is September 1998 we launched quality protects, which is a programme to help local authorities improve the management and delivery of children's social services. We also announced that the programme would be supported by a £375 million new special children's grant, which is being paid to local authorities over three years. A similar programme, children first, is under way in Wales.

Quality protects is part of our wider plans, detailed in our White Paper "Modernising Social Services", to tailor services to real needs, delivered efficiently and to the highest standards. Today's public services have to be shaped around the people who use them—not the other way around. Social change, growing public expectations, an ageing population and shifts in family structures all call for a modernised system of social care.

That is why when we launched quality protects we announced for the first time new Government objectives and specific targets for children's services. That was a major step forward which has provided a clear framework for developing local services. The failures in the system also called for a new framework of legal protections for children and that is precisely what we are delivering.

[Mr. Hutton]

The Protection of Children Act 1999 will place the Department of Health's consultancy index on a statutory footing. Regulated child care providers will be required to check the names of anyone they propose to employ in posts involving regular contact with children against the index and DFEE's List 99, which is already on a statutory footing. People placed on the new list will not be able to work with children. As I told my hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge, the Department of Health is working toward implementation of the Protection of Children Act later this year.

In particular, we want to provide greater protection and care for the most vulnerable children and families. This is why we recently introduced The Care Standards Bill, which has at its heart two key aims: first, to protect vulnerable people from abuse and neglect; and secondly, to promote the highest standards of quality in the care that people receive.

The Bill provides for the establishment of a new independent national body, the National Care Standards Commission, which will have significant responsibilities for safeguarding children. All children's homes will be regulated and subjected to rigorous inspections. This will include local authority homes, which are currently exempt, and small private children's homes for fewer than four children. That loophole in the current law has long been considered a scandal, and rightly so. We shall not wait for the establishment of the commission to bring small private homes within regulation. As soon as we have Royal Assent for the Bill, we shall bring them within the current regulatory regime.

Good quality care must be provided in all children's homes, whether they are in the private or voluntary sector, or run by local authorities. Children must be protected from abuse and their welfare promoted, whoever is responsible for running the home. In the past, problems have occurred in all types of homes. In future, all homes will have to meet the same rigorous standards.

The Bill will also introduce for the first time regulatory regimes for fostering agencies and for residential family centres. The National Care Standards Commission will also regulate the crucial and very specialised work of voluntary adoption agencies, in a way similar to the current system operated by the social services inspectorate.

In recognition of its role in safeguarding children, the National Care Standards Commission will appoint a children's rights director, whose job it will be to ensure that children's rights and welfare are at the heart of all its responsibilities for regulating children's services. The children's rights director will provide a crucial function in being the person who will be there when children or staff have concerns or suspicions about what may be happening in a children's home or other service. The creation of this new post in England is very much in the spirit of the Waterhouse report's recommendations.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales has already announced that we will also use the Care Standards Bill to implement Sir Ronald's Waterhouse first recommendation, that an independent children's commissioner for looked-after children in Wales should be appointed.

We believe that the appointment of the children's rights director in England and the children's commissioner for Wales will act as significant additional safeguards for looked-after children.

Mr. Win Griffiths (Bridgend): I was tempted to intervene earlier when my hon. Friend said that the Government were committed to appointing a commissioner for looked-after children. Waterhouse places no limit on the commissioner in respect of looked-after children or other children. When one considers that some children are not looked after, but on the at-risk registers, there is a strong case for the children's commissioner having a wider remit for the welfare of all children.

Mr. Hutton: My hon. Friend will be aware that in Wales, these issues will ultimately be the responsibility of the National Assembly for Wales. We have the primary responsibility to make legislation for Wales, but we do so in close consultation with the National Assembly. I am not sure that I agree with my hon. Friend's initial observation. The context of the Waterhouse report is specific and clear: it is about looked-after children. That is what Sir Ronald Waterhouse was investigating. It is certainly our view that the appointment of the commissioner in Wales and the children's rights director in England are consistent with the spirit of the Waterhouse recommendations.

Ms Shipley: I welcome my hon. Friend's statement about the commissioner in Wales. Does he agree that the rest of the United Kingdom also needs a commissioner?

Mr. Hutton: The establishment of the children's rights director in England will closely mirror the role of the commissioner for looked-after children in Wales. I understand that the National Assembly for Wales is still working on the details of what the new commissioner should do. There is a danger of focusing on job titles when it is more important to establish the functions of the children's rights director in England and the commissioner for looked-after children in Wales.

We are satisfied that the post of children's rights director is a significant breakthrough in children's welfare in England. We are happy to consult a wide variety of organisations on the director's precise role. Against the background of the appalling abuse and violence inflicted on children in north Wales, this is a significant step forward, and very much in line with the Waterhouse recommendations.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): Is the Minister aware that some children's charities are concerned that there may be a difference between the commissioner and the director? I appreciate what he says about titles being less important than the responsibilities and duties of the position, so can he confirm that the duties will be exactly the same in England and in Wales?

Mr. Hutton: The hon. Gentleman is a late convert to the cause of devolution—he opposed the enactment of the Government of Wales Act 1998. He will be aware that the National Assembly for Wales is responsible for what the commissioner will do in Wales. It is not a decision

for Ministers in my Department. Job titles should not dominate this debate. The most important thing is what the new officers will do to enhance the welfare and well-being of children. The hon. Gentleman will agree that it is more important to focus on the substance of the job rather than the title conferred by legislation.

Mr. Wigley: The powers of the National Assembly will be constrained by any statutory powers regarding the commissioner. Can the Minister assure us that, if it is the wish of the National Assembly, the commissioner can have a wider remit than just looked-after children, especially in view of the immensely worrying conclusion in the report that

a significant number of children regarded life in care, even at Bryn Estyn, as distinctly better than life at home..?

Can he assure us that the statutory underpinning will not debar the National Assembly from conferring that wider remit?

Mr. Hutton: I think that I am right in saying that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales dealt with all those issues in the House a few days ago, when he explained that it was our intention to table amendments to the Care Standards Bill to allow the establishment of a commissioner for looked-after children in Wales and that we would look for the earliest opportunity to carry out the wish of the Assembly to establish a commissioner with a wider remit, in line with the manifesto commitment of the Labour party in Wales. I do not want to add to what my right hon. Friend said.

We have been concerned for some time about the support that care leavers receive from local authorties. Every year, about 5,000 young people aged 16 and 17 leave the care of local authorities. There has been an increasing trend to discharge young people from care early. The proportion of care leavers aged 16 to 18 who leave care at the age of 16 increased from 33 per cent. in 1993 to 46 per cent. in 1998. That is completely unacceptable and the trend must be reversed. It is undoubtedly one of the reasons why so many children leave care without a single qualification and why so many find themselves unemployed and ultimately homeless.

The Government believe that care leavers ought to be able to expect as much support from their "parent"—the local authority—as any young person would receive from their own parents. That is why the Children (Leaving Care) Bill gives local authorities a new duty to assess and meet their needs, from the essentials for living—accommodation and maintenance—through to their needs for development, including education, training, any special needs, and the ordinary skills that all children have to learn in order to be able to live independently: how to shop, how to manage a budget, how to cater for themselves.

The Bill obliges local authorities to provide a young person's adviser and a pathway plan for all eligible young people. The plan will map out a route to independence, including consideration of when they might be ready to leave care. The new financial arrangements ensure that there will no longer be any incentive to push young people out of care until they are ready to go, but they will not be forced to stay in care: the system will be built around their individual needs.

Beacon status has recently been awarded to four councils for their excellence in helping care leavers: Suffolk, Wakefield, Kensington and Chelsea, and Westminster. The specialist leaving care teams in those local authorities have excelled in developing effective partnerships with statutory and voluntary sector bodies to deliver high-quality services in housing, health and education; in developing innovative methods to assist care leavers in preparing and planning for adult life; in developing initiatives on education and employment for young people and providing basic skills training and intensive support to sustain them on college and training placements; and in involving young people in shaping and influencing the development of the services.

I want to pay a special tribute today not only to the staff working in those four authorities, but to all those people throughout the country who work so hard to promote the best interests of young people in care. Their hard work and dedication rarely get any mention when we discuss these issues. It is right that their commitment should be acknowledged today.

Mr. Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd): About six weeks ago, a worker in a care home who had been sexually assaulted by a young resident came to see me. I welcome my hon. Friend's support for people who work with children in care. What will the Government do to protect those who work in homes, often with disturbed children?

Mr. Hutton: It is ultimately the responsibility of the employer to provide a safe working environment for the employees, and we certainly encourage local authorities to do that. My hon. Friend represents a Welsh constituency, but he might be interested to know that in England we have convened a special advisory group to assist the Department in tackling issues of violence against social care workers. It is a high-powered group under the chairmanship of Chris Davies, who is a distinguished leader of social services in England. He is considering precisely those issues, and I hope to have a report from him soon about what further steps we can take to protect the social care work force in England. I do not know what initiatives are under way in Wales, as that is ultimately the responsibility of the National Assembly.

Social care workers do some of the most important jobs in our country, helping and dealing with some of the most vulnerable, and sometimes the most difficult, people in our society. They are entitled to look to us—we are ultimately responsible for their employment—to make their working environment safe. They do a difficult job on our behalf and we have clear responsibilities towards them.

We are determined that all authorities should give care leavers high-quality services. Local authorities were asked to explain, in their management action plans relating to this year's use of the children's special grant in England, how they were improving services to care leavers and putting in place plans to implement the new arrangements.

The new arrangements for young people in and leaving care will link closely with the development of the new ConneXions service for all young people aged 13 to 19, which was launched earlier this year. This new, joined-up, modern service will connect services provided locally to young people. It will radically transform the support that young people receive as they make the transition from adolescence to adult and working life. The ConneXions service will raise the expectations and aspirations of all young people, of all abilities and from all backgrounds,

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by ensuring that they receive the support and advice they need, when and where they need it, to make a success of their lives.

It is a flagship venture for cross-Government and cross-agency working; effectively, we are trying to "wire up" public services for young people.

Mr. Win Griffiths: My hon. Friend said that young people up to the age of 19 would be assisted. However, did not Lord Hunt recently assure the other place that the costs of education, training and employment would be paid for up to the age of 21 and, in certain circumstances, beyond that?

Mr. Hutton: My hon. Friend is referring to specific provisions in the Children (Leaving Care) Bill. I was referring to the new ConneXions youth service, which will provide a service up to the age of 19. The Bill will give local authorities powers to provide additional support for children who have left care, or who have been in local authority care, to support their education, employment and training up to the age of 21. My hon. Friend and I are talking about two separate matters. Establishing the ConneXions service will be a complex and ambitious undertaking, which will require a lot of detailed and ground-breaking work. We are determined to build on what works best.

Two of the key developments which form part of the quality protects programme are the revision of the inter-agency guidance "Working Together To Safeguard Children" and the development of the new framework for the assessment of children in need and their families. The aim is to ensure that how we safeguard and promote the welfare of children and how we assess their needs are consistent with the approaches used for all children.

At the end of December last year, the Government, following extensive consultation, published new guidance on inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children. "Working Together to Safeguard Children" replaces the previous guidance, published in 1991, and takes account of new research, experience and legislation concerning child abuse. The new guidance emphasises the importance of agencies working together to help families and children before abuse and neglect has taken place. It provides a clear framework for social workers, the police, teachers, health service staff and others to work together and with families to secure the best possible outcomes for vulnerable children and young people. The new guidance provides a number of essential safeguards against abuse that apply in every setting in which children live away from home. Where services are not directly provided, basic safeguards should be explicitly addressed in contracts with external providers.

In September 1999, the Department of Health issued draft new assessment guidance which focuses on assessing the needs of children and the capacity of their parents and families to respond to these needs in the short and longer term. It is underpinned by the latest knowledge of the impact that adult problems such as domestic violence, alcohol and drug misuse, mental health problems and sex offending can have on a child's development. We will be publishing the final version of the assessment framework shortly.

Both the new working together programme and the assessment framework form important components of the wide-ranging programme of work across Government to strengthen protection for children and to improve the support given to vulnerable children and families. But protection is not enough—we must ensure that all children have the love, care and support that they need for the whole of their childhoods, and that the children for whom social services are responsible gain maximum life chances from education and other opportunities.

In particular, we want to see looked-after children achieving more at school; more care-leavers in training, education or employment; fewer moves between placements for children who have been looked after by local authorities; the level of offending among children brought right down; and, where appropriate, children being adopted without undue delay. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister recently announced the setting up of a ministerial group to carry out an urgent review of our adoption policy and procedures, which will report to him later this year. We also want to see better services for disabled children.

These are tough objectives, but we believe that they are achievable; indeed, they must be achieved if we are not to fail these children. Quality protects and children first have been warmly welcomed by local authorities and the voluntary sector. No one challenges the need to transform the quality of care and the chances in life of some of those vulnerable children. The challenge is to make it happen.

All local authorities are required each year to submit management action plans to the Department of Health. These set out their plans for modernising the management of their children's services. On 31 January, we received local authorities second management action plans. These set out how local authorities have improved their services in year 1 of the programme of quality protects, and their plans for year 2. No one expects all of these problems to be sorted out overnight; they will not be. However, all authorities must now show how they are beginning to make a real difference to the lives of looked-after children.

In the second year of quality protects, the challenge is to fully implement the plans, improve services and achieve much better outcomes for children and young people.

Mr. Ruane: These are admirable aims. How will the programme be monitored by central Government?

Mr. Hutton: While I am not going to speak about children first in Wales—my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Wales will deal with that when he winds up—the monitoring of the management action plans in England is being done by the Department in conjunction with the social services inspectorate.

As part of quality protects, we have employed a number of experienced regional development workers who are working across the regions of England with local authorities in improving, developing and monitoring those plans. In other words, the full monitoring arrangements that we had in the Department to check on the progress of social services are being deployed to monitor the progress of the quality protects initiative. It is a flagship initiative; it is the first time that any Government have systematically tried to get to the bottom of some of these

fundamental problems that have dogged social services in England for many years. We want the programme to work, and all the resources that we have in the Department that can be deployed to raise quality and to monitor standards in local authorities are being pointed at the quality protects programme to ensure that it is a success.

Next year, we are increasing the grant from £75 million to £120 million. We expect to see real improvements delivered in return for these extra resources. The early evidence is that we are beginning to deliver on those objectives. We hope that, by the end of this month, all authorities will be meeting their statutory duties to inspect children's homes. We have also seen an increase in the number of adoptions, in the support being given to care leavers and in councils listening to children.

One of the key priorities of the quality protects programme is to improve the supply and choice of placement options for looked-after children. One important choice is adoption. Research shows that, generally, adopted children make good progress through their childhood and into adulthood, compared with children who have remained in the care system. Adoption provides children with a unique opportunity for a fresh start as permanent members of new families, enjoying a sense of security and well-being so far denied them in their young lives.

I know that the Department's circular "Adoption—Achieving the Right Balance" has had an important impact on social services. I am pleased to say that our monitoring shows that most authorities have taken action to improve their adoption services. I am pleased also that 200 more children found adoptive families in 1998-99 than in the previous year. That equates to an 11 per cent. increase. This is good news, but there is still much more to do.

Recently, we launched the publication "Adoption Now—Messages from Research". The report shows how the nature of adoption has changed. We know that there are now few babies that need adoption. We know that many children needing adoptive families have faced great difficulties in their young lives. We are currently holding seminars, nationally and locally, to discuss the report and to consider how we can promote more co-operation between the statutory and voluntary sectors, particularly in the development of consortiums and greater collaborative working. Following the publication of the Waterhouse report, my right. hon. Friend the Prime Minister set up a ministerial group to review the operation of adoption services in England. The group will report to the Prime Minister in mid-May. A consultation paper outlining the way forward is expected to be available by the end of the year.

We also need to ensure that good quality foster care is available. At the moment, despite the fact that there are around 32,000 existing foster carers, we have a shortage nationally. I am pleased to say that work is currently under way to develop a national foster care recruitment campaign, with a launch date planned for June. The campaign is being run by a steering group consisting of the Department of Health, the National Foster Care Association, the Association of Directors of Social Services and the Local Government Association. This is a good example of how central and local government and the voluntary sector can work in partnership for the benefit of all. I hope that the campaign will lead more people to consider taking up the unique challenge of caring for children from other families by becoming foster carers.

Mr. Evans: A foster parent came to my surgery on Saturday and told me of the difficulties of placing foster children in local schools, which are usually full. Will the Minister ensure that children cared for by foster parents are able to gain access to local schools for their education?

Mr. Hutton: We will certainly take that issue into consideration. Of course, that is also a matter for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment to consider. We want children who have been fostered to have the best possible access to schools and education and that is why, as part of quality protects, we are trying to drive up the qualifications and educational achievements of looked-after children. That is the first time that any Government have tried to do that with a specific programme of work, and access to good schools is important if we are to succeed in that.

I am pleased that councils have begun to listen to children and young people in their care much more effectively. Listening to children helps to protect children—from harm and from low expectations. If children can speak up and are heard, abuse is less likely to happen. Children and young people demand and need to have a voice in all decisions taken about them—not just on the big issues such as education, health, and their placement, but on the day-to-day big issues for them such as pocket money, sleep-overs, and bedtimes.

Young people can and want to contribute to making the care system more effective. Children's participation will help local authorities to provide high-quality and effective services. It will also help councils to implement one of the key responsibilities under the requirements of best value. Councils must become more responsive to the people to whom they are supplying services. I am glad to be able to tell the House that listening to children was a priority area for expenditure for the children's special grant last year, and that councils spent nearly £5 million on improving the way in which they consult looked-after children in their care. Listening to children will remain a priority area for use of the grant in future as well.

In order to practise what we preach, we are organising a series of regional events at which I and senior members of the Department will hear directly from looked-after children. We are working with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, the Association of Directors of Social Services and a small project team of young people to plan the events.

We are currently reviewing the Children Act 1989 complaints procedure, which was mentioned by the right hon. Member for Caernarfon, and the procedure under the Local Authority Social Services Act 1970. A consultation document will be published shortly. The aim is to bring the two procedures more closely into line with each other and to ensure that they are effectively observed.

The review of complaints procedures has addressed issues such as the role of the "independent person" within the existing Children Act guidance. The review has shown that there is often confusion about that role. The consultation document will discuss whether a complainant would be better served by having a statutory right to an advocacy service in formulating and pursing their

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complaints. As I have already indicated, a statutory right to advocacy is being considered as part of the review of complaints procedures. Advocacy in general is a developing area and—I am glad to say in relation to the point made by the right hon. Gentleman—is a priority area for grant funding under quality protects.

I recognise that for quality protects to be a success, authorities need to be able to recruit and retain staff. For quality protects and the whole social care modernisation agenda, local authorities and other employers need to be able to recruit and retain staff of the highest calibre and in the right numbers. A high-quality work force is essential to the delivery of high-quality services.

We are well aware of the concerns expressed in the media and directly to us by local government about the shortages of social workers and other care staff which jeopardise our modernisation plans and quality protects in particular. It is important to see that against a general background in which the social care work force have been fairly stable. The latest data available show vacancies for social workers are at the lowest level for a decade. Vacancies have declined from 10 per cent. in 1990 to just over 7 per cent. in 1998. Turnover rates over the same period have also declined from 14 per cent. to about 8.5 per cent. Those overall trends do mask particular difficulties in some service sectors and some parts of the country, which may be affected by the demands of service developments such as quality protects.

It is the responsibility of local authorities, in the first place, to address their work force requirements. The Government are not the employer. We are therefore particularly pleased that the Local Government Association has recently taken an initiative to set up a work force task group with the express purpose of identifying, for implementation as soon as possible, a series of practical measures that can have a more immediate impact.

We also recognise that the Government have a role to play. We have therefore agreed with the LGA to build on this early work and, together with the wider employment interests across the whole of social care, to work on a programme of action for implementation over a longer time scale. We are therefore making arrangements for a work force summit to be held on 22 March. Among the issues to be discussed in that summit will be the image and status of social care, including conditions of service, family friendly employment policies, encouraging return to work, developments in the existing work force, the skills mix, and the problems of recruiting students to social work.

The Government are of course already taking action to raise the quality of social workers and other social care staff. For example, we are funding a top management development programme for senior managers in social services. The Care Standards Bill provides for the creation of a new General Social Care Council. That body will have a statutory duty to promote high standards of conduct and practice through its codes of conduct and practice for all social care staff. We have already commissioned the initial drafting of those codes. The council will have the powers necessary to ensure that social work training is fit for the purpose. In addition, we are currently considering the reports of external consultants whom we engaged to advise us on the content and delivery of professional social work training. Those reports will be published with the forthcoming Green Paper on quality issues in social services at Easter and further announcements are likely in the summer.

The Government accept that to build the new ethos of excellence in social services that we all desire, we need the highest standards among all of the social care work force. The essence of modernising social services lies in raising standards. We must have a new ethos of excellence, not of excuses. We must drive standards up and drive failure out. At their best, social services authorities are capable of just that sort of excellence. That is why we will issue a quality strategy Green Paper for social services.

The quality strategy is the Government's next step in their modernising agenda for social care. It will set a national framework for raising local standards, reducing unacceptable variations in practice and achieving an ethos of excellence in social services. It will build on and consolidate existing initiatives to improve quality. It will consider the creation of a new institution to support the drive for quality—a social care institute for excellence. The institute would provide authoritative guidance about effective and efficient social care interventions and help to guide local authorities through the modernisation process.

No one who has read the Waterhouse report could fail to be shocked by the catalogue of abuse it records of children in care in the former county council areas of Clwyd and Gwynedd. That abuse destroyed young lives over a period of more than 20 years. I repeat that this Government are determined to learn the lessons of that inquiry. We must use it as a catalyst for meaningful and radical change in children's services. The report should serve as a warning of the constant need for vigilance, of the need to ensure that children being looked after can always talk freely about their concerns and worries, and of our duty to listen to them and to treat them as we would our own children.

Safeguarding children is an absolute priority for this Government. Through quality protects, we are taking action now to get the management and services right. Through our legislative initiatives, we will enshrine real safeguards for vulnerable children and young people on the statute book. Through the ministerial task force, we are actively considering our response to all of the outstanding recommendations of the Waterhouse report, which we hope to publish early in the summer.

In conclusion, I would echo the words of Jo Williams of the Association of Directors of Social Services, who said recently that

the age of innocence is past.

We must shoulder our responsibilities now for the children of this generation and for the future. There can be no more excuses. The events recorded in this unhappy report must never be allowed to happen again.

10.29 am

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge): The Minister started his speech by emphasising the consensus that we have across the Chamber in dealing with matters of children's safety and protection. Indeed, there was little in his speech with which I could disagree. Where we do disagree, is about the modalities of achieving those safeguards and that protection, and I hope that the Minister and the House will take it as read that,

even though we have questions to ask and, perhaps, criticisms to voice, we are at one with the Government in their determination to ensure that vulnerable children are properly protected and safeguarded and in our recognition that achieving that is a responsibility that we must all share.

This debate is being held in the aftermath of the publication of the Waterhouse report. The report was a very long time coming and, as the Minister said, many of its conclusions had been anticipated, by the previous Government as well as by this one. Many initiatives are already in hand that seek to address the problems that Waterhouse identified.

However, nothing prepared any of us for seeing in black and white the horror of what went on in north Wales over a long period. We had to read a catalogue of abuse, a damning indictment of the failure of our statutory public services to protect the most vulnerable in our society. The report was an exposé of the violation of the concept of care by authorities in a place of safety. My hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) described the report as the greatest scandal to hit the modern welfare state.

Mr. Ruane: The hon. Gentleman mentioned consensus, and I do not want to break it, but I want to put matters into their historical context. Paragraph 47.18 of the summary document states that

> in 1979, the new Government announced its intention to reduce substantially the number of bureaucratic controls in order to give local authorities more choice and flexibility.

The next paragraph states that a "climate of disengagement" was thus created. Does the hon. Gentleman feel that the child abuse scandals of the 1980s and 1990s were exacerbated by that Government instruction?

Mr. Hammond: My instinctive answer is no. As I was going to go on to say, Waterhouse has exposed and uncovered dark and shameful secrets that have been buried in our society, probably for a long time. As those shameful secrets are exposed and examined, it is important that we work together to address them and to expunge such activity from our society.

The Waterhouse report is shocking. It will have shocked many hon. Members in the most genuine sense of the word, but there is no doubt that it describes only the tip of an iceberg. The Minister confirmed that 32 other police inquiries into child abuse are under way, but we should also look on the positive side. What has been exposed so far has been acted on. Things are changing for the better. Waterhouse said so, and he described the Children Act 1989 as the springboard for many improvements in children's services.

However, no one who has read the Waterhouse or Utting reports could possibly dispute the obvious and imperative need for still greater safeguards in the future. No one could fail to be dismayed that what is described as care should have failed so dismally to provide for so many children.

Taken together, the Utting and Waterhouse reports identify what was in some cases the deliberate exploitation and abuse of children. The Waterhouse report is a catalogue of physical and sexual abuse. However, as the Minister also said, the reports also identify the systematic failure of the statutory services to deliver the protection that they are charged to deliver. Sometimes, that failure was the result of political misguidedness, but more often it was the result of bureaucratic incompetence that harmed those whom the statutory authorities were supposed to help.

The Minister referred to the haphazard arrangements for access to child care services. I should be interested to hear, when the debate is wound up much later on, whether that indicates that the Government are minded to consider the arguments for standardisation of assessment throughout the system to prevent such problems of haphazard access and differing thresholds.

Yet there is no doubt in my mind that society as a whole has gradually woken up to the problem in its midst. There is a consensus on this issue, which we are taking forward. A growing awareness of these problems in the 1980s led to the Children Act 1989. The Secretary of State for Wales has said that the far-reaching changes of the past decade resulted directly from changed perceptions introduced by the 1989 Act. That sea change in attitude placed children at centre stage. Their well-being became the paramount consideration when arranging the affairs of families and the responsibilities of the statutory bodies dealing with them.

The commissioning of the Utting and Waterhouse reports in the summer of 1996 by my right hon. Friends the Members for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) and for Charnwood (Mr. Dorrell) carried forward the recognition and awareness of the problem. It demonstrated the determination on all sides of the House to address the problem, deal with it, and to expunge this shame from our society.

The Family Law Act, the Sex Offenders Act and the Police Act all became law in 1997 and provided the foundation for legislation introduced by this Government, such as the Protection of Children Act 1999. There has been a continuum of legislation and initiatives to deal with what was gradually being revealed to the nation and to the politicians charged with its conduct.

In anticipation of Waterhouse and in response to Utting, I am glad to say that this Government have continued that approach and have delivered further improvements to services for children. I am happy that the Government are building on what my right hon. Friends the Members for Richmond, Yorks and for Charnwood started in 1996 with the commissioning of those reports.

There has been abuse in our care system and a failure to perform the statutory duty of care with which local authorities are charged. That is especially shocking to all of us, as we share a responsibility for ensuring that bodies charged with caring for the vulnerable and taking on the role of parents discharge those responsibilities effectively and with appropriate diligence. We have to acknowledge that it is an indictment of us all that, over the years, that has not been the case.

We must also acknowledge that most abuse suffered by children takes place in the home and at the hands of a family member. I would be the first to accept that, but we must retain a sense of proportion. Our starting point must be that the vast majority of parents are supportive and proper guardians for children, and that the family is by far the best environment in which to care for children.

Ms Shipley: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that, according to widely accepted figures, one woman in seven experiences violence in the home in this country? Where that happens, there is a high probability that children will also experience violence in the home. That adds up to a very large number of children, and makes it clear that families in this country have real problems. Although the family is an important unit, and we support it, it is problematic and not always perfect. Violence in the home is unacceptable.

Mr. Hammond: I agree entirely, and I do not wish to suggest that the family is a perfect unit. However, it is the preferable unit for raising children appropriately, and I shall return to the points that the hon. Lady made when I speak a little later about the arrangements for support of the family.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): I accept the point that has just been made, but instead of lowering and modifying society's standards and mores, should not we in this House aim to raise those standards and provide the funds needed to cope with the problems that arise when things go wrong?

Mr. Hammond: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point, and I agree with what he says. I shall shortly be arguing that although we support what the Government are doing in dealing with the issues of children in care and ensuring that they are properly safeguarded, it is also important to look upstream, at the way in which families become dysfunctional. We must give families every possible support and encouragement so that children do not have to come into contact with the statutory care system in the first place.

We recognise the problems that can exist within the home, but we believe that family life is the optimum way to bring up children. It makes sense to support families to try to avoid the possibility of children coming into contact with the care system. Once they are, however, we must maximise the use of fostering and adoption to ensure that they return as soon as possible and as often as possible to something as close as possible to a normal family life. I shall develop that theme a little later.

In seeking to ensure the well-being and safety of children, we must look through the chain at how they come to need the support of the statutory care system, and then look at what the Government are doing to address each of the areas that I shall outline.

First, it is axiomatic to me that we should encourage and support the family in general, and proper and appropriate parenting in particular. In that way, we will enhance the opportunity for the greatest possible number of children to be brought up within the family context without the need for statutory authorities to be involved. Secondly, we must target particular help on vulnerable families, making appropriate interventions early enough to support families in crisis and seeking to avert family breakdown. Thirdly, once family breakdown becomes inevitable, we need to have effective and appropriate mechanisms for identifying children at risk and taking rapid and effective action to protect them when their families, for whatever reason, can no longer do so.

Fourthly, as the Minister outlined in some detail, we need to ensure that there are proper safeguards for children who are looked after or are identified as being at risk. We must at all costs ensure that children do not go from the frying pan into the fire, which is clearly what happened to some of the children described in the Waterhouse report. Fifthly, effective programmes must, wherever possible, place children back into family situations through the mechanisms of adoption or fostering.

I hope that those aspirations are uncontroversial. I hope that every hon. Member would agree that care, in itself, must not be seen as a parking ground where children end up, but that everything possible must be done to make it an interlude in their lives—a safe and secure interlude—on their way back to something better.

We have made much of the consensus on the issue, and I have no wish to disrupt that consensus. However, the duty of the Opposition is to identify areas on which the Government should focus more or differently. I have criticisms of the Government's performance when it comes to encouragement and support for the family. Their support for the family is, at best, ambivalent. The last recognitions for marriage in our tax system have been withdrawn. There seems to be a general agenda of downgrading the value of conventional family relationships. I do not propose to engage in a debate on section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988. However, last night on television I saw a Minister refusing to acknowledge that marriage is the preferable relationship in which to bring up children, in the face of all the evidence to the contrary in every study that I have seen.

It is a debate for another day and another place whether individuals should have different views about the appropriateness of various relationships. That is not our purpose today. However, we have been talking about a child-focused, child-centred agenda. Whatever else people may say about unconventional relationships, the evidence is that when we look at the world from a child-focused point of view, the argument for conventional marriage between two parents of the opposite sex is overwhelming. I hope that at least in relation to their child protection programme, the Government will recognise the logic of such a child-centred, pro-family, pro-marriage approach.

I was contacted yesterday by a constituent who is involved in a divorce case. She was told by a court-appointed welfare officer that her concerns about the safety of her four-year-old child in the hands of her ex-husband arose from her "abnormally stable family background". The court welfare officer then authorised unsupervised access. The father is now awaiting trial on a charge of indecently assaulting the child. That is the sort of attitude that we must tackle and change if we are genuinely to protect children in our society.

The second area that I highlighted was help for vulnerable families—those at risk and in difficulty. I have discussed this with the Minister, and I know that he understands the value of the work of the voluntary sector in supporting families in difficulty. I have seen at close quarters the work of home start in my county of Surrey. It is an effective, low-cost solution to supporting and enhancing the care of children within families. However, financial pressures on local authority social services departments and the ending of joint funding initiatives have put pressure on many of those voluntary services and some of them are under threat. I hope that the

Minister will recognise the good sense—economic and common—of ensuring that those relatively modest local voluntary initiatives are supported. Investment in them is hugely beneficial and greatly reduces the burden on the statutory authorities further down the line.

Thirdly, we must ensure that rapid and effective intervention mechanisms are available when children become at risk. We must recognise that, from time to time, families become dysfunctional. I acknowledge the Government's initiatives in seeking to improve the responsiveness of social services and, when appropriate, clamping down on failing authorities which have not discharged their duties.

Support and appropriate intervention are the most sensitive issues. There is always a danger that in seeking to be effective, the statutory authorities will become heavy-handed and undermine rather than support the family. The challenge for us is to ensure that we protect children without eroding the role of parents in society.

The focus of much of what the Minister said started from the point that I have now reached in my analysis, when the family has broken down and the child is taken into care for his or her own protection. I understand why Government thinking is focused on this area, especially in light of the findings of Utting and Waterhouse. However, that focus addresses the consequences of failure rather than directing resources at seeking to avoid failure in the structure of the family.

Our prime responsibility is to ensure that safeguards for children in care are adequate to ensure their safety and well-being. The Government have rightly targeted legislation at that. Sometimes we are dealing with the problems of a culture of abuse, but more often there is simply a culture of despair. The quality protects initiative rightly focused attention on that culture of failure and despair, and we support the Government's initiative to change it. Statutory authorities looking after children must encourage a positive, forward-looking vision for the children in their care.

We support the broad objectives of the Government's legislative programme. The Minister mentioned three Bills—the Care Standards Bill, the Protection of Children Bill—now the Protection of Children Act 1999—and the Children (Leaving Care) Bill. We support the underlying objectives of each of them, but we have some concerns. The Protection of Children Act passed through the House last year, but Members have not yet questioned in detail the Government's intentions on the other two Bills. We rely for information on debates in the other place. I have a few questions about those Bills.

Is the Minister entirely satisfied that the arrangements proposed in the Care Standards Bill will allow inspection to focus properly on areas that are seen to be failing? Is he sure that the system will not bear down inappropriately on good performers but instead will focus on improving and, if necessary, dealing, perhaps dramatically, with those who are failing? Is he satisfied that the care standards commissioner will be sufficiently independent? The Minister is aware of widespread concern that we are shuffling seats, and that the same people will take on essentially the same roles under the different title of the commission. What reassurance can he offer that the commission is a genuinely new initiative that will break with the past arrangements that so often failed us?

Can the Minister assure us that the regulations that will govern provision for children and the standards by which they will be judged will focus on outputs, not inputs? Will they measure the quality of care delivered, rather than the nuts and bolts provided to deliver that care? Can he assure us that the proposed inspection of child minders and day care centres will not place a burden on those operations, which might lead to a reduction in provision—a concern expressed in other places?

Do the Government propose to follow the recommendations of the Utting report by extending the Children (Leaving Care) Bill to people aged 18 to 21? When does the Minister expect to do that? Resources are tight, but it has been estimated that the cost would be modest. If we seek to emulate for children leaving care the support and protection that they could expect from natural parents, it seems logical to extend the Bill as soon as possible. Do the Government intend to use voluntary agencies to maintain contact with children once they have left care, rather than consigning the job entirely to statutory bodies?

The Protection of Children Act 1999 is on the statute book, and the Minister has told us when he expects to implement it. I asked him about the availability of certificates from the Criminal Records Bureau because I understand that they are not expected to be available until next year. I find it difficult to see how the protection afforded by the Act can work effectively in the absence of the certificates. Perhaps the Minister would clarify the point.

Will the Minister say whether the Government plan to deal with the loophole identified by the hon. Member for Stourbridge (Ms Shipley)? The 1999 Act does not require vetting of voluntary sector workers. When and how does the Minister expect that loophole to be closed?

I confess that I have not yet had a chance to read the Criminal Justice and Court Services Bill, which was published this week. It will create the criminal offence of seeking employment from which one is banned, as the Minister assured us would be done during the passage of the 1999 Act. I assume that it will extend to vulnerable adults, as the Care Standards Bill does. Will the Minister confirm that when the Bill is on the statute book, the Act will include criminal sanctions against those who should not apply, but do apply for jobs with children and vulnerable adults?

Ms Shipley: I understand that the Criminal Justice and Court Services Bill will cover a wide range of areas, including education, health, social care, accommodation, leisure and sporting activities, religious activities and the criminal justice system. Will the hon. Gentleman undertake that Opposition Members will support that wide-ranging measure?

Mr. Hammond: I was fortunate in confessing just before the hon. Lady's intervention that I had not had a chance to read the Bill. It would be unwise of me to give any undertaking without having read it in detail. I thank her for that information, and I shall read the Bill.

[Mr. Hammond]

The Waterhouse report recommended an examination of the availability and adequacy of fostering. Being looked after should be seen as an interim step towards fostering and adoption—the optimum outcome for children in care who are unable, for whatever reason, to return to their natural families. Does the Minister agree that we should clear any ideological impediments to maximising fostering and adoption?

My hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) has announced our policy that children in care should have a fostering and adoption plan and that the system should be overhauled to ensure that those plans are implemented on a fast track wherever possible. No one will be written off. There will be no admission of failure, and no toleration of consigning children in care to the category "unplaceable". My right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) is heading a commission set up by my hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring to look into these matters. We will be happy to share its findings with the Government.

What are the Government doing? The Prime Minister responded to the Waterhouse report, and his spokesman said, in a Lobby briefing of 17 February, that the Secretaries of State for Health, for the Home Department and for Wales would meet that week to consider it. What are the Government doing to stamp out once and for all misguided, politically motivated interference in adoption and fostering, which we have seen too often in the past?

Mr. Hutton: When the hon. Gentleman checks *Hansard*, he will see that I set out what we are doing on the overhaul of adoption policy and procedures. He mentioned his policy that every child who is being looked after by a local authority should have an adoption plan. However, he will be aware that the majority of children who enter the care of a local authority return to their family within eight weeks. What is the point of such children having an adoption plan?

Mr. Hammond: I am not talking about children in short-term local authority care, who are expected to return to their natural family. My hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring wants to avoid the creation or continuation of a category of children who are treated and regarded as unplaceable. As the Minister is well aware, such a category has existed and continues to exist. I am sure that he agrees that it is unacceptable. All children in care have to be regarded as being on their way to something better. Ideally, they would return to their family; where that is not an option—or not likely to be one—it is incumbent on the responsible authority to set up an appropriate plan for them to be fostered or adopted as soon as possible.

We have a responsibility to ensure that the system works correctly and appropriately at all stages, so that we provide support as early in the chain as possible. We must protect those who cannot be, or who are not, protected by their parents, but in our zeal to do so, we must always ensure that we do not undermine the parent-child relationship which serves so well in the majority of cases.

The married family unit remains the cornerstone of our social structure. In that context, I want to explore a little further the Government's response to the Waterhouse report. Interventions in the debate highlight the ambiguity in what the Government have said so far. One of the central recommendations of the report was the appointment of an independent children's commissioner for Wales, whose duties should include

> ensuring that children's rights are respected through the monitoring and oversight of the operation of complaints and whistleblowing procedures and the arrangements for children's advocacy;

and

> examining the handling of individual cases brought to the Commissioner's attention . . . when he considers it necessary and appropriate to do so.

In response to a question about the report, the Prime Minister told my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition that:

> All parts of the House will be anxious to take action as soon as possible to act on the recommendations of the report. The Care Standards Bill and the Children (Leaving Care) Bill give us an opportunity to do so. We shall respond as soon as we possibly can . . . We shall implement the recommendations as soon as we possibly can.—[*Official Report*, 16 February 2000; Vol. 344, c. 941.]

However, the Minister of State, Department of Health said:

> My hon. Friend drew attention to the fact that Sir Ronald today recommended the appointment of an independent children's commissioner for looked-after children in Wales. Our proposal, to which my hon. Friend referred, to appoint a children's rights director to the proposed National Care Standards Commission captures the spirit of that recommendation.—[*Official Report*, 15 February 2000; Vol. 344, c. 926.]

The hon. Member for Bridgend (Mr. Griffiths) has already pointed out that the Waterhouse report does not limit the commissioner's remit to children in care. We need more detail about the children's rights director proposed under the Care Standards Bill to test the Minister's statement that the proposal does indeed capture the spirit of the Waterhouse recommendation.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. David Hanson): I should be grateful if the hon. Gentleman could tell House what discussions he has held with the National Assembly for Wales. Is he aware of the stage it has reached in its consideration of the appointment of a children's commissioner? He will know that Members of the Assembly are currently discussing that matter. What is his understanding of the Assembly's current position?

Mr. Hammond: Although I wholly accept that the Waterhouse report addressed itself specifically to Wales, I am sure that it is understood in the House that the recommendations for Wales are equally applicable to the other countries of the United Kingdom. Indeed, my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition and the Prime Minister had an exchange to that effect. I accept that in Wales matters may be moving in a particular direction, but I now want to clarify whether the Government intend to follow the Waterhouse recommendations in England as well. Do they intend to limit the role of the children's rights director only to looked-after children?

The Minister should not regard my question as sinister or as having an ulterior motive. I merely want to understand where the Government are going. Other hon. Members have pointed out that children in care are not the only ones who have problems and who need protection. I do not urge the Minister to take a route that

would involve intervention in what goes on in a normal, functional family. However, he will readily realise that, beyond children in care, there are many children who are identified as at risk. Does the Minister think that the role of the children's rights director for England might be extended beyond children in care to cover other categories of children whose well-being is already the responsibility of the statutory authorities? Would it cover children who are identified as at risk, even though they might still be looked after by their families? I ask those questions in a genuine spirit of inquiry and would be grateful for some clarification of the Minister's intentions in that matter—especially for England.

Do the Government believe that the role of the children's rights director—or a similar position—might extend to other statutory authorities? For example, might it apply in the case involving a court welfare officer that I cited earlier? Statutory authorities other than local authority social services departments have a role in ensuring the safety and well-being of vulnerable children. I should be grateful for any clarification that the Minister can offer on that point.

The thoroughness and detail of Sir Ronald Waterhouse's inquiry mean that all the recommendations merit the closest scrutiny. It is clear that what is relevant, applicable and necessary in Wales will be so in the rest of the UK. I accept that the Government cannot answer for what will happen in Scotland, but I hope that they can assure us that the spirit of the report will be properly implemented in England and Northern Ireland.

A comprehensive programme is already in hand—through legislation and through non-legislative initiatives—to address the wholly unacceptable situation that has existed. One of the dark secrets of our society has been exposed; we are gradually becoming aware of its extent and learning from it. Working together, we shall ensure that looked-after children are safer in future than they have been in the past.

We must be honest with ourselves, however. As was noted during the proceedings on the Protection of Children Act 1999, promoted by the hon. Member for Stourbridge, we must realise that we shall never completely eliminate abuse, neglect or indifference. We certainly shall not eliminate incompetence—either from the statutes or from the family. We must strive constantly to combat it, while taking care that we do not destroy or undermine the structure of the family.

The majority of parents conscientiously bring up their children—although none of us are perfect—far better than the best, most caring and well-run statutory bodies. We must not create some Orwellian nightmare society in which the authority and rights of parents are undermined by well-meaning but misplaced excesses of zeal in addressing the tiny minority who—whether through wickedness, incompetence or indifference—put at risk the children in their charge. I am sure that the Government are alert to that danger, and will ensure that the action that they take is a measured and appropriate response to the situation.

We have a structure in place for identifying and intervening in situations where parents are failing. I believe that we need to focus more of the overall effort on refining and continuously improving that structure, and on moving further upstream to ensure proper support for families in all aspects of Government policy—national and local—partly by providing proper, effective support to the voluntary sector, which can so often be effective and economic in helping to prevent family breakdown and its unfortunate consequences for children.

In view of the terrible revelations of the Utting and Waterhouse reports, I entirely understand the focus of recent Government policy initiatives on looked-after children, because we as a society have obviously failed in our duty to these vulnerable children in all too many cases. In doing so we are addressing the consequences of family failure, however, and it is right that we also focus a good proportion of our attention on doing everything possible to prevent children from finding themselves in that situation.

We look forward to a continuing programme of legislation and other initiatives to strengthen and make more effective support for the family and support for children where the family has failed. If the Government approach that programme with the clear objective of reinforcing, not undermining, the family, and strengthening the safeguards for children at risk or in care—regulating with the lightest touch compatible with achieving those objectives, and recognising and involving the skills and capabilities of the voluntary and independent sectors in delivering services within a framework of regulation and oversight provided by the statutory bodies—they will have our continued, wholehearted support.

I hope and expect that, in 20 or 30 years' time, when the history of this inglorious episode comes to be written, there will be no perceptible breaks in the continuity of evolution of policy between Governments of different parties; because, as the Minister said at the start of his speech, if ever there was a field of endeavour where we must put aside party politics and work together in the best interests of children and families, this is it. We owe that much at least to the many people whose lives have been blighted by our collective failures of the past.

11.12 am

Mr. Win Griffiths (Bridgend): The report of Sir Ronald Waterhouse and his tribunal members Margaret Clough and Morris le Fleming is an admirable but incredibly depressing document. It recounts a story of failures at every level of children's services, as children suffered sexual and physical abuse in the knowledge that any complaint would be a waste of time.

Everything that could be wrong was wrong. The Welsh Office, at a political and civil service level, local government officials, staff and elected members, private providers, and one critical police investigation triggered by Alison Thomas's complaint, all failed abused children appallingly.

Waterhouse catalogues the errors meticulously and, just as meticulously, makes 72 recommendations to prevent such abuse occurring again. At last the voices of the vulnerable and abused have been heard. However, that cannot compensate them properly for the abuse that they suffered. I hope that there is some comfort for them in the opening up of this secret world of terror, and the proposals made by Waterhouse to prevent it from happening again.

Unfortunately, the Waterhouse report probably will not be the last major investigation of child abuse in the United Kingdom. Even as I speak, police officers across England and Wales are investigating allegations of child abuse, involving, as the Minister said, 32 police teams.

[Mr. Win Griffiths]

It is salutary and deeply worrying to remember that Waterhouse is but the most recent of a long line of inquiries into child abuse allegations concerning both children in care and children living in their own homes. In the 1990s there were more than 20 child abuse inquiries; in the 1980s, more than 30; and in the 1970s, 17.

Those figures do not include more broadly based inquiries. The report of the Warner inquiry into the selection, development and management of staff in children's homes, "Choosing with Care", was published in 1992. The report of an inquiry chaired by Lady Howe into the pay, conditions of service, training and qualifications of residential staff employed in homes and hostels—including those for children—run by local authorities, "Quality of Care", was published the same year. The report of a review of children's homes in Wales by the Welsh social services inspectorate, focusing on the quality of care and the provision of solutions to meet the needs of children in care in appropriate settings, "Accommodating Children", was published the same year.

A wide-ranging review was undertaken by the social services inspectorate of the Department of Health, whose report, "Children in the Public Care", was published in 1991, hard on the heels of publication of the "Pindown Experience" report by Staffordshire county council. In 1987 Lady Wagner chaired an independent review of all residential care, commissioned by the then Secretary of State for Social Services, the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler); its report, entitled "Residential Care: A Positive Choice", was published by the National Institute for Social Work.

The most recent such report of this 10-year period was the Utting report, "Children Like Us: the report of the review of the safeguards for children living away from home", published in July 1997.

Let us hope that the fruits of these latest investigations will successfully ripen in the Care Standards Bill, the Children (Leaving Care) Bill and other Bills that, as this morning's debate has revealed, will address these concerns. Let us hope that they will all be enacted in this parliamentary year.

In the meantime, what is happening to children in children's services out there in the real world? In England in the 1990s, the number of children looked after by local authorities fell by nearly 5,000—8.5 per cent. In Wales, it increased by 122—3.7 per cent. The number of children on child protection registers in England fell by 30 per cent., while in Wales it increased by 16 per cent. In England, 28 of every 10,000 children were on child protection registers last year, while in Wales 40 of every 10,000 were.

In the last two years for which figures are available in Wales—1996-97 and 1997-98—the cost per child increased by 13.2 per cent., from £135,000 to £153,000. In the latter year, social services departments in Wales spent almost £103 million on children and their families.

It is obvious from reports such as the Waterhouse report that, in far too many instances, that money has not been well spent. Waterhouse notes in paragraph 55.12 of the summary that, from the records available to him, of 127 of the 129 people who gave oral evidence, 52 had convictions before they entered care, 85 were convicted of offences while they were in care and 85 had convictions after they had left care. There are undoubtedly huge savings to be made in the criminal justice system if we can provide positive, sympathetic and well-structured environments for looked-after children to recover for themselves the ordinary things of life, which most children enjoy without even realising it.

Although, in one sense, the Waterhouse report is history and an investigation of events over 16 years, the most recent of which took place more than a decade past, the shadow of those years still blights the lives of hundreds of youngsters who are now men and women seeking to come to terms with their betrayal in care. Can we be confident that we will do better by the young people in care now? We are certainly more aware of the dangers that can face young people in care, dangers which in the 1970s and the 1980s we deemed to be so horrific, brutal and inhumane that, all too often, we could not bring ourselves to think that such sexual and physical abuse of young children in care was really possible. We know now that it is, and we can look around us and say that we are trying to make sure that such abuse does not happen again.

By the time we came to power in May 1997, the previous Government had begun to tackle the problems in the care of looked-after children that had been revealed across the United Kingdom. We know, however, that that was not enough. Indeed, the Waterhouse report shows us that even the improvements that our own Government are making through the Care Standards Bill and the Children (Leaving Care) Bill, the additional funding through the quality protects programme and children first in Wales, and the commitments to have more qualified staff at all levels are not sufficient to provide the necessary safeguards for looked-after children and provide them with new hope, so that they do not feel, as Waterhouse puts it, "Lost in Care".

There is no doubt that the spirit is willing. In our first year in government, I was fortunate to be, among many other things, the first Minister with responsibility for children in Wales. In the Welsh Office, in local government and in the voluntary sector, I found willing partners in the campaign to improve children's services, to have better co-ordination across government in Wales and to have a strengthened appreciation of the need to assess the impact of our policies and programmes for children in Wales.

In September 1998, the Welsh Local Government Association published "Developing a Strategy for Children in Need in Wales: Local Government Role". I want to emphasise that it was a strategy for children in need, not in care. The association realised that the issue went beyond children in care. In many ways, the report foreshadows many of the recommendations in the Waterhouse report. The key areas identified in the report give a flavour of the wide-ranging nature of its work. It refers to children's service plans, looking at children in need including those with disabilities, children in public care, child protection, child care, leaving care and after care, youth justice and youth crime, staff training and development, educational issues, partnerships between the health service and local authorities and changes in the pattern of services.

That report was also set in the context of Government initiatives such as the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, on welfare to work and social exclusion, on building excellent schools together and on the health agenda as set out in the report "The Strategic Framework: Better Health, Better Wales". That report is an excellent blueprint for promoting public health strategies. It is, however, notable for its chapter on children and young people, which is about more than promoting their physical health. Its aim is to ensure that they reach their potential for achieving healthy and satisfying lives. The strategic framework focuses on a series of initiatives in the community—in schools and colleges—that will raise all aspects of services and enable children and young people to look forward confidently to opportunities for achieving healthy and satisfying lives.

I believe that, despite the rough ride that the National Assembly has had in the early months since its birth, it has the potential for developing an all-embracing, co-ordinated approach to services for children, bearing in mind particularly the duties placed on the Assembly to strengthen the role of local government and the voluntary sector in policy making and providing services. It is not for me to predict how the Assembly will rise to that exciting challenge, but I believe that it has the opportunity to concentrate more deeply on the needs of children and the services provided both to protect their rights and to enhance the quality of their lives.

Waterhouse was right to have as his first recommendation a children's commissioner in Wales. He said that the post should be established by statute and that it should be accountable to the whole Assembly and not just to a particular Secretary in it. That is rather like the Public Accounts Committee, which reports to the House and not to a particular Minister. Parliament should create similar offices in England and Northern Ireland.

We have already had an exchange on whether it is a commissioner for children in Wales or a commissioner for children in care in Wales. Waterhouse does not, in his list of recommendations, make any distinction. He says that an independent children's commissioner should be appointed and he lists some of the post's duties. It is misplaced to put the recommendation simply in the context of the report itself, which is about looked-after children.

Although the vast majority of Waterhouse's recommendations are about dealing with looked-after children, he does from time to time consider wider issues. In recommendation (62) he suggests:

> An Advisory Council for Children's Services in Wales comprised of members covering a wide range of expertise in children's services, including practice, research, management and training, should be established in order to strengthen the provision of children's services in Wales and to ensure that they are accorded the priority that they deserve.

Those are not services for children in care, but for all children. We should take the spirit of the Waterhouse recommendation for a children's commissioner in Wales to mean a commissioner who is involved with all children.

The commissioner or his office—one person could not do the job—should monitor and assess the policies and practice of all Government Departments in respect of the delivery of services to children. He or she—or the office—should ensure the development of policies and services designed to promote the welfare of children and young people. The office should undertake and promote research into any matter relating to the welfare of children and young people. It should be able to inquire generally into, and report on, any matter, including any enactment of the law or any practice or procedure relating to the welfare of children and young people. It should receive and invite representations from members of the public on any matter relating to the welfare of children and young people and it should increase public awareness of matters relating to their welfare.

It is obvious that, for too long, we have buried the issue deep in our psyche. I think that I am relatively sensitive to these matters, but the issue was brought home to me when I watched the BBC's adaptation of "David Copperfield" over Christmas. I do not know why, but it struck me forcefully that the abuse of children seems deeply endemic in our psyche. Although we have moved on from those days, to see total brutality as a matter of everyday life was something that hit me much more than reading that novel or the many others that describe such brutality.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: The hon. Gentleman is making a speech not only from the head but from the heart, and I fully appreciate the sincerity with which he is addressing the House. However, does he accept that some people think that having a commissioner for all children, rather than for children in care, would cause problems because it might usurp the normal rights of the majority of responsible mothers and fathers? Although I would be happy to accept a children's rights officer with jurisdiction also over children on the at-risk register, I would not be prepared to support a commissioner for all children.

Mr. Griffiths: I could understand the hon. Gentleman's concern if the policy were being introduced in a one-party, totalitarian state, but we have to remember that many countries, including Canada, New Zealand, Sweden, Norway, Iceland and Peru, have a commissioner for children. I would seek to make sure that the commissioner's statutory powers were focused on the policies of the Government and the public sector to promote the welfare of children and young people. That could be the subject of an important debate in the consideration of any legislation that is introduced.

Mr. Evans: I agree with almost everything that the hon. Gentleman is saying. He talked about his perception of Dickensian days and said that abuse of children is deep in the psyche. Does he share my concern about some of the refugees who come to this country taking children and babies begging with them? I make no party political point whatsoever in raising this issue. Does he deplore that practice and agree that urgent action should be taken to ensure that it is not allowed to continue?

Mr. Griffiths: The hon. Gentleman is taking me beyond the subject of this debate, but I agree that the issue is important and needs to be dealt with properly.

The office of the children's commissioner should also advise the Secretary for Education and Children in Wales on any matter relating to the administration of the law for children and young people, and it should keep under review and make recommendations on the working of that law. It should investigate and monitor the effectiveness of services for children provided by the public and voluntary

[Mr. Griffiths]

sectors, including the investigation of specific complaints. Last but not least, it should promote the full implementation of the convention on the rights of the child to guarantee the rights and welfare and children.

The office will of course need to be properly funded to do its incredibly important job. Critical in that regard will be the implementation of the recommendations made by Waterhouse on strategic issues, including a national review of children's services and a proper assessment of the financial resources needed to ensure appropriate staffing to support and monitor the provision of those services in Wales.

There is no doubt that despite the warm welcome given to the improvements made by our Government, fears have been expressed by voluntary sector organisations such as Voices, Children in Wales, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, and many others that some of the existing weaknesses will remain to endanger the efficacy of the new framework being developed to protect and enhance the lives of children in need in Wales.

Sufficient funding is needed to establish a truly independent advocacy service for youngsters, as the right hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley) pointed out in an intervention. Without clear independence of action and standing, there will always be the danger that youngsters' confidence that their complaints and concerns will be listened to will disappear, and the culture of hopelessness about ever getting complaints treated seriously, which blighted social services in Gwynedd and Clwyd, will enable abuse to start again and remain hidden.

Funding is also critical for the delivery of effective education services for children in care. The record of provision so far is appalling, with some 75 per cent. of these children leaving school with no qualifications whatsoever. It is good to hear of the Government's commitment to increasing the age up to which local authorities will have a duty to provide education and training for care leavers, rather than relying on their discretion, which has been discredited and has failed children since 1948.

Mr. Hammond: The hon. Gentleman talks about the Government changing arrangements so that local authorities will have a duty to provide educational support, but my understanding is that the Children (Leaving Care) Bill merely permits local authorities to provide that support. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that unless local authorities have a duty, we will not achieve more than the Children Act 1989 did?

Mr. Griffiths: There is absolutely no doubt about that. I understood from exchanges in the other place that there will be a change. I hope that the Minister will be able to clarify that point, because we know that discretion has been discredited and has not worked.

Extra funding, with the dissemination of best practice in positive corporate parenting, will immensely improve the chances of children leaving care then leading fulfilled and happy lives.

The review of children's services and funding will provide the opportunity to ensure that properly developed and monitored services, including fostering, for children on the at-risk register, will not become a disaster zone for social services' credibility.

There have recently been two well-publicised cases of children at risk in Caerphilly in south Wales, and in Brighton three children died between 1994 and 1997. Those are horrific and tragic examples of the need to raise funding issues. One point that is made in the Waterhouse report and which can been seen from the way in which high-profile tragedies are dealt with is that social services workers are totally overstretched. They do not therefore make the best judgments when faced with difficult situations. Waterhouse records that one social worker had responsibility for about 60 children in care, so it was impossible to cope.

On a slightly different issue, Waterhouse records also that in the care homes in north Wales were children from Tower Hamlets, Derbyshire and Newcastle, who had almost been abandoned there without any monitoring. One of the significant factors must have been a failure to provide the money for such monitoring.

Many social workers are undoubtedly overstretched. We need an in-depth review of funding. There are also issues around training: it is clear that lack of training was important in many, although not all, instances. At homes mentioned in the Waterhouse report, there was good care despite lack of training. That was one beacon of light in a sea of darkness. We also need money to help oil the wheels of co-operation between Departments and different parts of government which have responsibility for children.

If the Waterhouse recommendations are implemented in full and properly funded, I have every confidence in services for children leaving behind the dark terrors in Clwyd and Gwynedd expressed in the report, offering new hope to children who previously have been, tragically, "Lost in Care".

11.40 am

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): I very much welcome this debate. It follows one on the Waterhouse report in the National Assembly for Wales on Wednesday. Conducting the two debates so close together is timely.

We are dealing with what has been a tragedy for children in care in Clywd and Gwynedd and, indeed, other areas. My constituency is in Gwynedd, although the main location of concern in the report, "Ty'r Felin", is in Bangor, which is outside my constituency. Clearly, however, I have great constituency involvement in the issue, of which I have been aware over many years.

When I was a young Member of Parliament, many such areas were unknown to me. It has been part of my personal education to learn about them as the sad episode has developed. There is room for all of us in public life, as Members of Parliament, Assembly Members or local authority councillors, to maximise our education in order to understand matters in which we would not normally be involved.

There has, of course, been a change in local government, and there are now six new counties in north Wales that cover the areas previously under the jurisdiction of Clywd and Gwynedd. I know that the officers and members of those new authorities are acutely aware of the lessons that have to be learned from this sad saga and that there have already been many changes in order that that might be so. Those who work with such young people need our support and help in their very difficult work. It is from that direction that we should

approach the Waterhouse report. Many more steps need to be taken, and urgently. We should dwell a little in this debate on the need for such urgency.

I noted that, in opening the debate, the Minister said that we would have to wait until the summer for the Government's response to the Waterhouse report. We understand that there must be in-depth consideration, because the issues are very important, but I hope that there will be no undue delay. We have already been waiting far too long for action.

I welcome the establishment of a statutory children's commissioner for Wales. Several bodies and individuals in Wales have called for such a post for many years. As a party, Plaid Cymru has called for it for the best part of 10 years, as I know have other parties and many in the voluntary sector. The role of the commissioner should not be restricted just to children in care. I follow the points made by the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mr. Griffiths) and others in this debate. I do not accept that the Waterhouse proposals implied that the children's commissioner should deal only with children who are being looked after. That is obviously the report's remit, but it must be read in a wider context.

Indeed, the Government of Wales in Cardiff have not taken such a narrow approach. In the debate in the National Assembly on Wednesday, the Minister responsible, Jane Hutt, said:

> The Assembly has shown in its commitment to setting up an independent children's commissioner that it is willing to listen to children and young people. The Assembly will establish an independent children's commissioner for Wales. An amendment to the Care Standards Bill, currently going through Parliament will enable us to meet the first two recommendations of the Waterhouse report, but we fully recognise the need to establish an office with a wider remit to promote the interests of children in Wales.

That is the policy of the Government in Cardiff. I very much hope that the Government in London will facilitate the statutory underpinning necessary to grant the children's commissioner in Wales the full powers that he or she will need in order to undertake responsibility in that wider setting.

I would be grateful if the Minister gave an assurance in his winding-up speech that the Government's attitude towards such powers will not be restrictive, but will allow the National Assembly to determine a broader role, if it so wishes. Certainly, bodies such as the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children do not want a narrow interpretation of the commissioner's role.

We must, of course, look further than just the plight of those in formal care, as stated in paragraph 55.14 on page 212 of the summary of the report, which is well worth quoting again. I quoted it in part earlier. It in no way undervalues the very serious problem at Bryn Estyn. It states:

> Despite what we have said, however, a significant number of children regarded life in care, even at Bryn Estyn, as distinctly better than life at home and did not want to return to their family of origin. They were fed and clothed regularly and preferred a more predictable life to the unstable and sometimes dangerous one that they had known.

That surely underlines the need for the remit of the children's commissioner to go beyond those who are in formal care.

Ms Shipley: Earlier in the debate, I raised the issue of violence in the home. I should clarify that I am talking not about smacking, but kicking, punching, the stubbing out of cigarettes on children, very serious assault and a range of neglect, which the right hon. Gentleman has pinpointed. Does he agree that if, as a result of the Waterhouse report, good practice is developed in Wales, it should be a matter of political leadership that it is very quickly transferred to other parts of the country?

Mr. Wigley: Yes, I agree with the hon. Lady on both points. On her second point, we in Wales have clearly closely adhered to a fairly radical and progressive social agenda over many years and in different political contexts. If we can make progress that can be implemented and learned from in other parts of the United Kingdom, all the better. We are looking for the power and the right to be able to make progress in Wales in line with the wishes of the National Assembly, and to do so as quickly as possible.

The hon. Lady's first point is fundamental to the entire question. It would be far better if we could avoid the need for children to go into care by ensuring that they are looked after properly. That means being sensitive to the problems that they might be suffering in their homes and communities. If we can respond sufficiently rapidly, it might be possible sometimes to head off the trouble before it becomes too bad. There may be a need for foster homes in some instances, but there should not be an artificial barrier restricting the work of the children's commissioner. That view is widely shared in Wales.

All such points touch on the question of how much wider the problems go. I have the distinct feeling that the report touches only the very tip of a huge iceberg. The report implies that problems, particularly in the formal care sector in Clwyd and Gwynedd, may extend to other geographic areas—reference has been made by hon. Members to that—and that the breakdown of the care system, or even an absence of appropriate systems, may be endemic throughout these islands.

The issue of treatment of children within their own homes may require in-depth consideration. Although I took the point made by the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) on the extent to which the state should interfere in families, I am sure that not only he and I but all hon. Members believe that children's welfare must be the paramount consideration. Although we must not interfere more than necessary, when it is necessary to do so, we have to take responsibility to ensure that well-being. The children at-risk register is one example of how we take such responsibility.

I hope that Ministers, in responding to the report, will address the issues that it raises in a much wider context, not only geographically but in terms of the responsibilities that we as a community have towards our children.

The report highlights three or four key issues that must be addressed if we are to improve standards. The first is the training of the staff who look after children and young people. Recommendations 25 to 30 address that issue.

The pay and quality of staff is another issue, and addressing it is a basic requirement if we are to improve our standards. We have to make progress on appointing a children's complaints officer in each authority. We also have to address the issue of staff management tiers, and of appointing a specified social worker for each child in care.

[Mr. Wigley]

We also need a statutory independent advocacy service, which was mentioned earlier in the debate. On that, I received a very moving letter from the mother of a young boy, who is autistic. She wrote:

> What about the children who can't talk or communicate at all? My son is eight and autistic. He would be unable to get help if anyone was to hurt him.

We need that advocacy service if we are to ensure that the system we are developing provides safeguards to the most vulnerable children.

We need resources to address those issues. The Minister mentioned the sum of £370 million, but I seriously doubt whether that will be enough. We have to ensure that sufficient resources are made available, in England and, in Wales, to the National Assembly. We also have to ensure that the money provided to Wales is in addition to the Barnett block grant, as that is currently defined. The Waterhouse report specifically, in paragraph 69, highlights the need to provide adequate resources in Wales, at a national level, for those purposes.

Paragraph 64 of the report calls for a general review of the needs and costs of children's services, with a comprehensive and costed strategy. Waterhouse puts foursquare to the Government the need for more resources to safeguard our children.

Earlier, I mentioned the responsibility of elected representatives. As company directors are aware of their legal responsibilities towards those whose interests they safeguard, we have to ensure that elected representatives are aware of their responsibilities. In some ways, members of local authorities and hon. Members have even more serious responsibilities. We have to ensure that we are all not only aware of every aspect of those responsibilities, but fulfil them.

Recommendations 71 and 72 are the final recommendations in the report, and call for the Law Commission to ensure that the legal issues arising from the Jillings report—which was not published because of the pressure put on Clwyd council by the insurers—are addressed. Had that report been fully and promptly published, action might have been taken much sooner, thereby avoiding some of the difficulties.

On Wednesday, my colleague Gareth Jones, Assembly Member for Conwy, spoke very strongly on that matter. He was speaking from his own experience, both as a former headmaster of John Bright's comprehensive school in Llandudno, and as a local county councillor. He highlighted the failure to implement the lessons of previous inquiries—Cartrefle, Jillings and Cleveland. He called for implementation of Sir Alan Marre's report, back in 1978, entitled "Ad Hoc Inquiries in Local Government". That report is quoted on page 486 of the Waterhouse report.

The Marre report suggested changes in law, to enable local authorities to establish formal inquiries—a point that Waterhouse also emphasised very strongly, on page 485. I hope that Ministers will urgently ask the Law Commission to consider the Waterhouse recommendations on that matter.

My conclusions flow directly from the Waterhouse report's recommendations. We have had a string of previous reports. Some of them have been published, but some have not. Sometimes, the recommendations in the published reports have not been implemented. Waterhouse must not fall into that category. We owe it to all the children whose lives have been blighted, to the staff whom we ask to work with those children on our behalf, and to our communities to implement Waterhouse not only in full, but promptly. We also have to ensure that the resources are available to do exactly that.

11.55 am

Mr. Martyn Jones (Clwyd, South): Hon. Members will not be surprised to learn that, as a north Wales Member, I should like to focus on the Waterhouse inquiry. I should also like to introduce a slight note of discord into the debate. Although the Waterhouse report makes some very good recommendations, which I shall deal with later, I know that at least some of the victims feel let down by it. I am disappointed in some of its conclusions.

My involvement in the issue dates from about 1989, when a victim came to a surgery that I was holding in my then constituency. He was not a constituent of mine, and the abuse did not occur in one of the homes in my constituency, although events of that nature occurred in some of the homes in my constituency. I thought that the best plan would be to pass him on to the then chair of Clwyd county council social services, Mr. Malcolm King—who deserves an accolade for the efforts that he made to discover the problems that were occurring.

I was a Clwyd county councillor, from 1981 to 1989, although, from 1987 onwards, I was also a Member of Parliament and did not participate much in the county council's proceedings. However, at that time, there was no whisper at all of any problem—at least not to those of us who were in opposition on the council. It was only later, after the Labour party took control of the council, in 1989, that the matter started to be examined. I give Councillor King credit for that.

As we have heard, Councillor King's efforts resulted, ultimately, in an internal inquiry, which has come to be called the Jillings report. John Jillings, at the request of county councillors, produced the report. As we have also heard, that report was effectively suppressed by the insurance company. The council's insurers refused to allow it to be published.

Although Waterhouse recommended that that should be looked at, he said that it was not illegal. It is appalling for councils to be punished financially for acting in the interests of children. It would be astonishing if we allowed that to go on. The Government must ensure that it cannot happen again. If the Jillings report had been allowed to be published, we would have been able to investigate the issues a lot earlier, and I am sure that some of the victims who committed suicide after that would still be alive.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: The hon. Gentleman is not the first hon. Member to mention that the Jillings report was not published because the council was apparently refused the opportunity or right to publish it. Under what law can an insurance company prevent a publicly elected body such as Clwyd county council from publishing a report on such a critical matter? That is an issue of deep concern.

Mr. Jones: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's intervention. I note that, like me, he is concerned about the situation. As I understand it, the council was not prevented by law from publishing, but had the report been published, the insurers were legally entitled to withdraw their insurance. That would have meant that the individual councillors who acquiesced in the publication of the report, in the best interests of their charges in care, would have been personally liable for any legal action resulting from publication. They would have lost their houses. That is an appalling situation and an understandable, if deplorable, incentive not to publish the report.

In 1996, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, West (Mr. Morgan)—now the First Secretary—my right hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mr. Jones) and I met the then Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague). We threatened—if that is the word—to read edited highlights of a leaked copy of the Jillings report under parliamentary privilege. A week later the Government agreed to hold the public inquiry that we are now discussing. I hope that we had some hand in that, but I give credit to the Government of the time for agreeing to hold an inquiry.

The report makes gruelling reading and shows some interesting gaps in the care of children in Clwyd and Gwynedd: a culture of disregard for children seemed to be endemic in the system. It should have drawn a line under the sorry saga of child abuse in homes in Clwyd and Gwynedd and at least begun the healing process for the victims who were affected.

Some of the conclusions are good and all the recommendations are excellent, but sadly the report does not draw a line under the problems or satisfy the victims that they have been listened to. Why is that? I believe that it is because it was a public inquiry that was not public. The evidence was read out in front of the tribunal and victims went through the gruelling experience—not for the first time in some cases—of giving evidence about horrendous things that were done to them and their friends. Perhaps I am naive, but I thought that the point of a public inquiry was that all the evidence was published and that the duty of the tribunal was to analyse that evidence and say what had happened and how those children and young people would be treated and listened to. Unfortunately, that did not happen.

I understand that the naming of people who may be innocent is difficult. It is right that the victims were not named, but I do not understand how the public interest is properly served by not naming the potential abusers. The inquiry could exonerate those who were maliciously accused or for some reason mistaken by the children. We are talking about events that took place up to 20 years before. It is difficult, but I do not understand why all the accused were not named. That feeds the idea that there has been a cover-up. I have not established whether there is any evidence to support that belief, but unfortunately the refusal to allow the reporting of names leads to such accusations. That is a huge problem for the service of the public interest.

The belief that there might have been a cover-up stems partly from the fact that it is an open secret in the press and among those who were involved in the inquiry that many high-profile people have been named by the victims. I do not intend to name any of them at the moment, but I shall mention the categories. They include current and former Members of Parliament, senior members of the judiciary, members of the police force, including senior officers, and prominent business men. It was almost certainly a difficult judgment to make, but I do not accept that it is not possible to name these abusers.

Ms Shipley: I support what my hon. Friend is saying. It is important that these people are known. There is a facility to put people who are abusers or are very likely to have been abusers on the consultancy index. The Protection of Children Act included that important provision, but it also provided a balance by, for the first time, allowing an independent right of appeal. As there is such a right of appeal, the naming of such people appears to strike the right balance in these serious cases.

Mr. Jones: I absolutely agree. I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention as it adds weight to the point that I am trying to make.

The problem with the decision not to allow the public naming of people accused of abuse is that it makes it easier to avoid the hard work of following up less high-profile, but potentially dangerous people. The feeling that there has been a cover-up is encouraged by the fact that the Crown Prosecution Service was excluded from the inquiry. Why on earth was it excluded? I do not understand, and nor does the CPS.

I have been given a list of 45 people, excluding the categories that I have mentioned—who may or may not be abusers. We have no way of knowing for sure because of the way in which the report has been drafted. I have been making inquiries and I have received helpful responses from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales and from the police. I hope to be able to exonerate some of the people on the list as it would be nice to know that some of them are not potential abusers. It is a mammoth task and one that I should not have to do. The inquiry should have decided who to name as a potential abuser and, whether or not the victims' allegations were correct, those people should have been investigated.

Mr. Win Griffiths: A thought has occurred to me about what my hon. Friend said about the CPS being excluded from the inquiry. Can he tell me whether it is possible for the evidence collected by the inquiry to be given to the CPS, or to the police so that they can draw up a file for the CPS to follow up?

Mr. Jones: My hon. Friend has pre-empted me. He is absolutely right and I am pleased that we are obviously thinking along the same lines.

Before I turn to that point, I should like to query why that line was taken by the inquiry. I have read the official reasons in paragraph 6 of the report, but I remain concerned. I find it inconceivable that Sir Ronald Waterhouse did not consult Derek Brushett, a senior social services inspector, about the inquiry, as Mr. Brushett was in good standing between 1988 and 1997. I know for a fact that when the idea was mooted in 1996, he strongly advised the then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, the former Member for Clwyd, North-West, Mr. Rod Richards, not to have a public inquiry. That is hardly surprising, as it now transpires that Mr. Derek Brushett is in jail for 14 years for sexual abuse of children. If he was involved in setting up the criteria for the inquiry, that puts yet another question mark over why the people were not named.

[Mr. Jones]

We have a huge body of evidence that could now be published, with the names. It is not unreasonable to ask for that. We could have a royal commission on the whole matter.

Mr. Hanson: Let me assure my hon. Friend and the House that Mr. Derek Brushett was not involved in establishing the criteria for the inquiry.

Mr. Jones: I understood that to be the case, but I have not yet had a reply to my written parliamentary question asking whether he attended any of the four meetings that were set up by Sir Ronald Waterhouse.

There are other areas of concern throughout the United Kingdom. The problem is not confined to north Wales, to children in care or even to children: other vulnerable people are being looked after by the state and local government. A royal commission on all such vulnerable people would be an appropriate way forward.

The police—I use them as one example—set priorities for car theft, burglary and other crimes, and sexual offences and the abuse of children and vulnerable people are not very high on the list, but given the choice between a slightly lower risk of their car being stolen and a lower risk of their children being abused, I am pretty certain what most people's priority would be. A royal commission could take that on board.

The National Assembly for Wales discussed this issue on Wednesday. I only managed to get a transcript of the debate about 10 minutes ago, and I have not quite got through it, but I approve of its conclusion that there should be more powers for a commissioner in Wales. I am sure that most hon. Members would support that. I hope that we will get a positive response from my hon. Friend the Minister.

The evidence—naming names—should be published. That is the only way of getting the idea of a cover-up off the agenda. It is not acceptable to carry on pretending that because we have looked into the matter it is now all right. We have a 937-page report, with nearly half a million words, but unless people outside—and especially the victims—can be sure that their evidence has been taken proper note of, we will not be able to draw a line under the matter and the healing process will not be able to start.

12.14 pm

Jackie Ballard (Taunton): First, I apologise to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and to the House and the Minister, because after I have spoken I will have to leave for a long-standing engagement in Devon. I realise that that is a discourtesy and I am very sorry about it.

Many hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Clwyd, South (Mr. Jones), have referred to the Waterhouse report, but over the years there have been too many reports and too many investigations that have all identified actions that could be taken to safeguard our children further.

The Utting report, referred to by the Minister, identified three key dangers to children. The first was paedophiles, who are often very credible people who find ways of getting access to vulnerable children. The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children has produced an excellent booklet, advising parents on how to do as much as they can to protect their children from the attentions of paedophiles in the community. However, the NSPCC makes the point—which has been raised in the debate—that most child abuse happens within the family, and not with strangers.

The second key danger that Utting mentioned was adults and children who harm other children, either emotionally or sexually. The third danger—and the focus of much of today's debate—was failing organisation, where human error, incompetence or even indifference cause damage to children.

As we know from the Waterhouse report, institutionalised incompetence or indifference allows misconduct to flourish and fails to promote the welfare of children. We all want to believe that the abuse that happened 10, 20 or more years ago could not happen now. However, it is clear that, in many care settings, better strategies are still needed to drive up standards.

Mr. Ruane: The hon. Lady states that there have been too many inquiries in the past, and my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mr. Griffiths) has said that there were 17 inquiries into child abuse in the 1970s, 30 in the 1980s and 20 in the 1990s. Does she think that there should be an inquiry into those inquiries to find out why the recommendations were not implemented?

Jackie Ballard: As part of the Government's programme for the protection of children, it would be useful to have a compendium of all past recommendations to see where we have failed to deliver those which could have been useful. I am sure that that would be a long process.

Many actions are still needed in many care settings to drive up standards. I would include in that increasing the status of child care workers. Too often, residential social work has been seen as a second-best career, and not a particularly well-paid one. It is important that we have clear and consistent qualification requirements and on-going accreditation schemes. Staff should be able to whistleblow, or to report colleagues or managers, without damaging their own careers.

We have talked a lot about adults who have come forward in recent years to tell their stories of abuse when they were in residential care. We need a network of support and counselling for those adults. Just over a year ago, a constituent came to see me, alleging that he had been abused many years ago in a children's home in my constituency: a home which closed down a few years ago. Yet another inquiry—as part of a larger inquiry in Avon and Somerset—is going on into events at that home, and many people have come forward to say that they were abused in the home.

Just yesterday, a woman phoned my office, and we could hardly understand what she was saying because of her tears, and her obvious distress and anguish. We desperately need support, counselling and help for people such as that. It is not enough to set up the mechanisms of inquiries; people need on-going support for something that they may have suppressed for many years. It is only now that, after reading that an inquiry is going on, they feel able to come forward to talk of their experiences.

A number of hon. Members in the Chamber today served on the Committee scrutinising the Protection of Children Bill, as it then was. As has been said, there was

widespread party consensus on most of the issues. Yesterday, the Government published new proposals in the Criminal Justice and Court Services Bill that will place a statutory ban on people working with children in any setting if they have committed a serious offence against a child. There will be criminal sanctions if they break that ban. The measure should have widespread support in the House.

The hon. Member for Stourbridge (Ms Shipley) asked Conservative Members whether they supported the measure. That is a difficult question to answer, because it is encompassed in a wide-ranging Bill that includes a lot of other things that Opposition Members might not be able to support easily. However, I certainly support the measures in the Bill dealing with the protection of children. I believe that they will further strengthen the safeguards for children.

I especially welcome the widening of the definition of working with children to include voluntary settings. I am pleased, too, that it will be an offence for a disqualified person to seek to work with children. That was an issue that was raised during proceedings on the Protection of Children Act 1999, to try to minimise the risk of unsuitable people seeking work in less regulated sectors of child care. However, those provisions will apply only to people who have been convicted of harming a child and, for civil liberties reasons, I would not argue for extending the ban to non-convicted persons on suspicion only. As the hon. Member for Stourbridge knows, we had long discussions in the Committee on that Act about the civil liberties implications of preventing someone from working with children on the grounds of a reasonable suspicion that he or she might hurt them.

Children also need trusted people to whom they can turn if they are not happy with what is going on in child care settings. As other hon. Members said, children's complaints should be supported by independent advocates. That is especially important for children who have less of a voice to make their case. The position of children would be markedly improved by the appointment of a children's rights commissioner, as other hon. Members have commented.

The principal task of the commissioner would be to give advice and to keep under review the working of legislation affecting children. He or she would also have a key role in listening to children—not just looked-after children, but all children—and ensuring that their views were effectively represented to Government and other bodies. My party also strongly supports the campaign that has been launched by the NSPCC, Barnardos and others to that end. Waterhouse clearly recommended the establishment of a children's commissioner in Wales for all children. The creation of a children's rights director for England, as proposed by the Government, will safeguard only looked-after children. Many hon. Members hope that the Government will reconsider those proposals.

Children are too often at risk in their own homes, whether from someone who is paid to care for them or from their parents or other relatives. Too often, children in families do not receive the support they need and the Government are to be commended for introducing home start. However, it needs to be more widely accessible if it is really to provide the sure and safe start in life we want for all our children and the support that their parents need. I have said before in the House that being a parent is one of the most difficult jobs in the world.

We also need to acknowledge, as the hon. Member for Stourbridge pointed out in an intervention, that thousands of children a year witness or are subject to domestic violence. In the early days of the women's aid movement, the focus was on the battered wife and her needs. We are now much more aware of the impact on children of witnessing an abusive relationship. Research shows that children who grow up seeing violence in their daily lives, let alone experiencing that violence directly, are more likely to become violent themselves. A damaged child can become a damaging adult. Much more needs to be done by the Government and by statutory services working with the voluntary sector to produce a properly co-ordinated and resourced strategy for dealing with both the perpetrators and the direct and indirect victims of domestic violence.

The Government have taken some welcome initiatives in extending the statutory protection for children. However, there is still the question of people who have not been convicted of an offence against children and who are working in unregulated settings—as, for example, nannies in the child's home or as child minders. Child minders are registered and regulated, but at a local level only, not at a national level. We are all aware how cunning and credible child abusers can be and I believe that one more piece of the jigsaw is needed to minimise the chance of an abuser gaining access to children.

I am the chair of the parliamentary campaign for the registration of workers with young people and children. That is not a very sexy title, but we have shortened it to CRY. The campaign is supported by Labour Members and includes the hon. Member for Reading, East (Jane Griffiths), who was its chair before me. It is also supported by nanny agencies, the Chiltern and Norland colleges and the Professional Association of Nursery Nurses. Our key aim is to persuade the Government that there should be a national register of all those who work with children and young people. The Institute of Child Care and Social Education has prepared plans for the implementation of such a register. It would enable employers, whether public or private, corporate or individual, to check the background and see the information provided by an applicant, knowing that it had been independently checked out. A national register would prevent a person refused registration as a child minder, say, in one part of the country, from obtaining work in another area.

It seems that many of the workers named in the Waterhouse report are missing. They could still be working with children—they have not been convicted, and they may even have changed their names and faked their employment histories. A register could not totally exclude the possibility of child abuse but, by including police checks, a requirement for a minimum standard of relevant qualifications and a complete work history, it could enable employers to make better informed decisions.

Ms Shipley: I have had extensive discussions with the hon. Lady, and I recognise that she is making a very genuine proposal, but she will know that I have some reservations about it. She is proposing the establishment of a positive register, which will list those who are deemed to be good people to work with children. Such a register would be huge. There are many thousands working with children who are good people and who are

[Ms Shipley]

the right ones for that work. However, my experience of the Protection of Children Act 1999 is that the bad people who certainly should not work with children are devious liars and very cunning.

I would be very wary of the positive register that the hon. Lady proposes, as it would be extremely difficult to ensure that all the people in it justified their positive identification. I am worried—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. The hon. Lady is making an intervention, not a speech. If she wishes to make a speech, she must seek to catch my eye.

Jackie Ballard: Fortunately, the hon. Lady and I have discussed these matters many times, so I can imagine what she was about to say. I agree that the register would be very large, given the many people working in residential and non-residential child care. The people who would be bad and harmful to children would, under the proposals in the Criminal Justice and Court Services Bill and in the Protection of Children Act 1999, be included in the register of non-approved people. However, that would not tell a parent employing a nanny, for example, whether the pleasant and plausible person coming for interview was who she said she was and had the qualifications that she claimed.

A parent might be able to find out that such an applicant was not on a register of unapproved people, but I believe that a positive register would help give more information to people making the difficult decisions involved in employing a nanny. I and my campaign group would be happy to discuss the matter further with the hon. Lady, as we would be very pleased to have her support.

The Government intend to regulate nanny agencies, but only a small percentage of parents find nannies through agencies: 70 per cent. still use ads in magazines, or word of mouth. Only a national register will give parents better peace of mind.

A national register would also help to raise the status of child care workers. One thing is certain: if we are to safeguard children, we must value unpaid, parental caring as well as paid carers. As I said, looking after a child can be the most difficult, frustrating and demanding job in the world. It should be valued much more by society.

Life cannot be risk free, but we have a duty to do whatever we can to minimise the risks to children. The Government have made very welcome strides in putting together a network of regulation and legislation to safeguard children. I hope that they will be convinced to go just a few inches further—on a children's commissioner, and on a national register of child care workers.

12.29 pm

Mr. Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd): I am glad to have the opportunity to speak in this important debate, and I shall concentrate on Waterhouse's "Lost in Care" report. First, however, I should like to pay tribute to the work of Councillors Malcolm King and Dennis Parry from the Wrexham area, and of Alison Taylor, a social care worker in Gwynedd. For 10 years, they kept up the pressure to ensure that the Waterhouse report, and the Jillings report, came to fruition.

I know that "Lost in Care" will be different from all the other reports in the past—there have been 67, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mr. Griffiths) said. This report's recommendations will be implemented. There are 72 recommendations—60 pertain to the Department of Health, which is acting urgently upon 43 of them and reviewing another 27. That shows how serious the Government are in implementing those recommendations.

I am particularly pleased with the recommendation that those working with children should receive proper training and be required to gain proper qualifications to work in this difficult and demanding area. I hope that those who work in child care will receive adequate financial reward so that we attract people of the highest calibre.

I am pleased that the consultancy list of people who are unsuitable to work with children will be put on a statutory basis. Some of those named in the report have already gone on to jobs working with children in other areas of the country. That is unacceptable.

Another key recommendation—that children should have proper independent representation—will improve the lot of children in care. That, coupled with the local authorities' children complaints officer, will ensure that complaints are taken seriously. I was astounded to read of one ex-resident, who escaped from Bryn Estyn through his dormitory window. When he was caught by the police and told them that he was being abused, they did not believe him and took him back to the home the same night, where he was further abused. That is unacceptable.

There are a number of aspects of the report with which I am not satisfied. I share the concerns expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd, South (Mr. Jones). I am not happy that some of the abusers were named in the report and others were not. In appendix 4, page 877, the tribunal sets out its reasons for anonymity. The tribunal

> received requests from virtually all the potential witnesses . . . that they should be granted anonymity in the proceedings.

I agree that that should have been the case during the proceedings. Although it is entirely acceptable that those who have been abused have anonymity, I do not think that it should be given to people who have abused children and have admitted to doing so. For example, page 768 of the report refers to police officer Z, who was accused of indecently assaulting a 15-year-old boy on three occasions. He admitted the offence, and was given a written caution. That is unbelievable. It happened in 1993. He was let off lightly then, and I believe that he was also let off lightly in 2000, when the report was published, by not being named. Others were named in the report for carrying out physical abuse. Physical abuse is bad, and it is right that those people were named in the report, but the police officer committed sexual abuse, which I put on an equal footing, at least, with physical abuse. People accused of physical abuse were named in the report, while that police officer, who admitted sexual abuse, was not. I question that.

Mr. Martyn Jones: Is it not the case that people who accept a caution from the police, whether or not they are policemen, agree to accept the guilt of that offence? In other words, they are guilty.

Mr. Ruane: That is right. The officer in question admitted his guilt. There was no wild accusation; it was

verified by the officer's admittance of guilt. I cannot understand why a person who has been found guilty should be named while a person who admits guilt should not. Will the Minister address that point?

My hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd, South said that there is a feeling in north Wales that the investigation was not sufficiently transparent or public. He put it mildly. Because of the lack of names being made public, people in north Wales feel that there was a cover-up. Naming perpetrators would bring them great anxiety. They are probably sitting at home, terrified of being named. There have been press reports that my hon. Friend would name them today, and I am glad that he has not used parliamentary privilege to do so. If they are to be named, they should be named through the proper channels.

Mr. Hanson: My hon. Friend will be aware that chapter 6 of the Waterhouse report sets out the tribunal's policy on naming. For the record, the report states that the tribunal

> do not consider that the evidence against particular individuals has been such as to warrant naming them, bearing in mind the climate in which they were working.

We have a duty to recognise what the tribunal has said.

Mr. Ruane: I thank the Minister for that, but in the example that I have given, guilt was admitted. There are no two ways about it; the man was guilty, according to his own tongue. He should have been named. He got off leniently in 1993, and he has got off lightly again in the report.

People guilty of child abuse who were not named in the report are worried—probably terrified—about being named. But I ask them to remember the terror that they engendered in the young people in their care. I have spoken with people who were in care at Bryn Estyn and other schools, including some lads from the council estate where I was brought up in the 1960s and 1970s. They were placed in the dormitories of those homes, and they have told me of their terror at hearing footsteps on the stairs in the middle of the night. They have told me of their panic when they heard the door opening and closing. They have told me of their revulsion when people in positions of trust abused that trust and tried to force themselves on the young people.

Many of my friends from that tough council estate were tough lads, and they defended themselves. They have told me that if they did so, they were not bothered. The abusers were like water, flowing to the weakest point—abusing the most vulnerable young people. Those who abused young people in care in north Wales may be feeling anxious—even terrified—that they will be named, but I ask them to reflect on the terror that they caused.

Mr. Martyn Jones: My hon. Friend mentioned reports that I would use parliamentary privilege to name people, and I can say only that they were greatly exaggerated. I had no intention of doing so, unless I felt certain that people had not been properly investigated by the police and that they were a danger to the public.

Can my hon. Friend confirm that no one's interest will be served if many people who were innocent are scared? They have no need to be scared. An awful lot of people do very good work, and I commend them. I hope that they do not fear that they will be named.

Mr. Ruane: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention; I share his view on that matter.

Another issue that relates to the report is the number of ex-residents who have taken their own life because of the abuse that they experienced in those homes in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. I put a battery of parliamentary questions to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales, but, with respect, I was disappointed with the response. One of my questions was a request for a list of all the young people who had committed suicide as a result of their experiences as residents in those homes. I was told that the information was not held centrally. After the Jillings and "Lost in Care" inquiries, I should have thought that such information would have been kept centrally in the Welsh Office.

The Secretary of State did not supply the information. I had to rely on a newspaper—the *Daily Mail*. I shall read the toll of young people who committed suicide because of their experience in those homes: Peter Wynne, who hanged himself in 1994, aged 27; Mark Humphreys, who killed himself, aged 30, and who was raped at least 50 times in Bryn Estyn; Simon Burley, who hanged himself from a tree aged 27, after being abused by Peter Howarth; Robert Arthur Smith, who committed suicide in 1978, aged 16, by taking an overdose of painkillers; Barry Williams, found dead in his flat aged 21; Brendon Randalls, who died aged 27, after drinking himself to death; Richard Williams, who was found dead in a car, aged 18; Heath Kelvin Jones, aged 18, found dead in a car from solvent abuse; and Robert Chapman, who fell to his death from a railway bridge.

The last person I shall mention was one of my constituents, Craig Wilson. He committed suicide in 1994, aged 16. His case was examined in the Jillings report. Craig died six years ago, but the first that his parents knew about the abuse that he had suffered was when they read that report in the *Daily Mail* four weeks ago. That is unbelievable. We have had the Jillings report, the "Lost in Care" report and the coroner's report. Craig's suicide was trawled over by barristers, solicitors and other professionals, but his family were denied the right to know the circumstances of their child's death.

I spoke to Craig's mother at 11 pm yesterday and shall read from the letter that I received from the family:

> Dear Chris
>
> Once again I have to ask for your help. Our son Craig died on 21st November 1994 while being accommodated by Clywd social services.
>
> For five years we tried in vain to find through police, coroner and legal professions what exactly happened. To no avail. My wife's legal aid was withdrawn.
>
> I opened the Daily Mail on the 16th February . . . to see our son was one of the twelve victims related to the abuse in Clwyd. We did not know!!! The Daily Mail have told us the source of their information is the Jillings report. We can't access the report, can you?

Will my hon. Friend the Minister give me an assurance that the Wilson family in Prestatyn in my constituency will be given all the relevant information from the Jillings and "Lost in Care" reports, so that they know all the true circumstances behind their son's death. It is not much to ask. Any Member of the House would demand exactly the same if that had happened to their child.

I have expressed my main concerns about the report. I am sorry to be negative, because many positive results will come from the report. The 72 recommendations will lead to better care for young people in children's homes. However, I repeat my two main concerns: that anonymity

[Mr. Ruane]

is being given to certain people and not to others; and that the parents of Craig Wilson, my constituents, have been denied access to information that they should have been given years ago.

12.45 pm

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): The hon. Member for Vale of Clwyd (Mr. Ruane) has related to the House some horrific cases with which he has been intimately involved. I believe that we all listened with deep concern to what he said about his experiences and those of the families whom he is helping.

The Minister, in concluding a lengthy but detailed and helpful speech, quoted Mrs. Jo Williams, director of social services for Cheshire, who, quite by chance, is also chairman of the Association of Directors of Social Services, who said:

the age of innocence is past.

Despite everything that I have heard this morning, I am still one of those who believe that Parliament and rational and reasonable people, especially parents, should seek to restore that age of innocence to young people. It is a crying shame that people can say that no longer can children have eight, 10, 11 or 12 years of happy innocence, because for many, that may well prove to be the happiest time of their life. I make no apology for saying that I hope that this place, in legislation and in example, will restore that age of innocence to young boys and young girls.

The hon. Member for Taunton (Jackie Ballard), who has told the House that, sadly, she cannot be here for the remainder of the debate for reasons that we well understand, said that the bringing up of a child was a difficult, demanding job—and, moreover, a full-time job. I make the plea, because it has not yet been made during this debate, for the Government, whether the present Government or a Government of my own party or of another, to recognise the role that a mother, particularly, undertakes in bringing up a child. That could be done through the tax system. We have never properly reflected the full-time job of a mother in bringing up a child. Admittedly, times have changed and fathers now play a greater role than they used to, but I still believe that the tax system should recognise the role of the mother for the highly responsible and important job that she undertakes.

I make a plea to the present Government, and to my own party in drawing up an election manifesto, as it will in the next 12 months, properly to reflect in the tax system—perhaps by way of an allowance—the role of a woman in bringing up a child, the role of a mother. We should acknowledge the inadequacy of the way in which that role has been recognised.

I shall endeavour to be brief. For many years I served on the Select Committee on Social Services and the Select Committee on Health and, before both those Committees, on the Social Services and Employment Sub-Committee of the Select Committee on Expenditure. I knew Sir William Utting well. I endorse and actively promote the recommendations in his report, "People"—young people—"Like Us". I also endorse the recommendations of the Sir Ronald Waterhouse report, "Lost in Care", which has been the major source of all the matters discussed in today's debate.

I also wished to speak because an office of the firm of solicitors, Abney, Garsden and MacDonald, is located in the village of Poynton in my constituency. That firm is actively involved in the issues that the House is rightly debating. One of its partners is handling many of the cases that have resulted from child abuse.

Cases have occurred not just in north Wales. In an intervention at the beginning of the Minister's speech, I drew attention to the fact that, although north Wales has featured prominently because of the Waterhouse report, matters relating to the abuse of children have occurred in other counties, including my own county of Cheshire, and Staffordshire, which has been mentioned in the debate.

I have talked at length to the partner at Abney, Garsden and MacDonald about the experiences that he and his firm have had in dealing with such cases. I do not think that I am revealing a private conversation when I say that he told me that, for a period after his initial involvement, he was what I would describe as "traumatised" by the details of the horrors that had been revealed in the cases of child abuse. He has obviously got over that, but it clearly suggests that the House must do more about this issue. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Stourbridge (Ms Shipley) for what she has done, but much more action is necessary.

When I was on the Social Services Committee, we held an inquiry into young people in care. During that inquiry, we took evidence from and met several young people who were involved with what was then known as the National Association of Young People in Care—NAYPIC. I greatly admired the courage of the young people whom we met and took evidence from. The representatives of young people in care told us that there were problems and, although many people in recent years have been against the existence of residential care, they also told us that there was a need for such care. As the right hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley) and others have said, some young people believe that residential care provides them with a better quality and style of life than they would have received in their own homes.

Despite all the criticism that has been made of residential care homes for children and young people, we should not condemn them all. A number of them have clearly done an excellent job. Many young people who are doing well in society today spent part of their youth in residential homes.

I was in full-time business before I entered the House. I was involved in the construction industry when the midlands branch of the Contractors Mechanical Plant Engineers Association adopted the Pebble Mill children's home in Birmingham to give the children living there a better quality of life. We provided treats, entertainment and outings that they would not otherwise have had, so as to give them the best possible life. During the time of my involvement, I had every admiration for the house father and the house mother and many of the people who cared for the children. Many of the children were delightful and I was amazed that they were in local authority care because their parents were not able or did not want to look after them. That children's home provided a caring environment, and the house mother and house father did a wonderful job and had my full support. I therefore pay tribute to many of the people who spend their professional life looking after children in care.

I intervened a couple of times earlier on the subject of the children's rights commissioner. Although we need such a commissioner, his duties and responsibilities should mainly relate to children in care and, as I said in an intervention on the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mr. Griffiths), to children on the at-risk register. The commissioner's overall responsibilities might be broader, although I am deeply concerned that he might usurp parents' normal and natural rights and responsibilities and have an undesirable effect. However, I fully understand the concern expressed by all hon. Members who have spoken.

I speak on behalf of my party, and I am sure that hon. Members on both sides of the House will understand that my party, like all others, takes the safety of children extremely seriously. What is more, my party is proud of the legislation that was enacted when it was in government. As the House will know, legislation was introduced in 1988 and 1991 to overcome the problem of children feeling too scared to give evidence in court. One solution introduced was the use of videos in court, which is now taken for granted. That was a desirable development which clearly enables children to be more open and to feel more relaxed when giving evidence in horrific cases such as those described to the House today.

The Conservative Government also introduced the Children Act 1989. I played a part in that as a member of the then Select Committee on Social Services, which undertook an inquiry into the Bill. I pay particular tribute to a colleague who is no longer in the House, Roger Sims—latterly Sir Roger Sims—for his tremendous contribution to that inquiry. The Select Committees make a major contribution to the developments that the House wants to make.

It is worth saying also that the Conservative Government introduced the Family Law Act 1996, which protected all those, including children, who were abused in their own home. It has been said, I think by the hon. Member for Vale of Clwyd, that a great many child abuse cases occurred not in residential homes but in private homes, and that relations—and sadly, in some cases, even parents—were responsible for the abuse.

In 1997 the Sex Offenders Act was passed, and required certain sex offenders to notify the police of their names and addresses and any subsequent changes in those details. It was also designed to enable UK courts to prosecute British citizens or residents who commit certain sexual acts abroad. That legislation was long overdue, and I am delighted that it was passed.

This debate has been useful. With the exception of a few areas in which there is not total agreement, hon. Members are united on the need to seek the greater safety and protection of children.

I want to return briefly to the Children Act. The then Social Services Committee made a major contribution in one other area. We considered the way in which Scotland dealt with cases relating to children, and we learned a lot. We discovered that the way in which matters were conducted in Scotland was much less confrontational and more informal. The changes subsequently taken on board in this House as a result of the Scottish experience were extremely beneficial.

I return to where I began: children are very precious to us all. I speak as a parent of three grown-up children. My two sons have married and I have seven grandchildren who—were it not for the fact that my constituents might be listening to the debate—I would say are the most important thing in the lives of my wife and me. We have a happy family. We want all children to share that experience and to have a happy and fulfilling life.

1.1 pm

Ms Debra Shipley (Stourbridge): This debate is important. The Protection of Children Act 1999 introduced me to information which I wish I had never known. It churns my stomach, reduces me to tears and is more than I can cope with on some occasions. "People Like Us"—the Utting report—and the Waterhouse report have shown that we have clearly failed to protect children. They have been abused, attacked and neglected. For far too long, they have been left with nowhere to turn, their voices have not been heard and they have not been believed.

I thank hon. Members who have mentioned the Protection of Children Act and its measures. I had the honour of taking the Bill through the House. As a result I learned exactly where there are gaps in legislation and how very much more needs to be done. As a Back Bencher, I was limited in the amount that I could do, which hugely upset and frustrated me.

In the light of "Lost in Care", there have been many calls in the House and from children's charities for a commissioner for children, which I fully support. This debate has highlighted discussion of which areas the commissioner should cover. There is certainly consensus that care homes should be covered, but how much wider the remit should be is under discussion. There is compelling evidence of the need for a United Kingdom-wide commissioner. I certainly believe that the remit should reach beyond care homes for children.

In responding to my intervention, my hon. Friend the Minister suggested that an English version of the commissioner would be similar and that the matter was one of title. I am not quibbling over matters of title; it is the content that is vital. We need a strong commissioner. I would welcome more thoughts on the matter from my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Wales in his winding-up speech. I should like to know whether he agrees, first, that a UK-wide commissioner, of whatever name, would be an important step in supporting and protecting children, and secondly, that confining a commissioner's role to care homes would be far too restrictive.

I turn briefly to measures regarding leaving care, which have been raised. I welcome the measures in the Children (Leaving Care) Bill. For far too long, children who have no family or parental support have been brought up in care homes and left with little or no support once they leave. It is up to the Government to do something about that. It is to their credit that they are tackling the issue, and I truly welcome the measures taken.

Nevertheless, people working with these young people have told me that they have some concerns. Although they do an excellent job, the resources available to them are limited. They will require support, training and more resources to implement the important and correct innovations proposed in the Children (Leaving Care) Bill. I hope that the Minister is able to offer some reassurances that they will receive that support.

I cannot adequately express to the House how happy I am with some aspects of the Criminal Justice and Court Services Bill. As I said, the Protection of Children Act

[Ms Debra Shipley]

1999 has great limitations. However, some of the Criminal Justice and Court Services Bill's provisions will build on and greatly enhance the powers provided in the Act, to help stop those who are identified as unsuitable to work with children from moving with impunity from one type of employment to another. Such provision is vital.

It is my understanding that the Bill will apply to those who work in a wide range of employment, including those working in education, health, social care, accommodation, leisure and sporting activities, religious activities and the criminal justice system.

It is my understanding that the Bill will also provide for a ban on such people working with children regardless of the status of their employment, whether it is paid or unpaid, public or private, or—within the definition—in the voluntary or volunteering sectors. As I have said in the House on a number of occasions, inclusion in legislation of the voluntary and volunteering sector is extremely important. I tried to include it in the Protection of Children Act, but was not able to do so because sanctions could not be applied to it. We have to make such provision, and the Criminal Justice and Court Services Bill will tackle the issue. I hugely welcome the Bill, as it will, for the first time, provide an integrated system to cover those who work with children.

However, I am not sure that the provisions of the Criminal Justice and Court Services Bill will make it a statutory requirement to vet employees in all the spheres that I have just mentioned. In the Protection of Children Act, in certain circumstances, vetting of volunteers is permissible, but it is not a statutory requirement. It is vital that vetting in all those spheres be made a statutory requirement, and I should be very pleased if my hon. Friend the Minister clarified whether the Bill will make it a requirement.

I raised the issue of domestic violence in an earlier intervention, but it is worth raising again. The sad truth is that many children end up in care because of family breakdowns and violence in the family. For too long, the issue of violence in the home has been hidden. Now it is being revealed as a very widespread phenomenon. I welcome the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children's full stop campaign.

I also welcome the Daphne project, which, under the auspices of various organisations—including my union, the GMB—is being piloted in the west midlands. It will make violence in the home a workplace issue. I had the honour of launching the pilot scheme, which will train managers and union convenors to recognise the signs of violence in the home and offer help and advice in the workplace. It is a huge step forward that a very large trade union, such as the GMB, and some important businesses in the west midlands have agreed to pilot the scheme, and I thank them for doing so.

I anticipate that the scheme will be a success, as there is much good will behind it. A similar pilot is being conducted in Spain. Should the initiative prove successful, it will be launched Europe wide.

I am proud that we have a Government who are putting children at the heart of their decision making. I welcome my right hon. Friend the Chancellor's endeavours substantially to reduce child poverty, and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister's sincere pledge to work for children. That commitment by the Government is not only enormously important, but hugely complicated. From my experience with the Protection of Children Act, I know that a great deal of interdepartmental co-operation is required to implement such a commitment, and that, even with good will, the job can be immensely difficult.

I should like to tell the House a small anecdote about the Protection of Children Act, to illustrate my point. All the time I was battling for more. Three Departments were primarily concerned with the Bill—the Department of Health, which had the lead responsibility, the Department for Education and Employment and the Home Office. Several other Departments also had significant input. I had large meetings and was frequently told, "Ms Shipley, you can't do that." I said, "Why? This is very important." On occasions I needed to get three Secretaries of State to agree something before it could happen. Perhaps that is right. That interdepartmental co-operation—

Mr. Win Griffiths: What my hon. Friend is saying is interesting. I think that there may be up to 10 Departments involved in some matters relating to children. In Wales we decided to have a Minister for children. I wonder whether my hon. Friend has given any thought to that for England.

Ms Shipley: How right my hon. Friend is. He anticipates the direction of my thoughts. The arcane structures of the House worked in my favour, because during a Division I was able to find three Secretaries of State in the Lobby with me. I could rush up to each of them, grab their elbow and say, "Look, this is really important."

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: Very important.

Ms Shipley: I hear supportive words from Conservative Members. Excellent though that facility was on that occasion, it is surely wrong that chance should play a part in such an important aspect of legislation.

There is a need for one person to be responsible for children's issues and to co-ordinate all the varying and very tangled strands relating to children. I received great good will on my Bill from all the Departments involved, but even so it was difficult to bring about the measures that everybody wanted. That is not good enough. The time has come for a Minister for children at least. I have given the matter a good deal of consideration and I believe that it is time for an entire Department for children, because they are a huge and very important topic. Every time we take a little step in the right direction, we find that there is a huge amount more to be done. There is currently nobody responsible for pulling together those strands. Without someone, we shall carry on failing our children.

1.13 pm

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole): It is a great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton), who, for 17 years, did excellent work on Select Committees on topics such as this. He had two excellent years as the Chairman of the Health Committee before he was the victim of a putsch, which was one of the most short-sighted deeds of the previous Parliament.

My hon. Friend always says things as he sees them, and if we had more Members of Parliament like him people would have more respect for the House.

I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Stourbridge (Ms Shipley) for the Protection of Children Act 1999, which she piloted through the House. It is an excellent Act, but very technical and complex and it will be difficult to get it fully operational. The hon. Lady acknowledges that there are one or two holes in it. We may have to revisit the issue. However, it is one of her major achievements in this Parliament.

The fact that she happened to be in the Division Lobby and was able to grab two or three Ministers is a good thing. The way in which we vote is excellent, because it enables Back Benchers to talk to Ministers, even for only a minute or two, to mention their concerns. No electronic system could substitute for that. I know that people sometimes regret the current system on hot, sweaty evenings, but it is a good system.

I serve on the Health Committee. One of the most harrowing investigations that we have done in this Parliament was on child migrants. This country had a history of sending young children to the colonies. In the 1950s and 1960s—I think until 1972—we sent young people to Australia.

The Select Committee went to Australia to talk to people who had come from children's homes in Liverpool, Bristol and Coventry and had ended up in children's homes in the outback, 500 miles from Perth. Many of them had suffered abuse. On meeting those people, who are now in their 50s and 60s, we were struck by the collateral damage that they had suffered. Many of them had experienced divorce, prison or mental hospital and all sorts of other personal problems which stemmed from their dreadful upbringing and the abuse that they had undergone. Many speeches today have referred to the consequences of abuse, which can be a ticking time bomb for many years afterwards.

Safeguarding children is extremely important. As my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield said, perhaps the House does not spend enough time on it and today's debate is welcome. I agree with the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) that the best place for children is in a traditional loving family. Our job is to look after those who unfortunately do not have that advantage.

I should like to touch on a few points. We are all aware that we are not doing as well as we would like in respect of adoption. It can take five years for a child over five to find a family. That is far too long. We have to redouble our efforts to place children. Many people would like to adopt. I know that sufficient checks have to be made, but bureaucracy sometimes gets in the way of children finding loving homes.

The unsung heroes of children are the 32,000 foster carers in Britain. We all know many people in our constituencies who foster children for precious little reward. They sometimes have concerns and difficulties with children who may have been damaged, yet they continue to care, and do so good humouredly. They and their families put a great deal into supporting those children. We have to consider whether the rewards are adequate. Some local authorities do not reward foster carers as well as private agencies do and people are tempted to come off the local authority list. That is wrong because foster carers are a tremendous resource that we should value.

The Health Committee also considered looked-after children and the relationship between local authorities and children. That inquiry took place at about the same time as the William Utting report "People Like Us". Many of us were shocked by the way in which the system operated and the fact that children have to leave children's homes at 16, which is very early. Children living at home with their parents usually decide when they want to leave. Quite often it is when they are beyond their teens, but they still have their bedrooms at home. Sometimes even when one gets married one can go back to one's parents, look at the toys in the cupboard and feel that there is a refuge.

For many 16-year-olds who have only ever lived in a children's home, the moment they go out the door their posters come down and their bed is allocated to someone else. In many cases they are discouraged from returning to the home. It is considered that the job has been done and they have to leave. In 1993, 33 per cent. of 16-year-olds had left care. The figure has now gone up to 46 per cent., and 75 per cent. of them leave homes with no educational qualifications. We should be greatly concerned by that.

The Children (Leaving Care) Bill is a good Bill that deserves all our support. It is very much in line with the proposals of the Health Committee to encourage children to stay at home until they are 18. We were hoping for 21, but it is a good start. Pathway plans for young people up to 21 covering education, training and careers and providing support is also a good idea. Young person advisers are also a step in the right direction. We found that many young people need advice and someone to act as an advocate. That is a good way forward. The points in the Bill about vocational support—at university, for instance—education and training are very good.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: My hon. Friend mentioned advocacy. Does he share my view that there should be a clear advocate for children—I do not go so far as to ask for a Ministry for children—within Government, on any legislative matter that directly affects them?

Mr. Syms: We should consider that point seriously, but more often the problem for a child in a home is finding someone to talk to who is not part of the institution. In the Health Committee, we heard about children being able to talk to the gardeners, for example. They need someone to talk their life out with, as most children do routinely with their own parents.

The Bill is a step in the right direction. If we get it wrong with these children and fail to give them more educational qualifications and offer them better guidance, society as a whole will pay the price not only in terms of crime but financially for the taxpayer. Sometimes we seem to be penny wise and pound foolish when it comes to looking after our young people. We are all aware of the importance of ensuring that they have the best possible start in life.

There is much consensus, although that does not stop Opposition Members asking hard questions. We are making a lot of progress. I have been pleased to contribute today, and I have learned a great deal.

1.21 pm

Mr. Tom Cox (Tooting): I, too, welcome this debate, which gives us an opportunity to raise issues about the welfare and protection of children. In his opening speech, my hon. Friend the Minister of State touched on a wide range of issues. He was right to point out the commitment that the Government have shown on this very important matter.

Many interrelated factors affect children and young people, including where the family lives, what the environment is like, whether the father or mother is working, what the education system is like, whether the child goes to school and whether there is crime in the area. The evidence shows that if, sadly, the family is living in what is now known as social exclusion, that family will find life very hard indeed and the youngsters will often be deeply affected. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor will have that high on his list of commitments in his Budget next week.

We have heard moving speeches from Welsh Members about the abuses in children's homes in north Wales. The report by Sir Ronald Waterhouse clearly showed the lack or the weakness of the policies of organisations that were there to protect the children. Sadly, we know that they failed those youngsters.

My hon. Friend the Minister of State will recall the Adjournment debate that I had on 15 February, when I called for the appointment of a children's commissioner. He referred then, as he did this morning, to the appointment of a children's rights director. We will watch with interest the appointment of the director. I hope that he or she will have wide-ranging powers and, above all, will regularly consult young people and organisations for the protection of children.

I meet regularly with ombudsmen and women and commissioners for children through my work in the Council of Europe. They all speak of their success in building up confidence with children and children's organisations. I hope that, in the coming months, the new director will work on that.

Before I came to this House, I chaired the children's committee of one of the largest London authorities, the London borough of Hammersmith. From my experiences, I know that we need a clear policy on the accountability of Government Departments. Often in local government, the roles of committees overlap and one finds repeatedly that Departments believe that an aspect of legislation is not their responsibility. The Government's proposals must make clear which organisation is responsible.

I hope that the director will encourage children's organisations to co-operate on proposals to strengthen the law as it relates to children's rights. Also, we must get their opinions on legislation on children's rights and protection. We must seek at all times the views of children and young people; sadly, that has not been done often in the past.

I am one of the British delegation from this Parliament to the Council of Europe, where I chair the Social, Health and Family Affairs Committee, which looks at all issues concerning family life, especially those relating to children. Sadly, the work of the Council of Europe—and our opportunities to meet representatives of the 41 member states—is rarely discussed in this Parliament.

I was in Paris on Wednesday chairing the Committee. We had four items on the agenda concerning children, including the role and responsibility of different Governments on children. We learned a great deal. The Council of Europe—which has existed for 50 years—was at the forefront in the preparation of the UN convention on the rights of the child, and we have a close involvement with UNICEF. I hope that the Government and the director will work closely with the Council of Europe. We have the opportunity to learn from other member states about the legislation they have introduced and how it works. The House has missed the opportunity of working with the Council of Europe and its Committees for too long.

I have one or two specific issues to raise. First, there has recently been much coverage of the court cases involving paedophiles. Those who abuse children, boys or girls, are dangerous and evil people. They often totally refuse to accept the damage that they have done to children. The Waterhouse report makes that damage clear, and my hon. Friend the Minister mentioned the number of young people who have been abused who take their own lives. All the evidence shows that the rest suffer throughout their lives as a result of the abuse.

I welcome the register of sex offenders, but I hope that we will make it clear that when such people are released from prison, as some will be, they will never work with children again. Wandsworth prison, in my constituency, has one of the biggest rule 43 units in the country. It contains men who have committed offences against children, and some who have been convicted of rape. When one meets those men, one soon learns that they have no regrets about what they have done to children and young people. If they are released from prison—and I am not one to say that they should never be released—we should have effective safeguards in place to ensure that they never work with children or young people again. It is the duty of the Government and local authorities to ensure that. I accept that it is not always easy to prevent sex offenders from working with children—people can move to different areas and adopt new identities. However, we must make it clear that we will not tolerate offenders being allowed to work with children again.

My second point concerns pornography. Our society has changed enormously and many of the things that we now see on television would have deeply shocked people just a few years ago. They would not even have been allowed to be shown on television. I am deeply concerned about the growth of pornography. Often, we read that the only type of pornography that individuals want is that which involves young people and children.

A case was reported in the national press only this week of a head teacher who was sent to prison for five months. I wonder whether a sentence of five months for someone who has been involved in child pornography is long enough. I would like to know much more about the case because the sentence seems inadequate. The House must remember that the person involved was a primary school head teacher.

Some people claim that although their interest is in child pornography, they are very different from people who trade in such material. I see no difference at all—young people are abused to make that material. I hope that my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Wales, who will wind up the debate, will assure the House that the courts will not accept that there is a difference between users of such material and traders in it, and that those users will not be treated more leniently.

Finally, I come to the question of refugees, especially those who are children. The debate is entitled "Safeguards for Children". In recent weeks, there have been many press stories about women begging with young children. That is a regular sight in my constituency. The begging is frightening and aggressive, and it arouses hostility in decent men and women who are usually generous towards people who have come to this country to escape religious or political persecution at home. It is time something was done.

I have received many complaints from constituents on this matter, and on 7 February I wrote to my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary asking what action the Government proposed. The reply from the Minister of State, Home Office, my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), outlined the existing legislation and the measures that the Government intend to introduce. I have told my local police that I hope that they will enforce the existing legislation.

On 6 March, I asked the Home Office another question about the numbers of asylum seekers being housed in Greater London. The Minister of State, Home Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Mrs. Roche), replied on 13 March. She said that the number of asylum seekers in Greater London area came to 59,350. I shall give the House some examples of the numbers in individual boroughs. There are 570 refugees living in Sutton, 2,540 in Barking and Dagenham, 5,040 in Haringey, and 5,870 in Newham. In my borough of Wandsworth, there are 980 refugees. In her reply, my hon. Friend said that those figures included 3,320 unaccompanied minors under 17. Those youngsters were allowed into the United Kingdom unaccompanied. I make no comment on whether they should have been allowed in, but we have a right to know what kind of welfare and supervision exists for them. For example, who was informed when they came here? Which organisations are looking after them? I do not know the age span of those youngsters because that information was not included in my hon. Friend's reply, but I know that they are under 17.

When we see these very young children taken by, one assumes, their mother on begging expeditions, we have a right to ask whether they go to school, because some of them are of school age. Do we know where they live? Do we know how they live? The responsibilities of Government Departments often overlap, as do those of local authority departments. Surely the welfare and protection of young refugee children is the responsibility of the Department of Health. I hope that if my hon. Friend the Minister cannot tell me today what supervision his Department seeks to enforce on the welfare of these youngsters, he will write to me about it.

The number of refugees living in London is of great concern to many Members of Parliament representing London constituencies, but it is a separate issue from the welfare and protection of these young children. Who is responsible for that? As other hon. Members have said, we are talking about the welfare and protection of all children and young people. We do not mean certain children who come from a different kind of background. The welfare of all children is crucial. I pay tribute again to the work that the Government have been doing. My hon. Friend the Minister of State outlined in his speech the legislation that will be introduced in the coming months.

We have had an excellent debate in which the Waterhouse report has figured prominently. However, I would like to have more debates on this kind of issue. Members on both sides of the House have mentioned adoption. The Committee that I chair in Europe produced a report on adoption which contained some horrendous findings about the problems and abuse that youngsters can face even when they are adopted. We should have the opportunity to discuss that.

I asked a parliamentary question last week about the number of youngsters held in secure training centres. The reply on 9 March said that 103 youngsters between the ages of 12 and 14 were being held in secure training centres. We never have debates in the House about the system adopted in those centres. That is something else that we should have an opportunity to discuss.

I am glad to have had this opportunity to speak. I have heard interesting and deeply moving speeches from hon. Members on both sides of the House. No matter which side we sit on, all hon. Members must be committed to the welfare and protection of children.

1.45 pm

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): We have rightly had a sober debate about a subject that demanded it. We are discussing safeguards for children, the most vulnerable people in our society whether they are in foster care, adoption or even boarding school. There are 13 million children in the United Kingdom. Many of those of whom we have spoken have special needs, making them even more vulnerable.

The Minister of State, Department of Health said that 32 police inquiries are going on into child abuse—a chilling statistic. The Waterhouse report is one of the most disturbing documents that I have ever read. The prospect of its being the tip of the iceberg should make us all feel cold. We are talking about sexual, physical and mental abuse. Children in our care must have proper protection, the best that we can afford them. We must put strategies in place to ensure sufficient detection and prosecution.

As the Minister said, no one who reads the report can fail to be shocked. My right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague), as Secretary of State for Wales, began the judicial review into the care of children in 70 homes in Clwyd and Gwynedd from 1974 onwards. The review began in 1997—it was a long time in coming. Waterhouse has made 72 recommendations across a comprehensive range including training, care planning, fostering breakdown, staff recruitment, the duty to report abuse and vitally important whistleblowing procedures.

The role of elected members is also mentioned at page 224. I was a West Glamorgan county councillor for six years, and I do not think that sufficient stress was laid on what my duties should be in regard to children in our care. That recommendation must be fully implemented, and councillors must be given sufficient advice and training in what to look for. I was a young councillor, and even if I had been told what to look for, I am not sure that I would have had the tools and wisdom to see it. Councillors have a vital role, and I am disturbed that the Government's response to the report seems to be slipping. I hope that the Minister will reassure us on when the Government will respond. I heard what the Secretary of State for Wales had to say in the St. David's day debate—on 2 March—and was grateful for it.

[Mr. Nigel Evans]

Several hon. Members have discussed the need for more foster care, as the Minister did when he opened the debate. He said that there are 32,000 foster carers, and that he wants more. We welcome that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) has set up a commission to consider fostering and adoption. The Minister will welcome all the advice he can get when he considers how to persuade more youngsters into foster care or adoption.

Education is important. A constituent of mine who is a foster parent has a statemented child with special needs. We must ensure that there is proper provision for that child within the area where he or she happens to be. It is not appropriate to put a child on a bus, or in a taxi, to travel to school many miles outside the area, when schools are available locally. That child was offered 10 hours education a week. That is not suitable; I hope that the local authorities will ensure that there is proper provision for children who are being fostered, as such situations will continue to arise.

The roles of the children's commissioner and the children's rights director have been mentioned. The precise title of that person does not bother me, as long as the duties are such that they ensure the proper protection of children. I am sure that the Minister is fully aware of the request by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children that the commissioner should operate throughout the country. The commissioner should be fully independent, but should have a wide remit that does not only cover children in care.

The Minister will also know that the NSPCC's call is supported by several reputable organisations, including Barnardos, Childline, UNICEF UK and Oxfam. In opinion polls on an independent office for children, 85 per cent. of those responding said yes. It is obviously a matter that we must consider carefully.

The Minister mentioned the beacon councils of Suffolk, Wakefield, Kensington and Chelsea, and Westminster. We applaud the good work that they are doing and look forward to the time when the best practice in those areas rolls around to the rest of the country.

The hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) and several other hon. Members mentioned recommendation 71 of the Waterhouse report, which deals with Jillings. It is right that that recommendation be taken on board. It deals with the problem of advice from lawyers acting on behalf of local authorities. We should examine the role played by insurance companies during that time to ensure that reports, such as Jillings, will never be suppressed in future. Had that report become public earlier, several children who were abused would not have suffered in that way.

My hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) referred to the measures on which the Government have already embarked. We welcome that. They are building on legislation that was introduced by the Conservative Government and we support what they are doing. However, my hon. Friend is right to question some aspects of those measures. He referred to the Criminal Justice and Court Services Bill; the ink is hardly dry on some of the Government's proposals. However, we shall support any common-sense measures proposed by the Government to try to eradicate the abuses that we have been discussing.

The hon. Member for Vale of Clwyd (Mr. Ruane) spoke eloquently on the Waterhouse report; he showed great knowledge of the subject—of the problems of abuse and of the number of inquiries that are currently under way. When people realise how many police inquiries and internal inquiries have been set up, they will scratch their heads and wonder why we are holding the debate and why action was not taken sooner to ensure that some of the problems were sorted out. The hon. Gentleman also referred to the wider implications of the Waterhouse report.

The right hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley), whose reputation on this matter precedes him, talked about the urgency of adopting the Waterhouse recommendations. He was right to do so. He too referred to recommendations 71 and 72 and to the string of previous reports.

The hon. Member for Clwyd, South (Mr. Jones) spoke about the cover-ups over previous reports. That too relates to recommendation 71. It is disturbing that a cover-up could take place, as is the fact that people in positions of responsibility were involved in abuse. I agree with the hon. Gentleman, and his hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Clwyd, that there is no reason why we should not make public the names of those who have admitted carrying out abuse. However, the hon. Member for Clwyd, South will also know that another reason why such names should be made public is to exonerate innocent people who have been under suspicion. If the names are not published, suspicion might always linger around those people. It is right that people who have been involved in abuse be properly investigated, and I hope that I correctly understood the hon. Gentleman to say that they should be properly investigated and that those who have not yet been brought to justice should be brought to justice as soon as possible.

Mr. Martyn Jones: That is precisely what I was saying, but I was also trying to say that people should be named only if they have not been properly investigated, for the sole purpose of bringing their names into the public domain to protect children from potential abuse.

Mr. Evans: I also assume that all the people under suspicion in cases described in the Waterhouse report would have been properly investigated before the report came anywhere near us. I can only hope that the Minister will give us some assurance that all those names have been properly investigated.

The hon. Member for Taunton (Jackie Ballard) spoke about the need for better strategies and the involvement of the voluntary sector. I agree with her on that.

The hon. Member for Vale of Clwyd spoke feelingly about some anecdotal evidence of abuse. The nine suicides that he mentioned are chilling indeed. He also asked the Minister that the parents of Craig Wilson be given information about the death of their son. I find it astonishing that that information has not previously been given. We add our support to the request that the parents be given information as to what happened leading up to the death of their son.

My hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) spoke, also with passion, about the restoration of the years of innocence; we can only agree with him on that. It seems as though children become

adults suddenly at the age of three or four, which is rather sad. Therefore, I believe that we could all support the restoration of the years of innocence. My hon. Friend also spoke with great knowledge, with his experience on the Select Committee on Social Services and the Select Committee on Health, about the stress and trauma experienced by professionals involved in abuse cases. We too easily forget the stress and trauma that must build up in people who are involved in such cases. The hon. Member for Stourbridge (Ms Shipley) gave a prelude to that when she spoke about her involvement in the passage of the Protection of Children Bill.

My hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield also spoke about the businesses that have become involved in what might be described as a twinning arrangement with children's homes. We should encourage many businesses to form such links, to afford opportunities to youngsters who otherwise would not get them.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Stourbridge on the work that she has done in steering the Protection of Children Bill through the House; it is now the Protection of Children Act 1999. She spoke with great passion about the knowledge that she gained—the learning experience of steering the Bill through the House—and suggestions that she now has to improve on the 1999 Act. The Government should listen carefully to her calls for a strong United Kingdom commissioner for children. The hon. Lady also spoke about the fact that the Criminal Justice and Court Services Bill will build on the 1999 Act. We applaud that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Mr. Syms), who also has experience on the Health Committee, spoke about the abuses of migrants from the UK to Australia as children. He also spoke with emotion about the fact that he can still go to his parents' house and play with his toys. [HON. MEMBERS: "How often?"] Probably on a regular basis. We were all heartened by that, but of course he is saying something important about the fact that youngsters in care do not have the same sort of building blocks that the rest of have—the security that we all have from knowing that we can always go home to our parents. He also spoke about the vital need for the pathway plans for those up to the age of 21.

The hon. Member for Tooting (Mr. Cox) has enormous experience in considering these issues at the Council of Europe. I wish that more were done with the Council of Europe's reports. Perhaps more debates on its recommendations could take place in the House, but I congratulate him on the hard work that he has done. He spoke with passion about the evils of paedophilia, and I do not suspect that anyone in the House would disagree with a single word that he said about that.

The hon. Gentleman also spoke with feeling—I am glad that he did—about the problems with asylum seekers. We are debating the welfare of children and that means all the children who reside in this country. Social services have a serious role in that, and the Government have a duty to take a strong position on the way in which children and babies are used as tools for begging on the streets and on the tube by, in the main, eastern European refugees. Children and babies should not be used in that way.

The hon. Gentleman spoke of the fact that children wander about on their own, begging. I have seen youngsters as young as 12 or 13 carrying younger children with them. That is quite appalling. It is totally wrong for youngsters to spend hours on the underground or on the streets and to carry even younger children with them in the attempt to shame people into giving money. That must be stopped as a matter of urgency. A strategy must be put in place for refugees and their children while they are in this country. The Government must not turn a blind eye to a growing and appalling practice.

I applaud the work of charities, such as the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, which do so much work. This week, I met representatives of the NSPCC who told me that, last year, they were called into 82 investigations because of their knowledge of working with children and in children's homes. Local authorities use the NSPCC as an independent source to investigate particular problems and I have already said that it has called for an independent children's commissioner.

Conservative Members believe that much has already been done in the legislation that we introduced and since the inquiry that was set up by my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks. We passed several pieces of legislation when we were in government and we have supported this Government's legislation on this issue since 1997. It is right that we consider and scrutinise such legislation carefully to ensure that it is right and proper and does the job that we want. Too many people will read this debate and wonder why more was not done in the past by both Governments and by social services under the political direction of all parties.

The system has let down the children, and this debate is about them. They do not have a voice other than through us here. That is why we must redouble our efforts to ensure that we introduce the right measures to protect them. It has been said—and I can only agree—that we shall not fully eliminate the problem, but that should not stop us trying. We cannot prevent individual cases from happening, but we must ensure that the wholesale abuse that was revealed in the Waterhouse report and other inquires never again happens to children in care. The Government will always receive the support of the official Opposition for any common-sense measures that will help to prevent the most corrosive and squalid practices from happening in our society.

2.3 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. David Hanson): We have had an intensely interesting, moving and harrowing debate in which hon. Members have described their experiences and policy suggestions to the House. I welcome the tone of the debate and the fact that we have had a strong element of cross-party support for the aim of providing positive safeguards for children.

I welcome the debate, not least because I am the father of three children under the age of 12 and because I represent a constituency in north Wales, in which many of my constituents were the victims of child abuse and violence because the system failed them. The debate has given us the chance to show the importance that the Government and the House attach to listening to children and to ensuring that effective systems are in place to prevent abuse in future.

Let my say at the outset that children deserve to be safe and protected. Abuse has lasting and terrible effects on children, not only in their formative years but for the rest of their lives, and accordingly shapes the whole of our

[Mr. David Hanson]

future society. The Government are committed to protecting children, and in the past three years we have considered and reconsidered the safeguards in place to protect them.

We have responded to the findings of the Utting report, and we continue to pursue that agenda. As my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Department of Health said in opening the debate, we have put in place a series of initiatives to help to ensure as far as possible that there are effective measures to prevent further abuse.

The Protection of Children Act 1999, which was introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge (Ms Shipley), the quality protects and children first programmes, the Care Standards Bill and the Children (Leaving Care) Bill are all important measures, to which I shall return after I have responded to hon. Members' contributions.

It is the paramount duty of Government to ensure that a safe environment exists for our children, and this Government take that duty very seriously. The Waterhouse report, our response to its recommendations and today's debate are only the latest steps in our assessment of the risks that children face.

We have had an interesting debate, which has been permeated by certain serious themes. Those issues are important, and I shall respond to all hon. Members in my winding-up speech as far as I can and contact them with further information after the debate, if my hon. Friend and I have not, between us, covered all the points mentioned.

In the past, there was inconsistent control and poor management of children in care, and we must make sure that it does not happen again. A considered response to recommendations is needed to help to prevent those tragic events from recurring. We need to take immediate steps to stop known offenders offending again, as my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Mr. Cox) said.

There must be partnership with the devolved Administrations and local authorities to protect children, deliver effective services and ensure that those people who have abused are not currently working with children. We need to rebuild trust and ensure that we listen to children because what they are saying is as relevant to our day-to-day lives as it is to theirs. All that underlines the Government's commitment to safeguard children.

I say to the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) that I appreciate the consensus on these issues and the serious consideration of them. There is cross-party support for tackling them. First and foremost, the hon. Gentleman raised family policy, and there is strong cross-party support for the family. The Government have introduced the sure start initiative in England and Wales, and my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Department of Health has provided additional resources to support that initiative. Although there may be political disagreements, which I will not bring into play now, child benefit and the working families tax credit are important in helping to underpin the security that families bring to our community, and the Government want to support those policies.

The hon. Gentleman raised important issues about the Care Standards Bill. As he knows, the House will shortly have an opportunity to consider that Bill. My hon. Friend the Minister of State and I will be dealing with that Bill, and I look forward to listening to hon. Members' concerns. The hon. Gentleman asked important questions that deserve answers. We envisage that the National Care Standards Commission will look at regulation and inspection, work to national minimum standards and set professional training standards for the work force to ensure that we protect and regulate care standards.

The hon. Gentleman also raised important issues on the Children (Leaving Care) Bill. The Government will certainly consider extending the powers of that Bill to 18 to 21-year-olds when resources permit. The matter is important and I look forward, as does my hon. Friend the Minister of State, to discussing those issues with the hon. Gentleman in due course. The Government will certainly encourage voluntary organisations to play an important part in providing such services. I recognise that organisations such as the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children and those providing residential care play an important part not just in protecting children, but generally in our society.

The hon. Gentleman will be aware that my right hon. Friends the Secretary of State for Wales and the Prime Minister and my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Department of Health are carefully considering the review of adoption services and will be making recommendations in due course. I hope that we shall scrutinise them on a cross-party basis. There is ground for consensus.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mr. Griffiths) raised very important points. I pay tribute to his work as my predecessor in what was then the Welsh Office during the first year of the Labour Government. He brings to the debate great knowledge of the importance of safeguards for children and their rights. I welcome his contribution to today's debate.

My hon. Friend dealt with two specific points, both of which were also raised by the right hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley). I shall deal with them immediately. My hon. Friend mentioned the question of the National Assembly's role and the children's commissioner for Wales. Sir Ronald Waterhouse recommended such a commissioner. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales wanted to take immediate action to ensure that we indicated our strong support for legislation on that matter as soon as possible. He announced in the St. David's day debate on 2 March that we would take the issue forward. I am pleased to confirm that we will amend the Care Standards Bill to allow the National Assembly to establish a children's commissioner for Wales.

I know—because the National Assembly is still considering the matter—that it wants to consider a wider remit for the commissioner. We shall certainly consider sympathetically and with urgency its reports once the Care Standards Bill has been dealt with. Both my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend and the right hon. Member for Caernarfon will recognise that, for the reasons that we have discussed, the Government want to act quickly, table an amendment that covers children in care and ensure that the Assembly is given initial powers

to get the matter moving. I hope that that reassures hon. Members. In due course, we shall certainly look at the National Assembly's proposals.

Mr. Hammond: Would there be any logic in finding a different solution in Wales from that ultimately found in England, given that the problem is universal?

Mr. Hanson: The issue is one of devolution. I am pleased and impressed that my party and, indeed, other parties, were committed on entering the Assembly election to the establishment of a children's commissioner. I believe strongly that a children's rights director in England will deal with many similar issues. As my hon. Friend the Minister of State said, we should not get too hung up on titles. The devolved Assembly will develop different solutions for Wales. What is important is the output and the protection that results.

The right hon. Member for Caernarfon and my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend mentioned advocacy services. As the right hon. Gentleman will understand, there have been six months of research into such services in Wales by the National Assembly. The Assembly is considering the findings of the report on that research.

The right hon. Gentleman said that he wanted urgency. The ministerial safeguards committee, which is chaired by my hon. Friend the Minister, is considering such matters urgently. The National Assembly is represented on that committee by Jane Hutt, the Assembly Secretary. We met very soon after the Waterhouse report was published, and again in the past 10 days. We shall meet again shortly to produce the Government's response.

We are addressing the issue as a matter of urgency. However, in considering the report and its recommendations, we are also trying to include various people—Members of the National Assembly and of the Scottish Executive, Ministers from various Departments, and various people outside government. We have to get our response right and to inject urgency into our proceedings, and I know that my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Department of Health wants to do precisely that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd, South (Mr. Jones) raised some important issues. The first one was insurance cover, which was mentioned also by my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd). The Jillings report was dealt with by Clywd county council, and advice from insurers influenced the council's decisions on it.

The Local Government Association has now issued guidance to local authorities in England and Wales recommending principles to be applied when considering arrangements for an inquiry, particularly the relationship between insurance companies and local authorities. The guidance has been drawn up by the Local Government Association, with the support of the Association of British Insurers. My Department and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions are considering those issues.

My hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd, South also mentioned the tribunal's naming policy, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Clwyd (Mr. Ruane). The tribunal's naming policy, stated in chapter 6, was clear and specific. The tribunal considered all the evidence in detail—in more detail than hon. Members could have dealt with at the time—and, in chapter 6, stated:

> we do not consider that the evidence against particular individuals has been such as to warrant naming them, bearing in mind the climate in which they were working.

I emphasise that the tribunal was independent of the Government. I also do not want to compromise the tribunal's independence by questioning the way in which Sir Ronald and the other tribunal members conducted the inquiry. We have to recognise that the tribunal has considered the evidence and that it reached that conclusion. I tell my hon. Friends the Members for Clwyd, South and for Vale of Clwyd that, although I realise that that policy will disappoint them, we have to acknowledge the tribunal's conclusions.

Mr. Hammond: On the day that the Waterhouse report was published, the Government extended the scope of the consultancy index and added to it names that had appeared in the report. Will the Minister assure the House that that was the first occasion on which the Government had sight of those names, and that there were no delays whatever in adding them to the extended consultancy index?

Mr. Hanson: The day of the report's publication was the first day on which the Government could act on those names. Previously, the names identified in Sir Ronald's inquiry as having caused concern were passed to appropriate authorities. Prosecutions have been conducted in some of those cases. However, the Government could take action on the matter only on publication of the report.

Mr. Evans: In the statement on the Waterhouse report, the Secretary of State for Wales said that various bodies working with children would receive the list of individuals and have to reply on whether any of them had been working in their area. What was the response to the request—was anyone found?

Mr. Hanson: If I may, I would prefer to reply to that in writing. I do not have to hand the facts and figures, and I do not wish to mislead the hon. Gentleman on the list's impact. Some names were identified. I shall certainly reply to him on that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Clwyd also mentioned Craig Wilson and his family, who contacted my hon. Friend. Before boundary reorganisation, Craig Wilson was my constituent, and I met Mr. and Mrs. Wilson when I was their Member of Parliament. If my hon. Friend would write to me with the family's difficulties and details on the issue that he raised today, I shall urgently investigate the matter and report back to him as soon as practicable.

The hon. Member for Taunton (Jackie Ballard) raised several important issues about support and counselling. I am sorry that she was not able to be here for the final speeches, but I valued her contribution.

The right hon. Member for Macclesfield—

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: Not yet.

Mr. Hanson: Sorry, the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton). Perhaps I could do him a service after his 30 years in the House. I welcomed and valued his contribution. His work as the Chairman of the Health Committee during my first Parliament was valued by many Labour Members and others. He raised important points about recognising the role of the mother and the family. I come from a happy family. Despite many financial deprivations, I was fortunate enough to grow up in a family that had security, warmth, love and care. The most important thing that we can give our children is a sure start in life. The hon. Gentleman's points were well made.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge on her recent initiative in bringing forward the Protection of Children Act 1999. I look forward to its implementation. The Government are listening to her important points about a Minister and a Department for children. We shall examine the representations in due course. Her points about domestic violence and the importance of security in the home are equally well taken.

The hon. Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) also made some points that struck a chord with me. Despite my constituency and Government experience, the debate was slightly abstract for me until the hon. Gentleman made the strong point that many children who grow up in care disappear and do not have the solid base that many of us have to refer to. That has left an impression on me about the impact of the lasting difficulties that such children face as a result of the lack of a solid family base. I thank him for that contribution.

My hon. Friend the Member for Tooting talked about the children's rights director. My hon. Friend the Minister of State, Department of Health believes in a strong role for that senior post in the National Care Standards Commission. It is a real breakthrough for looked-after children that will bolster the Government's commitment to improving safeguards for them. When the appointment is in place it will make a real difference.

My hon. Friend the Member for Tooting also mentioned the important role of Europe. Paedophile behaviour, the control of pornography and refugees are pan-European issues. I would welcome debates in the House on the reports that my hon. Friend mentioned from his work with the Council of Europe. His important points on pornography and refugees are well met. I do not have ministerial responsibility for either issue, but I shall draw the attention of the relevant Home Office Ministers to his comments.

The hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) asked how many people we found following the publication of the Waterhouse report. By the magic of this place, I now have further information on that. Twenty-eight individuals whose whereabouts and employment status were unknown were identified in the Waterhouse report as abusers of children. As a result of the inquiries that were immediately initiated, we were able to establish the whereabouts of all of them. One person was found to be working with children and was immediately suspended. I hope that that obviates the need for a letter, but if the hon. Gentleman requires further information I shall certainly follow the point up.

I have tried to cover as many issues as I can in the time available. The Waterhouse report will have a significant and lasting impact on Government policy and children's rights. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State submitted the report to the House and I remind hon. Members of the background to the inquiry and the report.

Mr. Evans: I have a question about the information that the Minister has just given us about the person who was found still to be involved with children. It was quite disturbing news and I am pleased that the individual concerned was suspended. Has there been an investigation to ensure that there has been no incidence of abuse in the institution where that person was working?

Mr. Hanson: I understand that the individual concerned was working for an authority in the west midlands. He was suspended immediately, so it is now a matter for the authority and the employing organisation. The Government will certainly take an interest in the outcome of that case.

The Waterhouse report drew 95 conclusions and made 72 recommendations. Some were specific to Wales and others had wider implications. The report made important recommendations on assessment and care planning, inter-agency working, recruitment and retention of staff, foster carers, inspection and regulation of private residential schools and all forms of residential care and on common standards of care. We must certainly address the catalogue of errors and mistreatment to which the Waterhouse report drew attention.

My hon. Friend the Minister of State outlined some of the steps that have been taken. In Wales, in which I have a particular interest, the National Assembly is already working up detailed proposals for a children's commissioner. The Secretary of State for Wales has announced that the Government will table amendments to the Care Standards Bill to legislate for a children's commissioner for Wales. That was the first recommendation in the report and we have taken this early opportunity to implement it for children in care. The Government will also consider with sympathy the urgency of the Assembly's proposals, when they are made.

On the day of the publication of the report, the Department of Health took immediate action in respect of the names of the individuals mentioned in the report. It is important to recognise that the Government have not been complacent. We have established a ministerial task force under the chairmanship of my hon. Friend the Minister of State, comprising 10 Ministers from across Government to ensure that our response to the Waterhouse report is comprehensive and wide-ranging.

The task force has identified priority areas where further action is needed, which my hon. Friend outlined in his speech. They are the commissioner for looked-after children, the complaints procedure, the independent advocacy services, the human resources issues and the future role of residential care as a placement choice. We shall report as soon as practicable—I hope by the summer—and I look forward to the Government's further proposals to implement those recommendations.

As my hon. Friend said, before the publication of the report, the Government took a range of important steps in response to the Utting report and the Protection of Children Act. The Care Standards Bill will introduce improved arrangements in England and Wales for an independent regulation service. The Bill also contains specific clauses to reflect the situation in Wales. The

Assembly will have the power to establish the commission for care standards which will be part of the National Assembly rather than an independent statutory body as planned in England. Devolution will mean differences, but we should support and relish those differences. It is important that the Assembly and the Government reflect the needs of each individual nation within the United Kingdom.

The Children (Leaving Care) Bill will provide further support. The Government have launched major new programmes, including children first in Wales and quality protects in England. The importance of those programmes cannot be overstated.

In conclusion, the aim of all that the Government have done, including the programmes that we have undertaken before Waterhouse and those that we will undertake in future, is to ensure that those responsible for children in need and looked-after children—in social services, education and the health service—play their full part in raising standards. Today's debate has been an important stage in that process. I thank all hon. Members who have contributed to it. I assure them, and others who have taken an interest in the debate, that all the points that have been made will be considered and that we shall act in the short term and in the long term to prevent those horrific occurrences from happening again. We must ensure that children are safe. The Government are committed to that and, as far as we can, we shall protect children and make sure that safeguards for children are protected in future.

It being half-past Two o'clock, the debate stood adjourned.

Dairy Farming (South Gloucestershire)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Clelland.]*

2.30 pm

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon): This is a very appropriate time for this debate. We had a national report from the Agriculture Committee at the end of January that concluded:

> There is without doubt a crisis in dairy farming and, sadly, there are likely to be more casualties before any real recovery is felt.

This week, we have had a mass lobby of Parliament by dairy farmers, and a farming summit is coming up in a couple of weeks at Downing street. Within the past 48 hours, the Minister has been at the Dispatch Box tackling the subject of dairy farming, and I read the report of what was said in the early hours of the morning. I will try not to go over all the same ground, and I hope that she will feel able to do the same.

The debate is also timely for me locally, as a constituency Member. Dairy farmers in my area have been expressing their anger. A couple of weeks ago, more than 250 farmers from my constituency and beyond met in Thornbury to protest about their situation, and about a third of them went on to protest outside a local dairy. There were remarkable scenes—I understand that the protest was very orderly—and at 11.30 at night the dairy management arrived and were willing to talk to the local farmers. I welcome that dialogue, but it is an extraordinary situation.

I was very struck by that demonstration, because it showed that the farmers felt that writing to me or to the Government or talking to the National Farmers Union might not achieve very much. They felt so frustrated at the worsening situation and the fact that no one seemed to be getting the message that they were driven to protest in a very visual way. It brought me up short and made me question whether I had been doing enough to represent their concerns. That is one of the reasons why I sought this Adjournment debate.

The farmers clearly want action. I attended Agriculture questions yesterday and noted the response of the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to a question about the milk price. He took the view that it was a matter of market process, and he used the phrase "supply chain" two or three times. There is an element of truth in what he said, but it will not have heartened the farmers in my constituency. I hope that the Minister will tell us today what the Government can do and are doing to help my constituents.

I want to sketch out the national picture and to focus on the concerns of one farmer in my constituency. I visited Mr. Kevin Kingston, who explained to me that the three main sources of income for dairy farmers have all been hit—a triple whammy. First, cull cows, for which farmers might have got some value in the past, are now virtually worthless because of BSE, and the unrealistically restrictive weight limit on the over-30-months scheme is putting further pressure on farmers.

Secondly, there is now little or no market for dairy bull calves, which would perhaps have been exported in the past. There was Government assistance until last summer under the calf processing aid scheme, but that has now ended. Typically, a bull calf will now be shot at birth—often by the local hunt, apparently.

[Mr. Steve Webb]

Thirdly, and perhaps crucially, the real price of milk is now about half of what it was 30 years ago. Farmers in my constituency are talking about a price of 8p a pint, which is clearly below even the cost of production.

Nationally, incomes in the dairy sector fell by 21 per cent. last year, but they have fallen by three quarters since the mid-1990s. I recognise that one can pick any very high base and show a big fall, but for those of us on secure salaries, having to cope with a quarter of what we had five years earlier is unimaginable—yet that is what farmers have had to do.

The factors behind the fall in the milk price are well known and are clearly not all under the direct control of the Government. I want to identify three, all of which suggest some possible response. The first is the strength of sterling against the euro, both its direct effect and—as the Minister remarked a day or two ago—the indirect effects, such as the price support mechanism.

The second factor is the weak position of the sellers in the market. Much comment has been made on the competition report on Milk Marque. Farmers give a hollow laugh at the suggestion that they were somehow terribly powerful in the milk market. Given the long-standing decline in milk prices, the idea that Milk Marque was a powerful factor in the market seems overstated. The third factor is that there has been a fall in demand for milk products in overseas markets such as Asia, the former Soviet Union and elsewhere.

That is the national background against which farmers are having to work. Locally, I wish to draw the Minister's attention to particular concerns. Dairy farming is important in my constituency, and yet it is in significant decline. I am aware that there is a national decline, but it seems to be quite marked in my area.

One farmer in Pilning wrote to me to say that, 15 years ago, there were 11 viable dairy farms within a one-mile radius of his farm. He expects that, by the end of the year, it will be down to one or two. A point made forcefully to me by farmers in my constituency is that it is not just the old who are retiring and going out of the business, and it is not just the inefficient who are being forced out. It is very often the most efficient and the best farms that are going under. Some of those which have invested and overstretched are most vulnerable to a downturn, to interest rate rises and so forth. It is not just the weeding out of the weak, but the collapse of the very businesses that we would want to keep going.

There is a fear that more is on the way within the local area. The chairman of Chipping Sodbury National Farmers Union, Mr. Michael Weaver, wrote to me this week saying:

> I am at the sharp end of the industry and know that another price cut in milk will be the end for many producers, especially tenant farmers still paying high rents.

There is very much a local fear that what has gone on is set to continue; there is no sense that we have bottomed out yet. The milk price may be nearing the bottom—it probably could not fall much further anyway—but there is still a sense that there are many more closures to come unless urgent action is taken.

It is clear that my constituents are talking not just about those who work on the farms, but those in the ancillary industries. Another farmer wrote to say:

> I've spoken to people in the ancillary trades, feed merchants, vets, auctioneers and they are all seeing their farming related business falling substantially and they are very worried about the future because many dairy farmers are considering packing it in.

I understand that a local firm manufacturing trailers closed a few months ago, and an agricultural engineering firm at Thornbury in my constituency closed only last month. That is a further local pressure that is causing concern.

Another local factor links to the demonstration that I mentioned earlier, which is the strengthening position of purchasers of farmgate milk. The Minister will be aware of the merger of Dairy Crest and Unigate, which gives them an important market share nationally. In addition, it has been estimated to me that, within the south-west, they may have as much as a 60 per cent. market share in milk; that is what the local NFU believes.

Given the Government's concern about fair competition, I am concerned that a 60 per cent. share in purchasing will do only one thing to farmgate prices—put further downward pressure on them. That is particularly acute in the south-west. The Prime Minister and other Ministers tell farmers that they want a stable, long-term framework, and clearly we are all of one mind on that. However, many, if not most, of those farmers will not be there in the long term, and short-term measures are needed as well. I want to touch on four very briefly.

Agrimonetary compensation is regularly mentioned, and I am aware from the Minister's comments of 48 hours ago that this is not free money. We are aware that there is a cost attached to it, and an issue of prioritisation. One farmer told me that that must be measured against the cost of unemployed farmers and the knock-on effect on the ancillary industries. There is a temptation to characterise this as a large sum of money and, obviously, only a part would feed through into the dairy industry. Clearly, there are savings from investing the money now, and I hope that the Minister can reassure me on that. I know that the Secretary of State said yesterday that it is still on the table, but the deadline is getting tight and farmers want to know. I hope that the Minister will offer some reassurance.

The second thing that the Government can do is, metaphorically, to bang heads together—they can get people round the table, such as the supermarkets, the dairies and the farmers, who, perhaps, have not always worked together effectively. The Government can encourage them to see their common interest in having a long-term secure supply of British milk to the British market. Government have a role to play in co-ordination and in emphasising the need to work together, and I hope that they will do more of that.

Thirdly, the Government should give farmers more freedom to work together in producing milk products. I have read the Minister's comments on that, but one of the advantages that has not been stressed enough is that if we could move milk output from the liquid milk market into milk products, we could affect the surplus in the overall market that is depressing the price. As well as assisting farmers in competition, co-operation in processing would also improve the milk price as a beneficial spin-off.

Finally, the Government should take measures to stimulate demand generally. The issue of free school milk was mentioned in the earlier debate in a negative context, in the sense that the Government are trying to stop a subsidy scheme being removed, but I hope that the Minister will talk to her colleagues in the Department for Education and Employment about extending free school milk. It is good for the health of our children and probably for their education, because well-nourished children study better. It is a win-win situation that would help the domestic dairy sector. I welcome the Minister's suggestion for generic milk campaigns, such as the "Drinka pinta milka day" campaign. I hope that she will say how much the Government will put into that and how long it will take to come on-stream.

Local farmers in my constituency have, regrettably, lost faith that anyone is listening to them. I have sought to be measured—I note that the earlier debate was measured, not hysterical—but I wish also to convey a sense of the anger and frustration that dairy farmers feel. I am aware that the Minister receives many invitations, but I invite her to visit south Gloucestershire to meet the farmers and to hear about the pressures they face, including the particular local factors that I have mentioned. I hope that she will be able to offer them reassurance that the Government understand their concerns and are taking action that will have an effect in the short term, as well as the long term.

I can do no more than conclude with a quotation from the group secretary of my local National Farmers Union, Mr. Robin Winfield, who wrote me a short letter in advance of this debate. He said:

with the price of milk forecast to drop even more, it clearly has reached an unsustainable level, and the flow of dairy farms that we have seen going out so far will, I feel, shortly become a flood.

I hope that the Minister will come and meet my farmers and tell them what she plans to do to ensure that that prophecy does not come true.

2.42 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Ms Joyce Quin): I congratulate the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) on securing this debate. I understand the concerns that he has expressed on behalf of his constituents, and I assure him that I have already met farmers from Gloucestershire on a couple of occasions. He mentioned that many farmers in his area felt that no one was listening, but my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food personally met farmers who took part in the demonstration and the march that came to Westminster this week. Indeed, he spent some time listening to their concerns.

The hon. Gentleman's concerns match those that have been raised by several hon. Members, including some of my hon. Friends, this week, both in the debate that took place earlier in the week and in the exchanges in Agriculture questions yesterday. At least the hon. Gentleman can take some satisfaction from the fact that his debate is at a more reasonable time of day than the one to which I had to respond just 48 hours ago.

The hon. Gentleman urged me to try to address some different issues during this response, and I shall certainly try to avoid stale repetition of what I have said before, but the essentials of the situation remain very much the same and I shall have to refer to, and perhaps amplify, some of the same issues today.

I shall begin, however, by placing on record the Government's pleasure at the good news from Germany today. The German Parliament has voted in favour of lifting the ban on British beef. We are very pleased at that, and I am sure that the news will be widely welcomed in the agriculture industry.

It is good news for two reasons. It shows that the rules of the single market are being respected. It is also important in terms of the signals that it sends to the world beyond the European Union. Third-country markets can have increasing confidence in the safety of our beef and in the measures taken to render it among the safest in the world. The Government take satisfaction in the German vote, and intend to build on it in the coming months to regain export markets world wide.

Understandably, the hon. Gentleman spoke movingly about the problems in his area. South Gloucestershire is one of the country's most important dairy production areas. The region has more than a third of the total English dairy herd, and dairy farming is, in terms of size, the most important of our agricultural sectors. It is a regionally important economic activity, in terms of direct employment and in terms of the numbers of allied jobs generated both upstream and downstream.

I know that the hon. Gentleman's constituents take events and developments in the sector very seriously, and he referred earlier to protests at local dairies about the price that local farmers receive for their milk. I am also aware that bovine tuberculosis causes concern in the hon. Gentleman's area. That is one of the most complex and controversial animal health problems, and the rising incidence of TB in cattle is a serious matter. The Government are seeking a science-based solution that will be in the long-term interests of farmers, wildlife and the taxpayer.

The Government's five-point research and control strategy is designed to examine all aspects of the disease and to provide a sustainable solution for the long term. The various elements of the strategy include research into transmission, the hunt for a vaccine and the protection of public health.

Research is also being undertaken into the controls that affect cattle, and into those that affect badgers. The trial involving badgers is the most controversial element of the research, but we must try to determine once and for all the role that badgers play in cattle TB. For that reason, we are determined to proceed as quickly as possible. Yesterday, my noble Friend Baroness Hayman, the Minister with responsibility for this area of policy in the Ministry of Agriculture, announced that a further two triplet areas had been enrolled in the trial.

Interference with the trials helps no one, but merely delays the achievement of a science-based solution.

Mr. Webb: I recently took a farming couple from my constituency, whose livelihood had been wiped out by bovine TB, to meet Baroness Hayman. Will the Minister update me on the progress of the trials, as part of my constituency is in the trial area?

Ms Quin: As the hon. Gentleman knows, the trials have three elements, which make up the triplet. I have nothing further to announce with regard to the details of the trials. It is true that part of the hon. Gentleman's area is one of the areas in the trial process.

[Ms Quin]

We are aware of the financial difficulties faced by farmers following a TB outbreak. We compensate the farmer for 100 per cent. of the market value of the animal. We are also in discussion with farming interests at the TB forum about what more can be done. The forum includes conservation and veterinary interests. We are keen that all parts of the forum work together to ensure that we make progress and that the various elements are taken into account.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the all-important issue of the price of milk. Prices paid to milk producers have fallen substantially over the past two years and farm incomes have fallen in consequence. There is no way that we are underestimating the severity of the problem. It is a problem across Europe, although the United Kingdom is particularly severely affected. Some European countries such as Ireland, Spain and Germany have also experienced very low prices for milk.

It is also true that in the single market and, indeed, in the wider world, the competitive situation for commodities such as butter, skimmed milk powder and various types of cheese is difficult. The weakening of certain markets, particularly in Russia and south-east Asia, has had a knock-on effect in making competition even more intense in the European market. Britain has faced that severe competitive situation in very difficult circumstances. There are some specifically British aspects to the situation which have caused difficulty for us. Even though the dairy industry has not been directly implicated in the BSE health scare, none the less, simply by association of ideas, the industry has not benefited from the negative climate surrounding British beef and agricultural products, which we are now addressing.

The industry has also been greatly affected by the strong pound, which affects agriculture in a unique way. Contending with a strong pound is challenging for all exporting industries, but in agriculture the situation is compounded by the fact that we are dealing not just with imports and exports but with the basic support price. The support price is set in euros, and its value falls as sterling rises. The basic price sets a floor, but it means that the floor is even lower in our case when sterling is as strong as it is at present.

The hon. Gentleman, quite rightly, referred to the difficulties surrounding the selling and marketing regime for milk. There was a period of uncertainty surrounding the initial deregulation which has, in more recent times, been compounded by the effects of the Monopolies and Mergers Commission report. The response to the report is crucial. We have welcomed the positive way in which Milk Marque has responded in its proposals for the three successor organisations. However, we are concerned about the ability of companies to be involved in processing. That is a very important element in terms of adding value and helping those involved at the producing end see some real benefits. I believe that the report of the Select Committee on Agriculture is very helpful in this respect. It endorses the views of people keen to see the maximum benefits derived from processing.

The role of supermarkets has been much mentioned by dairy farmers this week. It is right that supermarkets should consider their position in response to the representations made, although they must work within both commercial and anti-competitive constraints. I agree with the hon. Gentleman's stress on the importance of communication between various parts of the food chain. The Government are keen to promote good practice and communication. My right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture took an important food chain initiative; the report has been produced, but we shall certainly not sit back expecting problems to solve themselves. We have a continuing commitment to getting different parts of the food chain to work together and to understand the difficulties in other parts. We also seek greater stability and prosperity for basic producers in the chain.

The hon. Gentleman referred to comments made by my right hon. Friend, who rightly made it clear that the Government could not intervene formally to set the price of milk. That said, I would contest any suggestion that my right hon. Friend feels that that should simply be left to the commercial sector and that the Government take no interest in it. In fact, my right hon. Friend is conscious of our opportunities to try to create a better climate for those commercial activities. We want to help both in the short term, and in the medium and long terms. The hon. Gentleman said that we had made several statements about future hopes for development of agriculture. In particular, we hope to advance matters using the rural development regulation. I assure him that we are in no way neglecting short-term problems, and we continue to focus on them.

Many dairy farmers lobbied us hard about their fears for the introduction of cattle passports. I was particularly aware of that concern during my early days at the Ministry. Deferring charges for two and a half years equals £12 million of relief—£4.8 million annually.

Mr. Webb: I met a farmer the other day who pointed out that the Government claim that not having put an extra burden on farmers is help. I appreciate that that burden might have been put on farmers, and that it has not. But if we say to someone who is drowning that we might throw a brick at him, and then do not do it, the person is still drowning. I hope that the Minister understands the point that I am making. The delay was welcome, but it does not make farmers any better off; it just leaves them where they were.

Ms Quin: I understand the point, but I do not accept it. Farmers were worried about the scheme, and they were grateful that we responded by taking that decision.

Many of the recommendations of the red tape review will help the livestock sector, including dairy farmers. Measures to promote generic advertising of milk will also be vital over the months to come. Last week, the scheme to allow such generic promotion was widely welcomed in Parliament. We know how effective such promotions have been in the past, and we should bear their importance in mind. We propose to move forward in months, not years, on that matter. Progress will happen in the near future.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned the European Union school milk scheme—

The motion having been made at half-past Two o'clock, and the debate having continued for half an hour, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *adjourned the House without Question put, pursuant to the Standing Order.*

Adjourned at Three o'clock.

House of Commons

Monday 20 March 2000

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

DEFENCE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Public Access (Departmental Land)

1. **Mr. Colin Pickthall** (West Lancashire): If he will make a statement on progress in providing public access to his Department's land. [113688]

10. **Angela Smith** (Basildon): What review he has made of the criteria on which his Department allows access to his Department's land. [113697]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Dr. Lewis Moonie): There is a presumption in favour of public access to the defence estate subject to safety, security and operational reasons. Although those have been the overriding factors governing access by the public, we have also taken into account the criteria—which are now in the Countryside and Rights of Way Bill—of land management, nature conservation and heritage protection as well as the interests of our tenants. Our forthcoming strategy for the defence estate, which is due for publication in June, will be the vehicle for improving the quality, extent and certainty of access to the defence estate.

Mr. Pickthall: I thank my hon. Friend for that positive reply. Will he nevertheless consider some of the changes that could be made under current legislation? For example, will he consider complaints about Dartmoor, where about 40 firing days every year are not used by the Army, and 60,000 acres can be closed off when only a handful of troops are using a corner of the territory? Does he not agree that an awful lot of efficiency and compromise could be achieved under the present regulations?

Dr. Moonie: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. Ease of access is clearly one of the main principles that we have in mind, and although we must also be careful about public safety, allowing access wherever possible will be an overriding consideration.

Angela Smith: I, too, welcome the Minister's answer, but may I push him further? I welcome the current review, but is he aware that in 1986 public rights of way were withdrawn from areas of Salisbury plain? Despite that, the Royal Artillery hunt is allowed access to it even when the red flags are flying, although many ordinary ramblers are not—it is still out of bounds for those who want only to walk. Given the unpredictable nature of fox hunting—the fox runs, and the hounds and riders follow—would not it be appropriate to open up access to those who merely want to walk?

Dr. Moonie: While it remains a legal activity, hunting with hounds is permitted on the defence estate. It is restricted to recognised hunts, and licences are granted only to those that have held such permission previously.

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury): Will the Minister confirm that, under clause 26, he will seek to exempt all military training lands from the provisions of the Countryside and Rights of Way Bill? Given the severe shortage of training land and the training shortfall, particularly in the Army, when can we expect an announcement on the outcome of the inquiry into the Otterburn range's improvement, which is putting a great deal of strain on the Army's training programme?

Dr. Moonie: First, the presumption has to be that the public have right of access, but clearly the needs of the service must be taken fully into account in that presumption. Secondly, I am sorry to say that Otterburn is not in my hands.

Ethnic Minority Recruitment

2. **Mr. Clive Soley** (Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush): What proposals he has to increase recruitment from the ethnic minority communities into the armed forces. [113689]

9. **Fiona Mactaggart** (Slough): What action has been taken by the Army to tackle race discrimination; and if he will make a statement. [113696]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. John Spellar): In the spirit of our partnership agreement with the Commission for Racial Equality, all three services continue to work vigorously to increase recruitment from ethnic minority communities. Challenging goals have been set, rising to 5 per cent. in 2001-02, and we are beginning to see considerable signs of progress. Along with the other two services, the Army is fully committed to tackling and removing prejudice in keeping with the zero tolerance policy towards racism. A number of other organisations are now consulting our armed forces to learn from that successful approach.

Mr. Soley: Will the Minister convey my thanks to the members of his Department who organised a brilliant effort by those—mainly non-commissioned officers—who visited various constituencies and came to the White City estate in my area to lead a recruitment campaign? They were from the ethnic minorities and did not dress up any of the problems of racism that are encountered from time to time, but, with enthusiasm and commitment, made it abundantly clear to the young people from the

ethnic minority communities in my constituency what rewarding careers the Army, Navy and Air Force can offer.

Mr. Spellar: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments, which reflect those I have heard from around the country on the members of the ethnic minority recruiting team and my experience in meeting them in a number of locations. They are not only fine members of the armed forces, but extremely effective communicators of their message to young people. They are perhaps far more effective than Ministers in that regard because they wear the uniform of the armed forces and are themselves from the community. They have an effective message to put over. They do that extremely well and have a great impact on the youngsters they talk to.

Fiona Mactaggart: Is the Minister aware that, before the general election, the Commission for Racial Equality was considering a formal investigation into recruitment practices in the armed forces and that there has since been an agreement between the CRE and the armed forces, which Herman Ouseley described as

a good, ground-breaking model for other employers . . . ?

Will he say unequivocally that my constituents—many of whom have ancestors from the Caribbean or the Indian sub-continent and family traditions of gallant service in our armed forces—are as welcome to serve in the defence of Britain as people from any community in this country?

Mr. Spellar: I thank my hon. Friend for her remarks. We want to re-emphasise that message. We pay tribute to the long history—two centuries—of involvement in the British armed forces of people from overseas, many of whose families are now in this country. The answer that I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush (Mr. Soley) was important because that is the real-life experience of members of the ethnic community in the armed forces, and that is the message that they are getting across. It is not the distorted vision that is portrayed in the media. It is extremely important that people who hold senior positions and positions of influence in the ethnic community also get the message across that the armed forces is a good career for their youngsters and offers great opportunities to serve this country.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): Does the Minister agree that it is important that we get across the message that there will be no discrimination prior to entry or while people from ethnic minorities proudly serve in our armed forces? Does he also agree that with 18,000 savage cuts in the Territorial Army, there are now fewer opportunities for young people from ethnic minorities who are working to be able to contribute to our armed forces?

Mr. Spellar: In spite of the fact that we have had the best year of recruitment into the armed forces in 10 years, there are still a considerable number of vacancies. We welcome into our armed forces all those who qualify and wish to serve this country. We are glad that that message is increasingly getting across. As I stressed earlier, we have zero tolerance of discrimination in the armed forces. I emphasise the fact that when one looks into many of the cases that hit the headlines, one discovers that they often relate to events that occurred some years before, and that there has since been a sea change in attitudes in the armed forces. That is welcome and is a tribute to the leadership of the senior command and the way in which they have brought that about.

Mr. Jonathan Sayeed (Mid-Bedfordshire): Encouraging the recruitment of people from ethnic minorities into the armed forces is to be welcomed, but will the Minister confirm that there will be no positive discrimination, and that the selection of people from ethnic minorities will be solely on merit?

Mr. Spellar: I certainly hope that that is the case; indeed, I know it is. That is the view of people from the ethnic community who serve in the armed forces. If the hon. Gentleman has met any of the recruitment teams in particular, he will recognise the high quality that we are talking about. I should make it clear that this policy is not based on political correctness, but is to ensure that we have the widest possible pool of talent from which we can recruit so as to maintain the high quality and high reputation of the British armed forces.

School Access (Service Families)

4. **Ms Ann Coffey** (Stockport): What steps his Department is taking to improve access to schools for service families. [113691]

11. **Charlotte Atkins** (Staffordshire, Moorlands): What steps his Department is taking to improve access to schools for service families. [113698]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. John Spellar): The service families task force has achieved considerable success in improving access to schools for service families. There is reference to service children in the Department for Education and Employment's code of practice on school admissions. The Service Children's Education Agency is now a formal member of, or is in attendance at, 18 local education authority admission forums. Although some families are still experiencing problems, the code has generally improved access to education for service families.

Ms Coffey: As someone who was brought up in a service family and went to seven different primary and secondary schools, I welcome the Minister's reply, which I am sure will also be widely welcomed by thousands of service families who experience real difficulty in getting access to schools to enable their children to have a decent education. What evidence is there that the new guidance is having an impact?

Mr. Spellar: Discussions are under way with service families. In the Chester area, which is quite close to my hon. Friend's constituency and where the 1st Battalion of the Prince of Wales's Own Regiment of Yorkshire is stationed, all the families have been able to put their children into their school of first choice. We recognise that there are still some difficulties, but progress is being made, and there is a willingness by admissions bodies across the country to understand the particular difficulties

and necessities that arise because of the requirements of service life and service careers—which my hon. Friend will obviously understand, given her background.

Charlotte Atkins: I am pleased to hear that progress has been made on this long-standing problem, but does the Minister accept that, because of their mobile life styles, service families also experience difficulties in gaining access to national health service waiting lists and in finding NHS dentists? What progress is being made in that regard?

Mr. Spellar: The NHS has made provision for extra dental services in areas that we identified as having particular difficulties and containing a large number of service families. The same applies to access to doctors' waiting lists. Those improvements are being achieved by the service families task force, which I chair and whose members include Ministers from a number of other Departments. The task force has focused on difficulties arising specifically from the service life style, and on the responses that other Departments can often make quite easily and effectively.

We are also examining hospital waiting lists. Some people, especially those with less threatening but often very painful conditions, may be on waiting lists for longer than they and their families are in the relevant location. We are undertaking further work on the jobseeker's allowance, and we have had considerable success in regard to student loans. From September this year, students—even if they have been resident abroad with the armed forces—will have access to loans.

Ours is a considerable record of success. Not only are we proud of that record, but we believe that it has had a real effect on the conditions experienced by the service families who play such an important part in ensuring the effectiveness of our armed forces.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex): I welcome the progress made by the service families task force, which is clearly an improvement on that of recent years.

Does the Minister agree that when men and women leave the armed forces, it is important for them to have access to the services that they need, in the places where they need them? Will he discuss with housing authorities the possibility of those who have served their country being put at the top of housing lists when they return to the local authority areas from which they originally came?

Mr. Spellar: There is a considerable housing problem, not least because the last Administration encouraged the selling off of so many properties. A number of Army families, in particular, are experiencing difficulties; this applies less to Navy and Royal Air Force families. When we have dealt with the immediate issues, we shall need to explore those difficulties further.

Once some problems have been solved, others always arise. For instance, the mobile life style of many service personnel causes difficulties with access to credit. I have asked my officials to discuss that with credit organisations. After all, we are talking about people with regular incomes and assured careers. We want to ensure that they have proper access to credit, and we are making considerable progress in that regard.

Mr. Paul Keetch (Hereford): Will the service families task force, whose establishment I welcome, undertake to audit the provision of facilities on bases throughout the United Kingdom? Is the Minister aware that the 1,400 service personnel based at Warminster have access to two playgroups, a creche, a mothers and toddlers group and a youth club, whereas the 7,698 service men at Catterick enjoy no such provision? Is it not time that our service men had equal provision, regardless of where they are based?

Mr. Spellar: This is almost a case of "What have the Romans ever done for us?"

If we had uniform provision, we would never make progress. Once we have made progress in some areas, we can see what works and then start to "level up". As I have said, we have made considerable progress, but we regard what we are doing as work in progress. We appreciate that there will be future needs, because of changing aspirations and changing life styles. For instance, far more service wives now work and have careers, and that creates problems for families because of the mobile life style. We are continuing to work on this. We do not think that we have solved all the problems; I merely say that we have made considerable progress.

Procurement

5. **Mr. Desmond Swayne** (New Forest, West): When he last met the Chancellor of the Exchequer to discuss defence procurement. [113692]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Dr. Lewis Moonie): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence has regular meetings with the Chancellor of the Exchequer and other Cabinet colleagues to discuss a range of defence issues, including procurement.

Mr. Swayne: Which procurement exercises have been cancelled, deferred or withdrawn during the current Parliament?

Dr. Moonie: None.

Mr. Ernie Ross (Dundee, West): Will my hon. Friend confirm that we inherited many of the procurement problems that have been reported by the press from the previous Government? Will he also confirm that we inherited a total overrun cost of £3 billion and an average delay of three years on the top 25 projects? What action is he taking to correct that?

Dr. Moonie: I can indeed confirm that. Because of smart procurement, we are on track to achieve the £2 billion of reductions in spending on equipment procurement by 2007-08. We aim to achieve that as a result of the defence review. The programme to introduce the new structures and procedures is right on course, with integrated project teams, a new customer organisation in

my headquarters and a range of new processes. Smart procurement really is a complete overhaul of all aspects of the business of buying and managing equipment.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): Does the Minister accept that the immense purchasing power of the armed forces can have a direct effect on the economy of these islands and that, other things being equal, that effect should be borne in mind, not least in the purchase of meat for the armed forces? There is an inability, apparently, to secure home-grown lamb from any competitive source. Surely that can be reversed, and it is possible to purchase lamb from within these islands.

Madam Speaker: Order. Questions should be about defence procurement.

Dr. Moonie: With regard to the procurement of beef and lamb, I am doing everything that I can to facilitate the purchase of those materials from British sources.

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley): In his discussions with the Chancellor, will my hon. Friend ensure that the case is put forward for the Meteor and A400M programmes, on which tens of thousands of jobs in the north-west depend? I realise that finance is always important, and savings of £300 million could come with the Antonov 124-100.

Dr. Moonie: I cannot comment now on the purchase of the BVRAAM—beyond visual range air-to-air missile—because we are evaluating the bids that we have received from two groups of companies: Matra BAe Dynamics and Raytheon Systems Ltd. However, our assessment will take into account a wide range of factors, including missile performance, cost, technical risk, industrial issues and overall value for money.

Mr. Quentin Davies (Grantham and Stamford): I think that the Minister may need to think again about his rather hasty answer to my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne). Surely, last summer, the original C17 leasing contract was shelved indefinitely and the current heavy-lift contracts and projects are all being considerably delayed. Those are just two examples.

Is it not time that Defence Ministers or perhaps the Chancellor himself—who no doubt imposed the savings—came clean about those efficiency savings? Is it not a fact that the Select Committee, which has a Labour majority, now regards those so-called efficiency savings as thoroughly suspect? When, for example, 65 per cent.—

Madam Speaker: Order. We want a question to the Minister. We do not want examples.

Mr. Davies: But if 65 per cent. of the current cost of running a warship goes on salaries, which cannot be arbitrarily reduced, and if, as the Minister himself has acknowledged, all the forces are under strength, those savings will have to come—

Madam Speaker: Order. I expect Front Benchers in particular to put questions to Ministers and not to hold the House up, as the hon. Gentleman is doing with examples. He should put a question to the Minister.

Mr. Davies: Is it not a fact that those efficiency savings are thoroughly bogus? To get 3 per cent. savings out of the remaining 35 per cent. the Government will have to cut spares, fuel and so forth by 10 per cent. each and every year—

Madam Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman will resume his seat.

Dr. Moonie: I shall reply briefly, Madam Speaker.

The decision on heavy-lift capability is a difficult one to make, as we are evaluating several excellent prospects. To get value for money, it is essential that we make a rational decision and make absolutely certain that we are satisfying our armed forces' need for a heavy-lift capability. It takes time to do that.

On spending, the hon. Gentleman should address himself to the cuts that the previous Administration made prior to the general election.

Budget

6. **Mr. Crispin Blunt** (Reigate): What recent representations he has received on the level of the defence budget. [113693]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): I have received a number of representations on the level of the defence budget from a variety of sources.

Mr. Blunt: The Secretary of State surely knows that the defence budget is wholly insufficient to deal with current commitments and the equipment programme. If it were not insufficient, we would have had a short-term answer on strategic lift last year, and the Secretary of State would have been able to publish the list of targets for efficiency savings—which we are now entitled to believe are cuts. Does he understand that, when he negotiates with the Chancellor in the comprehensive spending review, if he fails to obtain significantly greater resources for defence, he will have failed the armed forces and imperilled the future security of the United Kingdom?

Mr. Hoon: The hon. Gentleman is a considerable expert on the question of defence cuts. When he was special adviser at the Ministry of Defence, he advised on real-terms defence cuts in the order of £1.4 billion. I therefore do not think that he is in any position to give lectures to Labour Members on the subject. However, since he has mentioned the subject, I can tell him that in contrast to the record of the previous, Conservative Government—whom he supported and who cut defence spending by up to a third in the 1980s—the reduction in defence spending under this Government is less than 4 per cent.

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax): Given the indiscriminate and inhumane use of cluster bombs in Kosovo, will my

right hon. Friend tell me what representations he has had from interested parties to provide extra resources to clear up and de-mine the province?

Mr. Hoon: I have seen British forces in Kosovo engaged in the very difficult and dangerous task of removing mines and occasionally removing the failed parts of cluster bombs—the bomblets that have a 5 per cent. failure rate. Certainly that is something that they do extremely well. If they can be of assistance to any other organisation, although we certainly look to that other organisation for funding we are certainly prepared to participate where we can.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): What assessment has the Secretary of State made of the impact on the United Kingdom defence budget if the United States, as now appears inevitable, deploys a system of national missile defence? In particular, what are the financial implications for Menwith Hill and Fylingdales? For how long will the Secretary of State decline to state the UK Government's position on the political, military and economic consequences of the deployment of such a system? "I shall think about it tomorrow" may have been good enough for Scarlett O'Hara, but it is not good enough for the Secretary of State.

Mr. Hoon: The right hon. and learned Gentleman knows full well that no decision has yet been taken in the United States on the deployment of national missile defence. Although there have been considerable discussions among NATO Ministers about NMD and its possible deployment, the assessment of the financial implications for the UK—which, after all, is not part of any of the first phase of national missile defence—is not something that need currently concern either the right hon and learned Gentleman or the House. However, I should be entirely willing to discuss that matter should any right hon. or hon. Member suggest a debate or ask a question on the subject.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): Can the Secretary of State estimate what part of the budget, in the next three or four years, will be used for the design and construction of roll on/roll off vessels and the type 45 destroyer? There is very keen interest in those contracts in the shipyards on the Clyde, and I should like to know whether he has any good news for me.

Mr. Hoon: My hon. Friend puts together two processes that are being approached in quite a different way. He knows full well that ro-ro procurement is being done according to quite different principles from conventional defence procurement. Those ferries will have the capability of being used not only for military purposes, but—most of the time, we should hope—for civilian purposes, thereby significantly reducing their cost. I therefore cannot at this stage give my hon. Friend precise figures on the contribution from the defence budget. It clearly depends on the extent to which the vessels can be used for civilian purposes.

The type 45 procurement will be along more conventional lines, although certainly building in the considerable benefits of smart procurement, which have shown so many advantages in relation to the defence budget.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): The Secretary of State's budget is falling by about £800 million a year, and the deployments of troops to the Balkans that have taken place and may take place in future have a huge bearing on that budget. Does not the announcement that a battery of artillery armed with surveillance aircraft will be deployed in the area suggest that the need to survey both the area of Mitrovica and south-east Serbia indicates the way in which the Kosovo Liberation Army is beginning to drive decisions here that may impact directly on the budget?

Mr. Hoon: The hon. Gentleman knows that all the costs of Kosovo have been provided to the defence budget and that substantial repayments have been made, both in terms of the matériel that has been used and the consequences for our people in the form of long-service allowances and the various extra expenses that they have faced as a result of the deployment. His linking of the two subjects is not particularly helpful.

I shall refer specifically to the deployment in and around Kosovo of intelligence gathering. It is clear that we should have better intelligence of what is happening in Kosovo, and especially along its borders. That is why the Government have been delighted to assist in providing the extra facility and the extra people who can do the job, to ensure that KFOR can carry out its job of providing security in Kosovo still more successfully.

Mr. Duncan Smith: First, the right hon. Gentleman is only partially right about the way in which the budget is being funded. The pressures and stresses on his budget from having extra troops deployed in the area create a knock-on effect right the way through. May I draw his attention to the recent words of General Wesley Clark, who has been given to warning the Serbs about their actions in Montenegro. He has gone on to say that that would, if necessary, have drawn NATO in. Has the general consulted the right hon. Gentleman? Are we building plans for future deployments into Montenegro? If so, what effect will that have on British troops? Have we any such plans, or are we simply sliding behind the general?

Mr. Hoon: There are regular discussions between NATO allies about the security situation in the Balkans. We have made it clear to Milosevic that we would view seriously any sort of interference in the affairs of Montenegro. That is and will remain the position.

Crisis Relief

7. **Mr. Graham Brady** (Altrincham and Sale, West): How much his Department spent in providing assistance for crisis relief missions in each of the past five years. [113694]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): The defence budget does not include specific provision for disaster relief. The prime responsibility for

overseas crisis or disaster relief lies with the Department for International Development, whose budget is voted by Parliament for that purpose.

Should my right hon Friend the Secretary of State for International Development request the use of military assets and personnel to assist with overseas relief operations, the Ministry of Defence will investigate urgently whether we can help. If defence resources are employed on such operations, DFID would, in line with well-established Government accounting policy, reimburse the Ministry of Defence only for the marginal cost of providing the assistance.

Mr. Brady: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for that reply. Could not the resources be more quickly and effectively deployed if the United Kingdom had access to its own heavy-lift capacity? In Mozambique, we had to charter Ukrainian Antonovs for that purpose. Would it not be better if, two years on from the strategic defence review identifying a need for heavy-lift capacity, the Government had done something about it?

Mr. Hoon: I was almost going to agree with the hon. Gentleman until he spoiled his rather helpful question with his final comments. We agree that it was set out in the strategic defence review that we should have a heavy-lift capacity. I cannot resist the temptation to point out that it is a capacity that the previous, Conservative Government failed to provide and one that had to be identified in the strategic defence review. Nevertheless, progress is under way with procurement, and I hope to put him out of his misery quite soon.

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): Does the Secretary of State agree that the defence budget should take serious account of humanitarian relief missions to ensure that there is no delay in response to any future disaster, and also that there should be no question of charging other Departments for assistance, as happened with Mozambique? Some outsiders might say that charging a fellow Department for humanitarian assistance in Mozambique is rather like asking for a subsidy from those whose budget is dedicated to providing for the victims of such disasters.

Mr. Hoon: The difficulty with my hon. Friend's suggestion is that it would lead to the danger of two Departments trying to solve the same problem in different ways. By joining up the approach of both Departments, we ensure that we agree on the appropriate way of providing assistance and that, as in Mozambique, the help reaches the people in need as quickly as possible.

AWE Aldermaston

8. **Mr. David Rendel** (Newbury): What plans he has to extend the existing contractual arrangements at AWE until the DTI report on BNFL has been published. [113695]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. John Spellar): As I informed the House on 1 March, existing contract arrangements could be extended or direct MOD management imposed if, for whatever reason, we judge that AWE ML is unable to take over responsibility for the management and operation of the atomic weapons establishment as scheduled on 1 April.

Mr. Rendel: Does not the Minister recognise that employees at Aldermaston and residents in the surrounding area are deeply upset at the delays in coming to a final conclusion? Would not it be far better at least to announce today that the new contract has been postponed until the review of BNFL is published in mid April, to put those residents and employees out of their misery? Would not it be better still to announce that the new contract has been cancelled, given the grossly irresponsible attitude to safety of both BNFL and Lockheed Martin, the two main parties to that contract?

Mr. Spellar: I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman takes the attitude of sentence first and trial afterwards. As he is fully aware—he alluded to it in his question—an inquiry is taking place. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe has tasked the chairman of BNFL to undertake a thorough review of the company's affairs leading up to its recent difficulties. It would be quite inappropriate to pre-empt the inquiry by making a firm and final decision. That is why, as I said in the House on 1 March, we are keeping our options open—but, unfortunately, we are unable at this stage to announce to the House the outcome of the discussions and inquiries. We must wait until the full evidence is available.

Mr. Martin Salter (Reading, West): Is my hon. Friend aware that only this morning the company currently managing AWE Aldermaston, Hunting-BRAE Ltd., launched what it believed would be its final annual report on its seven years in charge of the atomic weapons establishment? Does he accept that the continuing uncertainty regarding the future of the establishment and its management regime is damaging confidence in the establishment as a whole? Does he further accept that, in view of the fact that the Department of Trade and Industry report into the disgraceful behaviour of BNFL is not due out until 15 April and the new management arrangements at AWE Aldermaston are due to kick in on 1 April, it is time that the Government made their intentions crystal clear?

Mr. Spellar: First, I fully understand the concerns of those who work in Aldermaston or live in the surrounding area, represented by the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel) and by my hon. Friend. I fear, though, that my hon. Friend is falling into the same trap as the hon. Gentleman in wishing to predict the outcome of the inquiry into BNFL. We are considering the options. Unfortunately, we have not been able to come to a conclusion before Defence questions today, but by definition there is a requirement to make a decision in the very near future because of the 1 April starting date of the new contract. We are fully aware of that, as well as of the skills and qualities of the work force who will be overwhelmingly the same work force, irrespective of who is managing the contract. As I said, we have a range of options, but we have not yet been able to decide which will be appropriate.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): To what extent are the future contractual arrangements for AWE and its sister

scientific organisation, the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency, being influenced by pressure from the Treasury? Given that both organisations are critical to our procurement process and command enormous respect in their co-operative work with the Americans, should not their futures be determined on their merits alone, and not by factors such as a promised £250 million refund to the Treasury?

Mr. Spellar: The hon. Gentleman is tying up two different, although tenuously related, issues. We have to make a decision on the effective management of AWE, and—as he rightly identified—we have considerable links with the United States of America on that. We have also asked for a report from the US on the accident at Oak Ridge and its assessment and evaluation of that. That issue is separate from the public-private partnership with DERA. As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, we have taken strongly into account the effective and mutually beneficial links between DERA and the various Government scientific laboratories in the US. They are very important and a significant part of the special defence relationship between ourselves and the US.

Other issues need to be explored in connection with the public-private partnership, especially the need to sustain a defence research base in the light of the considerable developments that are taking place in science outside defence establishments. In many cases, defence needs to capture scientific advances from outside defence, whereas previously it was the other way around. We also need to maintain the science base within the defence budget. Those issues are being actively pursued by my noble Friend the Minister for Defence Procurement, Baroness Symons, and we are working closely with the Americans to ensure the best deal for DERA and to maintain the proper scientific relationship.

Real IRA

12. **Mr. Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield): If he will make a statement on the Army's state of readiness in Northern Ireland in relation to the threat posed by the Real IRA. [113699]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): The Chief Constable of the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the General Officer Commanding Northern Ireland keep the security situation under constant review. We remain alert to the threat posed by dissident republicans and changes to the security profile are made as and when appropriate. The recently announced withdrawal of about 500 soldiers from Belfast to a rear base in Great Britain is one such adjustment. I would like to take this opportunity to commend, once again, all those who serve in Northern Ireland for their excellent performance in a most demanding role in support of the police.

Mr. Fabricant: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. Did he note that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland evaded answering my question on Wednesday, when I asked him about the Real IRA's acquisition of shoulder-held rocket launchers—just as, incidentally, he managed to evade apologising to the Household Division? What steps is the Secretary of State for Defence taking to protect our service men in Northern Ireland, given that the Real IRA is acquiring weapons from the Balkans, including portable rocket launchers, and given that we now learn that people who have been released early from prison in Northern Ireland are joining the Real IRA?

Mr. Hoon: I have already made it clear that we regard the security situation in Northern Ireland to be of paramount importance. On the hon. Gentleman's specific observation, we obviously do all that we can to block the illegal import of weapons from whatever source and we work closely with the police in achieving that.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): While reviewing the overall security situation in Northern Ireland, will the Secretary of State take particular care when considering proposals for withdrawal of the Royal Navy Northern Ireland patrol vessels, which I understand have not yet been discussed with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland? Will the right hon. Gentleman consider carefully the ability of the Royal Ulster Constabulary and Customs and Excise to replicate the valuable work that those patrol vessels currently do?

Mr. Hoon: Again, we consider any proposals that might affect the security of Northern Ireland very carefully. However, I emphasise that it is ultimately the responsibility of the Chief Constable to determine the level of security that is required. He acts in consultation with the General Officer Commanding and makes appropriate recommendations.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): As the Secretary of State started, quite rightly, with fulsome praise for members of our armed forces who have served in Northern Ireland, will he tell us whether, when he heard the comments of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland about chinless wonders serving in the Household Division, he contacted him and told him to apologise unequivocally? Does the right hon. Gentleman believe that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has done so in his letter to the Major-General?

Mr. Hoon: As the hon. Gentleman is aware, conversations between Cabinet Ministers on a private matter should remain private. As he also knows, my right hon. Friend wrote an apology to the General Officer Commanding, London district of the Household Cavalry, and also expressed his regret publicly in the House.

Learning Forces Initiative

13. **Ms Sally Keeble** (Northampton, North): If he will make a statement on the recent progress of the Government's learning forces initiative. [113701]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. John Spellar): We are making good progress with our learning forces initiative, which introduced a series of measures to enhance opportunities for education and personal self-development of armed forces personnel. Our forces are widely dispersed across the globe, so by using modern information technology-based learning facilities we are

bringing access to training and education to service people's workplaces, as far as possible regardless of geographical location.

Ms Keeble: I appreciate my hon. Friend's comments. Will the scheme be extended to give service personnel more general training in areas such as housing and finance, bearing in mind that ex-service personnel are among the groups most likely to end up homeless and sleeping rough on the streets of our towns and cities?

Mr. Spellar: The actual figures for the number of personnel who are homeless may well be skewed, particularly in the older age group, by the fact that the majority of them will have undertaken national service. However, we recognise that there are some difficulties and we are in discussions with other Departments to deal with that.

I take my hon. Friend's point on improving basic skills—that is part of the programme. It is a flexible programme, enabling individuals to develop their skills and, equally importantly, to acquire the certification that gives them portable skills to take back into civilian life after they have finished serving with our armed forces.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Does the Minister accept that retention is a problem for the armed forces, and that the learning forces initiative can have a positive part to play? Will the Government consider extending NVQ2 to the forces network under this scheme?

Mr. Spellar: We are looking, in as many cases as possible, at extending certification and proper levels of qualification. That gives objectives for individuals to aim for and provides a discipline within the framework of education. Equally importantly, it provides a benchmark and portable, recognised qualifications that individuals can take with them when they go back to their civilian careers, enabling them to have on-going careers, not just in the armed forces. As the hon. Lady rightly says, that is an important part not only of work within the forces but of retention. My experience and the experience of colleagues in visiting various bases has been that people undertake this enthusiastically, not just in this country but, through the use of modern information technology, at our bases in many areas around the world, even in some that we hope will be temporary.

RAF Chilmark

15. **Mr. Peter Brooke** (Cities of London and Westminster): When the RAF vacated RAF Chilmark; and when it envisages disposing of the site. [113703]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Dr. Lewis Moonie): RAF Chilmark closed in 1995. Parts of the site have already been sold, having been cleared of munitions, and it is envisaged that further areas, including the headquarters element of the site, will be released for disposal later this year. It is anticipated that the final section of the site will come forward for disposal in 2002 or shortly thereafter.

Mr. Brooke: That news is extremely welcome. My understanding is that the cost of maintaining the site is of the order of £500,000. The fact that disposal is being brought forward will be welcomed in the neighbourhood.

Dr. Moonie: It is expensive to maintain such a site—about £490,000 per annum. The total cost of cleaning and preparing the site for sale in accordance with MOD policy over the past five years amounted to 371,460.

Military Equipment (Charges)

17. **Mr. Paul Goggins** (Wythenshawe and Sale, East): If he will make a statement on the method used for calculating charges made to other Government departments for the use of military equipment in connection with emergency situations and natural disasters. [113706]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): As I have already indicated to the House, where military equipment is deployed on an emergency task that it is another Department's responsibility to fund, the Ministry of Defence—in common with other Departments—calculates charges based on the marginal cost of providing the assistance, in accordance with well-established administration practice and Government accounting principles. That is the amount that would not have been incurred had the relief activity not taken place.

Mr. Goggins: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. This morning, I spoke to a senior member of the team from CAFOD—the Catholic Fund for Overseas Development—which has been working in Mozambique in recent weeks. He described the British Government's response to the catastrophe as "brilliant". Nevertheless, does my right hon. Friend agree that now would be a good time to sit down with other Ministers and with representatives of non-governmental organisations to try to make improvements in the way that resources are charged for and allocated, so that we can continue to provide effective support and responses to natural disasters when they occur.

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for paying tribute to the excellent work that has been done in Mozambique by British armed forces and by civilians. I emphasise that, with the exception of helicopters from Malawi and South Africa, British helicopters were the first from any other country to help people in Mozambique. That is a tribute to the speed with which the armed forces, in particular, were able to get the helicopters down there in very difficult circumstances.

Certainly, there are lessons to be learned—as there are from all deployments. I shall follow my hon. Friend's advice and try to learn from that particular deployment.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): If everything in the garden about charging for MOD helicopters is so rosy, will the right hon. Gentleman tell us why the Secretary of State for International Development criticised the MOD

on the "Today" programme? She stated that the MOD was proposing to charge far too much for making helicopters available in this crisis.

Mr. Hoon: I think that the hon. Gentleman misunderstood what my right hon. Friend was saying. She made it quite clear that, in the early phase of the deployment, her priority—rightly—was to secure helicopters that were locally and immediately available. It was only when it became clear that the situation was more difficult and that further helicopters were not available in the region that it became necessary to turn to the Ministry of Defence to obtain helicopters from a great distance and, obviously, at considerable cost.

European Rapid Reaction Force

20. **Mr. Jim Murphy** (Eastwood): If he will make a statement about the ability of the planned European rapid reaction force to act in instances of natural disaster. [113708]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): Although we are not creating a standing European rapid reaction force, European Union member states at the Helsinki summit committed themselves to undertaking the full range of Petersberg tasks and developing the ability to do so rapidly. Those tasks cover a wide spectrum, including humanitarian response to natural disasters.

Mr. Murphy: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply. Does he agree that one of the aims of future defence strategies would be to get as many people from as many countries to a disaster scene as quickly as possible? I am thinking especially of the earthquake in Turkey last year and of the floods in Mozambique this year. Can he assure the House and me that, in future, he will ensure that full discussions are held with our European partners about the suitability of the rapid reaction force to reach emergencies and disaster scenes as urgently as possible?

Mr. Hoon: That is one of the explicit tasks that were set out at Petersberg; we are required to fulfil it as part of our contribution to the RRF. I shall certainly take account of my hon. Friend's words and ensure that they are carried out.

Colchester Garrison

21. **Mr. Bob Russell** (Colchester): When he expects work to commence on the new barracks at Colchester garrison. [113709]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Dr. Lewis Moonie): Subject to successful negotiations, it is expected that work will commence during the summer of 2001.

Mr. Russell: Will the Minister give an assurance that the Ministry of Defence will comply with both the spirit and the letter of the Deputy Prime Minister's brownfield land disposal and redevelopment regulations when it comes to the disposal of the existing Colchester barracks?

Dr. Moonie: I am happy to give the hon. Gentleman that assurance.

Schools (Service Families)

23. **Dr. Doug Naysmith** (Bristol, North-West): What steps his Department is taking to improve access to schools for service families. [113711]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. John Spellar): I refer my hon. Friend to the answer that I gave earlier today to my hon. Friends the Members for Stockport (Ms Coffey) and for Staffordshire, Moorlands (Charlotte Atkins).

Dr. Naysmith: I thank the Minister for his earlier replies and point out that they were mostly concerned with United Kingdom service families. Does he accept, as I do, that it is important to look after the needs of service families overseas? Will he also say a word or two about what goes on in Cyprus, and perhaps Belize, to ensure that service families' children receive good education?

Mr. Spellar: Given the rate at which we are moving through the questions, I am more than happy to say a few words on the latter subject. However, I am also pleased to have the opportunity to draw attention to the excellent work that is undertaken by our schools for service children overseas. For example, at key stage 1, if such schools were treated as a local education authority they would be fifth in the country—and that is behind a number of extremely well-off areas. At key stage 3, they would be fourth, behind three extremely well-placed areas. That is a tribute to the work that is undertaken by our education services, especially given the mobile and sometimes unsettled life style that service families have to face.

We must ensure that we integrate that work into the educational work here in the UK. That is partly to do with schooling, to which I referred in previous answers, and partly to do with transfers to higher education—in which connection I am very pleased to say that, from September this year, access to student loans will have been achieved, which will be a considerable weight off the minds of many families.

Shoeburyness Ranges

25. **Sir Teddy Taylor** (Rochford and Southend, East): What further progress has been made in the disposal and development of the old and new ranges in Shoeburyness. [113713]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Dr. Lewis Moonie): Details of the sale of the old ranges and Horseshoe barracks, Shoeburyness have been announced. I have written to the hon. Gentleman about the outcome; I trust that he has received my response.

On the question of the new ranges, DERA is now working with SERCO Ltd. to rationalise the estate and introduce new businesses which can co-exist with the continuing range activities. At a public meeting on 8 March 2000, DERA and SERCO put forward their proposals for regeneration of the site to the joint councils of Southend and Rochford. DERA and SERCO will work closely with both councils in preparing a 10-year

development plan for the introduction of new commercial activities on the site. Public consultation will be a key feature in taking forward any proposals.

Sir Teddy Taylor: Is the Minister aware of the concern in Shoeburyness that the plans for the new and old ranges involve the building of 700 additional new houses when already in the area we have serious traffic congestion and a shortage of public facilities? Will the Minister and his colleagues ensure that the transport problem is resolved before the houses are completed? Finally, can he explain why the bid of £8 million was accepted when a larger bid for only 150 houses, submitted by a local firm, was turned down?

Dr. Moonie: On the hon. Gentleman's latter point, the bid that was accepted was that which was considered to give the Department best value for money. On his first point, the purpose of the detailed consultations that we have held with local councils is to address the very concerns that he is raising, and I trust that they will be resolved before the matter goes any further.

Serle's House, Winchester

28. **Dr. Julian Lewis** (New Forest, East): If he will make a statement on the future of Serle's house, Winchester. [113716]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Dr. Lewis Moonie): Following a rationalisation study of regimental headquarters and museums in Winchester, a decision was made to co-locate those presently in Serle's house to Upper Barracks. Serle's house is a grade 2 listed building in the centre of Winchester with an attached memorial garden. My Department is keen to obtain best value for this property while ensuring that it and the memorial garden's future are taken fully into account. To achieve that, any open market sale will be subject to prospective purchasers being bound by a restrictive covenant or other legal agreement. This will ensure retention and upkeep of the garden together with rights of access thereto.

Dr. Lewis: I am very encouraged by the Minister's helpful answer. Is he aware that Hampshire county council is particularly concerned about the future of Serle's house and especially about the memorial garden, which commemorates the lives of those men of the Hampshire Regiment who made the supreme sacrifice for their country? Will he undertake that the Department will enter into discussions with Hampshire county council to ensure the future of Serle's house and the memorial garden once the Ministry of Defence no longer needs them for its specific requirements?

Dr. Moonie: As far as I am aware, that is part of the process. I shall certainly ensure that that takes place and that the memorial garden is properly safeguarded.

Personal Statement

3.30 pm

Mr. Ken Livingstone (Brent, East): In accordance with the report of the Standards and Privileges Committee, I wish to apologise to the House for breaching the rules on registration of interests and for not observing the principle of openness which the code of conduct requires.

When I was first elected to the House in 1987, I checked with the authorities that income from earnings paid into my firm, Localaction Ltd., did not need to be individually declared in the register. Following the new code of practice, I wrote in 1996 to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards to clarify the position.

My outside earnings then developed in such a way that my registry entry was no longer adequate. I ought to have made a comprehensive entry covering all the services that I provide through Localaction, but I did not in fact do so. As soon as possible after the issue was raised with me by the present Parliamentary Commissioner, I amended my entry in the register in accordance with the rules.

Countryside and Rights of Way Bill

[Relevant documents: The Thirteenth Report from the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee, Session 1997–98, on The Protection of Field Boundaries, HC 969-I, and the Government's response thereto, Cm 4200.]

Order for Second Reading read.

Madam Speaker: I have selected the amendment which stands in the name of the Leader of the Opposition.

3.31 pm

The Minister for the Environment (Mr. Michael Meacher): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Madam Speaker: Order. I had forgotten to mention the fact that there will be a 10-minute limit on the speeches of Back Benchers. [HON. MEMBERS: "And the Minister."] I am afraid that I cannot do that.

Mr. Meacher: The length of my speech will depend on the number of interventions, but I shall try to keep my remarks within a reasonable compass to enable everyone else to speak.

This is an historic Bill. It finally achieves the aims and aspirations of the great post-war Labour legislation, the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949, and it fulfils the yearnings of the British people, expressed often dramatically over the past century, for full rights of access to the beauties of our countryside to which we are all heir. It fulfils the Government's manifesto commitments not only to offer all people greater freedom to explore the open countryside, but—and just as importantly—to strengthen protection of our national heritage. It finally brings to reality the dream of Lloyd George that nobody should be a trespasser in the land of their birth.

There have, I recognise, been several worthy previous attempts to legislate, most notably the Law of Property Act 1925, which granted access rights to urban commons, and the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949. Yet extensive areas of open countryside remain out of bounds to the public. Despite some commendable individual initiatives, the key fact remains that the voluntary approach has delivered relatively little new access over the past 50 years. Indeed, at the rate of expansion by voluntary means over the past 50 years, it would take something of the order of 1,000 years to achieve what we shall achieve through this Bill.

I remind the House that our decision to legislate has been supported by very substantial majorities in the responses to extensive consultations and opinion polls.

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): The Bill will give the public the right of access to private property. When the right hon. Gentleman was framing the legislation, was he aware of any precedent for giving the public access to privately owned property and land?

Mr. Meacher: The hon. Gentleman, unusually, was not listening. I said that there are precedents, most notably the Law of Property Act 1925, which granted access rights to urban commons. That was taken further in the 1949 Act

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passed by the post-war Labour Government, but that Act did not succeed in extending the right of access to all the land that it intended to cover, because it relied on the voluntary method. There are plenty of precedents for what is being achieved today, but the difference today is that we are ensuring that the aspirations behind those earlier Acts will now be brought to fruition.

The Bill is not only about access; we also recognise that it is time to bring our public rights of way system up to date for the first time in many years and to legislate for increased protection of our sites of special scientific interest. We want to prevent further damage to those sites and to redress the effects of the Tory legacy, which has left a large proportion of SSSIs in a serious and degraded condition. We do not intend to stop there. We are also increasing penalties for people who deliberately damage special sites, and we will be introducing the first custodial penalties for wildlife crimes.

On the broader front, we are taking the first step towards the designation of two new national parks, in the south downs and the new forest. They will be the first new national parks in England for over 40 years. We are taking steps to provide better management and protection for our designated areas of outstanding natural beauty, which cover twice the area of the national parks in England. I have already announced that I am more than doubling the funding available for those areas, and soon I will be making a further statement about measures to conserve and enhance those beautiful and important areas.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): I share the right hon. Gentleman's concern to preserve these areas, but has he been to the New forest recently and seen the amount of litter and detritus produced by many visitors? Is he sure that his provisions for greater access to the countryside are compatible with the protection of the countryside?

Mr. Meacher: I have a lot of sympathy with the hon. Gentleman's view that the amount of litter in our country is intolerable. That is not a recent development, and since the former Prime Minister, Baroness Thatcher, went around St. James's park putting carefully selected pieces of paper into a plastic bag, the nation has not noticed much improvement in the litter problem. I entirely accept that we need much tighter litter provisions and more stringent application of the law. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we intend to include those measures in the rural and urban White Papers which we shall publish later this year.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): The right hon. Gentleman referred to the setting up of new national park authorities. Will they include parish council representatives, who were included in national park authorities by the previous Government—a measure that Labour then opposed?

Mr. Meacher: The composition of the authorities for the two new parks has of course to be decided. This is a long process; it will take two or three years to consider planning issues, the parameters of the parks' coverage and the composition of the authorities. I have much sympathy for the idea of parish council representatives on those bodies, but the decision has not yet been taken.

Helen Jackson (Sheffield, Hillsborough): Does my right hon. Friend recognise the huge welcome that has been given to the Bill in the northern part of England because of access and the resulting enhancement of areas of outstanding natural beauty? Does he also recognise that many landscape features are an essential part of such areas? Will he consider granting features such as dry stone walls special protection under the Bill?

Mr. Meacher: I have a great deal of sympathy with my hon. Friend, too. Although the matter is not specifically in the Bill, we can consider it in Committee. I accept that the landscape of many areas would be greatly improved if dry stone walls, particularly in the north, the dales and elsewhere, were restored. They are an essential part of the beauty of the countryside and have been neglected for too long.

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire) *rose—*

Mr. Meacher: If the hon. Gentleman wants me to give way on the same point, I shall move on because I am not devoting any more of my speech to dry stone walls. [HON. MEMBERS: "Why not?"] This subject is very wide and I intend to cover all its main aspects.

I turn to one such main aspect: greater protection for commons. We are consulting on that issue, too, and we shall be considering responses before deciding whether legislation might be needed. Nor are we ignoring the concerns of those who live and work in our rural areas—indeed, far from it. Our rural White Paper, which is being developed in tandem with our urban White Paper, will be published later this year. It will set out the range of our vision for rural areas and how objectives will be delivered. The Bill is of course a key element in that vision, but it is only one part of our overall strategy.

What exactly will the Bill do?

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): Will the Minister give way on the point about common land?

Mr. Meacher: I shall be coming to the subject of common land, so I suggest that the hon. Gentleman restrain himself until I get there.

Part I will deliver permanent public access to the countryside on a scale never before seen. We will grant a right of access on foot to 4 million acres of mountain, moor, heath, down and registered common land—much of which will be opened to the public for the first time in centuries. That amounts to about one ninth of the total land of this country.

Mr. Fabricant: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Meacher: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman. I have a strong impression that he will keep bouncing up and down every few sentences until I do so, and it is better to get his intervention over with quickly.

Mr. Fabricant: If nothing else, the Minister is always concerned about my welfare. He will know that

considerable numbers of sheep graze on common land. Does he accept that people unwittingly damage sheep by allowing their dogs to roam free? What steps is he taking to ensure that there will not be increased savaging of sheep by dogs? Has he considered raising the penalties for that terrible crime?

Mr. Meacher: We are extremely aware of the problems that dogs can cause. That is why we are proposing that dogs will have to be on a lead whenever they are in the presence of livestock, and at all times on all land during the March to June lambing and nesting season. If that is still insufficient, there is flexibility for amendment of regulations to extend further restrictions on dogs.

The issue is primarily about access on foot. I am not against dogs, but I intend full protection of wildlife in the open countryside.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Meacher: This is the last time I shall give way before making some progress.

Mr. Brady: How close to livestock would a dog have to be in order to be considered in the presence of that livestock?

Mr. Meacher: I hope that the hon. Gentleman can exercise a little common sense. *[Interruption.]* Perhaps my hope is misplaced, however. It is perfectly clear that if one is approaching a field in which there are livestock, one's dog must be put on a lead. We are talking not about precise measurement, but about common sense. I am sure that if such arrangements do not work, the local access forum, on which landowners and farmers will be fully represented, will raise the issue. If further tighter restrictions are needed, I shall be perfectly happy to sanction them.

Through part I, we shall deliver for walkers and landowners alike greater certainty, clarity and permanence of access. We shall promote inclusiveness, not exclusiveness, by giving everyone the opportunity to enjoy and appreciate our natural heritage. Together with our proposals for modernising the rights of way system, the Bill's provisions represent the most far-reaching—yet, I would insist, balanced—package of measures on recreational public access for decades.

Let me explode a few myths. Rights of access will not apply to developed land, cultivated land or gardens: there is no question of people being allowed to trample over fields of flax, or beds of begonias. Landowners will continue to be able to use and develop their land as they wish—the land remains theirs. Landowners will have the automatic right to close their land or otherwise restrict access for up to 28 days a year for any reason, although they do not have to give a reason; and they will be able to apply for further closures or restrictions for land management reasons.

Mr. Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe): I understand that there are no rights of access allowed in respect of land that is farmed or gardened, but what about areas of, say, moorland, that are especially sensitive in terms of the wildlife they support—for example, bird breeding sites? Is there any statutory protection that will prevent people from roaming over such land and disturbing the wildlife at sensitive times of the year? The Bill, as drafted, appears to give no firm statutory protection to such areas.

Mr. Meacher: I disagree: the Bill makes it perfectly clear that closures can be imposed. It does not specify the length of such closures, but to protect wildlife, they might well be expected to last the three months from March to June inclusive. There are powers to close land, probably temporarily; however, if it is recommended by the conservation agencies, agreed by the local access forum and supported by the Countryside Agency, a closure could be made permanent. There is no question but that wildlife will be protected. My priority is, through the Bill, to extend rights of access on foot, provided that such access does not damage the interests of wildlife, which must prevail.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): The Minister is being most generous in giving way. I believe that my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) is right. Clause 21 states that exemptions are not allowed on Saturday, Sunday, Christmas day or Good Friday, but how are we to tell that to a ground-nesting bird such as a merlin or curlew?

Mr. Meacher: The hon. Gentleman has completely misunderstood. Clause 21 relates to a landowner's capacity to determine days on which there will be closures, and the weekend is excluded precisely because that is the time when most people are able to visit the countryside. The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) was speaking of closing land that is otherwise open, the restrictions being imposed to protect wildlife. I insist that those powers are comprehensive and complete within the Bill.

The right of access will be limited. I repeat, access is on foot only, and it is subject to sensible restrictions to avoid damage or harm being done. If people engage in other, damaging activities or breach any of the restrictions, they will forfeit their right to be on the land. I have already explained the provisions relating to dogs.

Another issue of great concern to landowners is occupier's liability—indeed, it was one of the matters pressed most strongly by the Country Landowners Association. We have ensured that occupiers of access land will benefit from a reduction in liability. Their liability towards walkers will be removed in relation to the natural features of the landscape—in other words, if a walker sprains an ankle or breaks a leg, it will be his responsbility, not the landowner's. Landowners' liability will be reduced to that of trespassers in relation to man-made features and activities. That is important for the protection of the landowners' legitimate rights.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): Would an old mine shaft that has been disused for a century and a half be considered natural or man-made?

Mr. Meacher: There is already legislation requiring the landowner to protect the top of the mine shaft by

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fencing it off or capping it, or both. It is essential that that be now done. In respect of mine shafts and also quarries, landowners owe a liability which they must meet.

Mr. Paice: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Meacher: I must make progress. *[Interruption.]* I will give way to the hon. Gentleman later; I see that that is well supported.

We intend that access rights should be managed overwhelmingly by voluntary agreement, through local access forums, which do not appear in the Bill. All the main parties, including of course landowners, will be represented on the local access forums.

I insist that, collectively, the provisions will amount to a substantial and commonsense restriction on the right of access to ensure a proper balance with the interests of landowners, whose interests deserve to be equally respected.

The speed with which people will benefit from the new right of access—that is, when it will come into operation—will rightly depend on how quickly access land is mapped by the Countryside Agencies in England and Wales. Mapping must be done carefully. The Bill provides for a comprehensive procedure but some land, especially registered common land and land above the 600 m contour, can be identified easily. Taking the provisions together, I expect substantial areas of access land to be available within the next two to three years.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): The Minister says that access will be available immediately to land over the 600 m contour. Is he aware that access to most land above 600 m will be across other land, which will not yet be mapped? Will he delay access to land over 600 m until the mapping exercise has been completed?

Mr. Meacher: I did not say that access to mountain land over 600 m would be available immediately. I said that that land is most easily mapped, but the hon. Gentleman is right—one must take account of accessibility, which might require a further delay, depending on the circumstances.

Mr. David Tredinnick (Bosworth): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Meacher: No, I must get on.

The Bill contains two provisions to extend rights of access beyond mountain, moor, heath, down and registered common land. First, clause 3 permits the Secretary of State and the Welsh Assembly to extend the right by order to coastal land. That reflects a recommendation from the Countryside Agency. I give an undertaking to the House that any order of the Secretary of State to that end will be subject to approval by each House of Parliament, and that no order will be laid until a full public consultation has been carried out and a regulatory impact statement has been prepared.

Secondly, clause 16 is a new power for landowners to dedicate their land to permanent public access in accordance with the Bill's provisions. That is voluntary; there is no question of any compulsion. That power will be available to both public and private sector owners and may be used, for example, to permit access to woodlands.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): The Minister mentioned the role of the Welsh Assembly with regard to access to land adjacent to the sea coast. Does he accept that in Wales circumstances are somewhat different from those in England, not only with regard to the management function, but with tourism, agriculture, leisure and environment all coming under the National Assembly, and a different body of subordinate legislation developing? Will he re-examine the Bill before Third Reading to see whether it is possible to insert a clause—in line with the commitment given by the Secretary of State for Wales when he addressed the National Assembly before Christmas—to enable us to make modifications to the Bill, as may be deemed necessary from our own experience and needs in Wales?

Mr. Meacher: I am happy to consider the Bill further for that purpose, but I am not sure that it is necessary. It is clearly right for the National Assembly for Wales to exercise powers in Wales similar to those that Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions Ministers exercise in England. The National Assembly will be able to exercise all regulation-making powers. I believe that the Bill achieves the right hon. Gentleman's aim; if it does not, I will consider the matter further.

Part II deals with rights of way. Modernising the administration and management of the rights of way system is a natural complement to our proposals for more access to the open countryside. We are proposing radical improvements; we want the system strengthened, developed and brought up to date to respond to the modern-day needs of users and land managers.

There is a growing demand for safe and quiet recreational routes away from busy roads. We want to encourage the creation of new routes and changes to existing routes when there are good reasons for that.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York) *rose—*

Mr. Andrew F. Bennett (Denton and Reddish) *rose—*

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire) *rose—*

Mr. Bob Russell (Colchester) *rose—*

Mr. Meacher: I shall give way in a moment.

We want to extend the opportunities for linear access to users, such as horse riders and cyclists, who would not benefit from our proposals for more access on foot. Local highway authorities will be required to draw up and publish plans to improve their rights of way networks. They will have to take account of the needs of local residents and visitors, including people who experience mobility difficulties. We shall ask those authorities to report to us on their progress.

Miss McIntosh: Has the Minister considered who will be liable for any accidents that happen on the regular access routes? Will the landowner be solely responsible or will the Government make some contribution?

Mr. Meacher: If the hon. Lady is referring to access land, I have made it abundantly clear that the landowner

will not be liable for accidents. However, public rights of way are different. Any accidents are a matter for the person who had the accident and the local highway authority. Responsibility depends on the circumstances of the accident.

Mr. Bennett: Is my right hon. Friend happy that the provisions for footpaths are in good shape at this stage, or does he hope that changes will be made as the Bill progresses through the two Houses?

Mr. Meacher: My hon. Friend knows me well. I do not believe that the Bill is simply a cosmetic exercise. Part II, which deals with rights of way, was the last of the four parts to be settled. The matter is complex, and we held an extensive consultation exercise on it. We have already changed our proposals significantly in the light of the consultation to take account of what we genuinely believed to be the good case that was made to us. If others continue to press the case for change in an acceptable way, I am prepared for further changes to be made to the Bill.

Mr. Barnes: Are bridleways included in the provisions for protecting rights of way? They are used by motor cyclists to create mayhem in my constituency, following court cases in which the definitive map has not been treated as definitive by the courts. Can the Bill include a provision to close that gap and to ensure that bridleways are used for the purpose that Parliament originally intended?

Mr. Meacher: My hon. Friend anticipates my next point. We are worried about the matter. We do not want to discriminate against scrambler and motor bikes, but we propose to close the legal loophole and prevent the unauthorised use of off-road vehicles on land away from roads. They cause substantial damage and I am concerned—

Mr. Bob Russell *rose—*

Mr. Meacher: I must make progress, particularly as I want to deal with the point referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes).

Roads used as public paths—RUPPs, as they are known in the jargon—will be designated as an entirely new class of public highway called restricted byways. Those will offer a public right of way for walkers, cyclists, horse riders and horse-drawn vehicles and will be without prejudice to any pre-existing vehicular rights. Anyone with evidence of those rights will be able to apply, as now, to have a restricted byway reclassified as a byway open to all traffic—which is rather curiously known as a BOAT—with motor vehicular rights. Such evidence will have to be provided, and what I told my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire will apply. Most people do not want the quietness and tranquillity of the countryside torn apart by noisy and extremely obtrusive off-road vehicles being used in a manner for which I believe they were never intended.

Mr. Andrew Hunter (Basingstoke): Can the Minister explain why the Government have moved away from the consultation paper proposal that all RUPPs should become restricted byways?

Mr. Meacher: We have not moved away from our proposal—the hon. Gentleman does not recount that quite correctly. The original proposal was that RUPPs would remain as bridleways, although in a limited way. We changed our mind only as a result of the consultation and decided to introduce restricted byways. At present, bridleways can be ploughed up by the landowner and can be gated off, and there were strong objections from cyclists, horse riders and drivers of horse-drawn vehicles that that would limit their access. We believe that that view is reasonable, which is why we made a change to introduce restricted byways. That should assist cyclists and horse riders.

We are also tackling the long-term problem—

Mr. Paice: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Meacher: This must be the last intervention I take for a long time, but the hon. Gentleman has been trying to intervene for a while.

Mr. Paice: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way—if only because of my perseverance. May I pursue him on the business of RUPPs, BOATs and, in particular, the restricted byways? He said that it would be open to anyone with historical vehicular use of what will be a restricted byway to have it converted to a byway open to all traffic, but is there not a significant difference between a right of access used to gain access to land further up a restricted byway and its free-for-all use by the four-wheel-drive vehicles that he rightly denigrates? Should there not be protection for the person who wants to take a vehicle up such a route for access purposes; and would not the change to a BOAT create full open-to-all-traffic access and open the route up to the disturbance that he described?

Mr. Meacher: I very much agree. I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman caught my words, but I did not say that a person could require that a restricted byway be reclassified as a BOAT. I simply said that he could apply for reclassification. He would have to provide good reasons—it would certainly not be automatic. I very much support what the hon. Gentleman says: there is a great deal of difference between the need for vehicular access further up the byway and charging up and down on motor bikes—all the difference in the world. That would be reflected in the manner in which such an application was taken.

We are also tackling the long-term problem of obstructions to public rights of way. There will be a new right for people to serve notice on local highway authorities to have certain obstructions removed from public rights of way. If the local highway authority ignores the notice, the person can apply to the magistrates court for an order requiring the authority to remove the obstruction. Where someone has been convicted of wilfully obstructing a highway, magistrates will be able to order him to remove the obstruction. That is very important because at present magistrates only have the power to fine offenders, which does not directly address the problem. We are addressing that longstanding problem.

In addition, landowners and occupiers will have a new right to apply to a council for orders diverting or extinguishing footpaths and bridleways on their land and to appeal against the decision if the council refuses. If the

[Mr. Meacher]

council ignores the application—there are many examples of that—after four months the applicant will be able to ask the Secretary of State to direct the council to make its decision.

During the passage of the Bill through Parliament, we intend to introduce proposals to encourage the completion of the record of historic rights of way within 25 years, subject to the provision of adequate resources to complete the task within that time scale. We will also introduce order-making powers for local authorities to divert rights of way where necessary to protect SSSIs, and a power enabling local authorities to make temporary diversions of rights of way for exceptional land management reasons.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): All those complex and constructive suggestions will depend on the expertise in the countryside agencies and in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. Will my right hon. Friend give an undertaking that, before any alterations are made either in MAFF regional offices or in other agricultural civil servant posts, he will closely consult the people most concerned?

Mr. Meacher: Of course. The consultations on the operation of the Bill are interdepartmental. Liaison between DETR and MAFF is much closer than it has been in the past. The joint approach of the Departments on their corporate plans sets a new precedent. They have worked closely on the Bill, on the associated rural development regulation and the agri-environmental measures, and on changing the direction of the common agricultural policy, which is just as important as, if not more important than, the Bill. I certainly intend that joint approach to continue.

Mr. Bill Michie (Sheffield, Heeley): Under schedule 6 the landowner, the occupier or certain restricted groups can have changes made to rights of way, such as closure, diversion or creation. As far as I understand it, at present more groups can influence those issues. Will my right hon. Friend give us an assurance that they will not be restricted? If not, can schedule 6 be extended so that users as well as landowners can make applications?

Mr. Meacher: I can certainly assure my hon. Friend that, at present, members of the public can apply for the diversion or restriction of a right of way. It is for the council to decide whether to grant such an application. If the council grants it, there can be an appeal. Up till now that right has not extended to the landowner, and in our view it is right that it should do so. If an application is made, the council can be required to reach a decision and not sit on it indefinitely. We are taking a balanced approach between the two sides.

I assure you, Madam Speaker, that I shall be much shorter on part III and shall take fewer interventions. Part III represents a major contribution to delivering the Government's commitment to giving greater protection to wildlife. It strengthens significantly the powers to prevent damage to sites of special scientific interest, while creating the conditions in which those sites can be positively managed.

The Bill will substantially strengthen the powers of the conservation agencies. They will be able for the first time to refuse consent for damaging activities or to withdraw consents already given when damage is occurring, and to serve management notices requiring action to be taken to combat neglect. It is neglect rather than deliberate harm that does so much damage to SSSIs. The agencies will have new powers to enter land when that is necessary for the proper protection and management of sites, and to purchase land compulsorily if, in the last resort, that is the only way to secure the future of a site.

Increased powers require increased accountability. We have therefore balanced the new powers with a more structured approach to discussions about management, including the preparation of management schemes and new appeal procedures for owners and occupiers where rights are curtailed.

Nevertheless, when deliberate damage occurs—and it still does—it is right that penalties should reflect the site's importance. We will increase fines to up to £20,000 in the magistrates courts, and they will be unlimited in the Crown courts. There will be new court powers to order restoration of the damaged special interest when that is practicable, and there will be a new general offence applying to persons who are not owners and occupiers of the land. The Bill will also place specific duties on public bodies to further the conservation and enhancement of sites of special scientific interest, both in carrying out their operations and in exercising their decision-making functions.

Wildlife crime is a growing problem, and we must and will act to deal with it. The Bill will introduce the option of prison sentences of up to six months for most offences under part I of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, as well as increasing fines for those offences to £5,000. It will also give extra powers to the police and my Department's wildlife inspectors to assist them in the fight against wildlife crime. We are bringing existing legislation up to date by providing stronger powers for enforcers to require tissue samples for DNA analysis. Taken together, the provisions will send a clear message to those who cynically exploit wildlife, or use it for their own personal but selfish enjoyment, that their activities will not be tolerated, and that they will be pursued and punished.

If we wanted proof that the Tory party is still rooted in the squirearchy of the 18th century, its reasoned amendment would provide it. The right of access is described as a "heavy-handed and unjustifiable" infringement of owners' rights, and the compensation as "negligible". In fact, the new right is very carefully limited, as I have made abundantly clear, and there is no significant loss to be compensated. Only an Opposition of this character would think that the environment will be devastated and the rural economy ruined by walking.

Access is claimed to be

> in a form which will be damaging to . . . farmers and will threaten wildlife and conservation sites.

In the tiny handful of cases in which conservation needs will require no access to be permitted, the Bill will enable complete closure of the land.

It is claimed that the improvement to rights of way are insufficient. I can only say that I have heard no sensible proposals for improvements today, or during the extensive consultation period, that are not provided for in the Bill.

The Bill, it is noted, does not include measures relating to areas of outstanding natural beauty. I have already announced additional funding for AONBs, which are now being financed at twice the level that we inherited, and I promise to make a statement soon about further measures.

Finally, the amendment repeats the litany that the Bill does not deal with the so-called real rural problems. The Bill is, of course, only part of our overall policy: we are working on many other aspects, not least the forthcoming rural White Paper.

Unlike the Tories, we believe that the countryside should be an asset for everyone, not just those who happen to own substantial chunks of it. The Bill sets a new, historic foundation for the uniting of the interests of all parties—those who live and work on the land, those who want to enjoy access to some of our finest landscapes, and those who are anxious to strengthen the protection of our biodiversity and natural heritage. The Bill provides the framework for that essential co-operation, and I commend it to the House.

4.14 pm

Mr. Archie Norman (Tunbridge Wells): I beg to move, To leave out from 'That' to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

'this House declines to give a Second Reading to the Countryside and Rights of Way Bill because, although it contains worthwhile provisions on protection of Sites of Special Scientific Interest and wildlife protection, the provisions on access to the countryside impose heavy-handed and unjustifiable infringements on the rights of private property owners, and provisions for compensation are negligible; because it introduces access to "open country" in a form which will be damaging to the interests of hard-pressed farmers and will threaten wildlife and conservation sites which other parts of the Bill are designed to protect; because it fails to provide sufficient improvements in the Rights of Way network which is a more important mechanism for improving access for most people; and because it gives no extra protection to Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and misses the opportunity to deal with many of the real problems affecting the countryside in England and Wales.'

The Bill is the product of nearly three years of debate and consultation. It is of intense interest and no little concern to the agricultural and conservationist community, coming at a time of crisis in the countryside that is unparalleled this century. It is a source of regret that the Deputy Prime Minister is not participating—I do not know whether he is back from Brazil yet—especially as the Minister for the Environment announced that the Bill was of historic importance.

A few weeks ago, the Deputy Prime Minister accused me of being the silent spokesman for the Opposition. He will doubtless come to regret that remark, but his absence today will be taken by the countryside community as an indication of his priorities and the importance that he attaches to the Bill. That must be particularly so, as environment is one of few briefs that he retains directly within his grasp, unlike transport and the regions. It is also a Bill over which he has no conflict of interest, in so far as the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers has no particular interest in the countryside.

It is a source of regret that no Minister from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food is present, reflecting perhaps the detrimental effect that the Bill will have on the agricultural community. However, we recognise that, for the Minister for the Environment, the Bill represents the conclusion of three years of hard work and a longstanding commitment to the countryside and environment. There is no doubting the sincerity of his intentions. I congratulate him on bringing the Bill this far.

We welcome many aspects of the Bill. The first is the protection for sites of special scientific interest. My predecessors as spokesmen are on record as saying that we would support the tightening of restrictions and protection for SSSIs. We will stand by that reassurance. Secondly, we welcome the wildlife protection measures and the greater penalties for wildlife crime, which are much needed. Thirdly, we welcome the provisions on the public rights of way. In some respects, we would like them to be strengthened, but in general we welcome their inclusion.

Despite those welcome elements, overall, it is disappointing legislation. Far from being historic and balanced, it is incomplete, puts forward measures on open access that are heavy-handed and includes aspects that will damage the interests of farmers and conservationists alike: the very people whom it is designed to protect.

The Bill represented a great opportunity to deliver a comprehensive new approach to the rural environment by, for example, introducing a comprehensive framework for protection, including that of areas of outstanding natural beauty. We wait to see what the Minister has to say on that subject, but we see no reason why those protections should not have been included in the Bill.

Mr. Gray: Does not my hon. Friend find it odd that the Countryside Agency, which is, after all, a Government body, is sending briefing to hon. Members headed: "Countryside Amenity and Conservation Bill: Parliamentary briefing on AONBs"? Apparently, AONBs were included in the Bill until a very recent stage, when the agency printed its briefing.

Mr. Norman: My hon. Friend makes an important point. It is interesting to note that the Countryside Agency is advocating the inclusion of greater protection for AONBs in the Bill. That protection seems to be conspicuously absent.

The Bill provided an opportunity to shift once and for all the balance of protection from intrusive development, particularly house building on the countryside, and to facilitate new partnerships between farmers and people wanting access. By its draconian measures, it has obviated those partnerships and made it more difficult and less likely for them to happen. By all those measures, the Bill comprehensively fails. It is likely to disappoint and to anger in equal part.

More important, the Bill is significant for what it excludes. True conservation depends on the health of the rural economy, which the Bill can only damage. It is a time of crisis for the countryside. It is important that the Bill be seen in the context of what is happening to the rural economy.

Farm incomes have fallen 75 per cent. since the Government came to power. Hill farm incomes are down to an average of £4,500 per annum, which is well below a living income. Moreover, according to the National Farmers Union, the Government are cutting support further by £80 million in the next five years.

The threats to the rural environment are greater than ever. It is ironic that the Bill is being considered within two weeks of the Deputy Prime Minister's announcement

[Mr. Norman]

that 900,000 new houses will be imposed on the south-east—on the countryside of Sussex, Kent, Surrey and other home counties, which will be irrevocably lost—often on land that is directly adjacent to many areas of outstanding natural beauty and sites of special scientific interest, which the Bill was designed to protect. Independent surveys—it is not only our claim—state that 50 per cent. or more of those 900,000 new houses will be built on green fields. That is the consequence of the Deputy Prime Minister's announcement. The damage to the environment and to conservation in that one stroke—in that one announcement by the Deputy Prime Minister—will be far greater than the damage that the Bill is designed to redress.

The proliferation of visual damage to the countryside is accelerating, unhindered by the Government. Ministers are not providing the necessary support and legislation to restrict the growth of visual intrusion, of which mobile telephone masts are only one example. Although the number of such masts is expected to triple in the next 10 years, the Bill contains no provision to prevent, as Opposition Members have advocated, the unsightly siting of mobile telephone masts. The masts are eroding the countryside and reducing the value of the access that the Bill is designed to introduce.

More broadly, the Bill has been introduced in the context of a failure to deal with the consequences of agricultural intensity and the common agricultural policy. It is significant that, this week, the Prime Minister is going to Lisbon to negotiate at a summit at which agriculture will be conspicuously left off the agenda, despite the fact that we are now contemplating a historic enlargement of the European Union, bringing in the agricultural economies of Hungary and Poland to compete with our own. There are intended to be no changes to the CAP's provisions, which are doing more damage to the countryside than any of the other matters that we have discussed today.

The Bill should be seen against the background of a crisis in the rural economy, which the Bill fails to deal with in any fundamental respect. Nor does it go far enough in the spheres of conservation that really matter. My hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) mentioned AONBs. The Council for the Protection of Rural England stated:

> We are concerned that the Bill is a missed opportunity to deliver on numerous Government commitments to secure much needed improvements to the protection and management of England's valuable hedgerows, landscape features and AONBs.

That sentiment has been echoed by the Country Landowners Association, the Countryside Agency and other environmentalist groups.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that, in seven years under the previous, Conservative Government, 158,000 km of hedgerows were grubbed up? Who was responsible for that?

Mr. Norman: The hon. Gentleman knows that we are more than fully aware of the problems facing the countryside and the grubbing up of hedgerows. Opposition Members have frequently argued for measures to ensure that that grubbing up ceases.

The Bill not only fails to provide at all for AONBs or protection for hedgerows, but underestimates all the costs of its provisions—the cost to landowners and farmers and that to local authorities, when council tax is already rising at three times the inflation rate. According to the Countryside Agency, it will cost £30 million per annum just to deal with the backlog of work on rights of way. According to English Nature, it will cost £20 million per annum to protect wildlife sites. According to the CLA, it will cost £8 million per annum to operate open access.

Mr. Bennett: If the hon. Gentleman is so concerned about areas of outstanding natural beauty, does he accept that he could strike a deal now across the Chamber that agreed measures could be added to the Bill, which he would facilitate in Committee? He could get his friends in the other place also to facilitate such measures. How about it?

Mr. Norman: The hon. Gentleman will know that in the past we have offered to include such provisions in a narrower protection Bill. I shall refer to the aspects of the Bill that are a great deal more objectionable than those to which I have referred. I take the opportunity to welcome a representative of MAFF to the Chamber—the Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food.

Let us not pretend that the Bill solves the problems of conservation or access. It does neither, after three years of waiting. It delivers a little when much is needed. It is swimming against the tide of housing and development that has been unleashed by the Deputy Prime Minister, who is absent from the Chamber. It is a piecemeal attempt to address a systemic problem, and it is a sadly missed opportunity.

I move on to the right to roam and open access. Worse than the absence of true protectionist and conservationist measures, the parts of the Bill that we have welcomed are the sugar coating around the damaging provisions of the right to roam. We believe that the right to roam raises a fundamental issue of principle, which is that the state should not confiscate the property rights of individuals without compensation or without regard to the costs to, or the livelihoods of, those who are affected.

It is easy for the Minister to try to characterise those who will be affected as wealthy landowners. He will know that in reality many of these people are small sheep farmers—they are often tenant farmers, not even landowners—and conservationists. These are people who have worked and saved hard to do the right thing for the countryside, for wildlife and for the farming community.

These people, too, have rights. It is for Conservatives to stand up for minorities, whether rich or poor. Conservation is about providing incentives for all who are involved, and not only introducing regulations for the few.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way, especially as the hon. Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) has skedaddled. Perhaps he did not want to ask a question after all.

My hon. Friend will know that all Conservative Members are accused of being landowners and standing up for the big toffs who are similarly landowners. I own less than 0.1 of an acre of this country, so I do not think that I can be accused of being a big landowner. Does he

agree that the right to roam is really the delivery of a promise to the old-style socialists, those who envy the fact that someone might have some property that he wishes to protect? Since the inception of the Labour movement, it has always been argued that we must drive away all property. The Minister accused the Tory party of representing landowners, and in so doing he represented the old-style envy of the socialists.

Mr. Norman: My hon. Friend makes his point with characteristic potency. I am sure that no one on either side of the House would accuse him of being a toff.

Conservation is about providing incentives for all who are involved and not only regulations for a few. Unrestricted and open access will send a signal to conservationists and landowners alike not to bother, yet it is important to conserve open access land. It includes many SSSIs and other pieces of land that the Bill is designed to protect and preserve. It cuts against the grain of conservation incentives and the desire of owners to manage land with care for successive generations. It works by regulation and punishment that are entirely disproportionate in a system that is skewed against the landowner in favour of the trespasser and the hooligan.

Mr. Tom King (Bridgwater): Is not the real problem that this is not the right to roam but a highly qualified right to roam, with a whole lot of detail, which will be a lawyers' paradise? The hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) is right: the Countryside Agency and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food will find it very difficult to have the information at their fingertips. It is a racing certainty that the general public, who will have heard the phrase "right to roam" in relation to the Bill, will be unaware of all the exemptions.

Mr. Norman: My right hon. Friend makes a powerful point. The sheer complexity of the legislation will make it a lawyers' paradise for years to come.

The Minister could easily have negotiated a voluntary and conservationist outcome before introducing the Bill, but he spurned the opportunity. Contrary to his claim, voluntary access had been increasing steadily and it is clear that, had the right legislation been introduced, that increase would have accelerated, as there was considerable appetite for it in the agricultural and landowning community.

It is no good arguing that the reason for introducing the Bill in this form is that it is popular. The real demand, as demonstrated by Gallup polls organised by the CLA, is for waymarked routes close to where people live. According to Gallup, 63 per cent. preferred waymarked routes to open access; 41 per cent. would use greater access if it were within five miles of where they live; and only 13 per cent. would travel five miles or more to get access to countryside.

It is hard to conclude that the motive for providing open, unfettered access in this form has anything much to do with the countryside or conservation: it has more to do with good old-fashioned, anti-landowners, gut-feel socialist vanity. The Minister once said:

> If we don't redistribute wealth from the rich to the poor, what's the point of having a Labour party?

and nobody doubts his sincerity.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King) suggested, the problem with the Bill and the open access provisions is not just the principle but the fact that they are incredibly complex and unworkable. The Minister has argued that he has introduced adequate protections in the Bill, notably the 28-day closure period—weekdays only—the reduction in owners' liability for natural hazards and the requirement to keep dogs on a lead for four months of the year. In practice, none of those protections is effective or enforceable with open access, as opposed to restricted access or designated points of access. Without greater provision for practical implementation, those protections will prove so superficial as to be scarcely worth having.

Many points of detail in the Bill are unsatisfactory and will be extremely hard to implement and hard for simple farmers, landowners and others in the countryside to grapple with. They are not lawyers: they are people who want to get on with earning a livelihood, which is increasingly difficult.

Fundamental to our concerns are five basic points. The first is simple injustice: the Bill provides for total inequity of enforcement. If a walker gets it wrong, he is trespassing, and leaves for the day; but if a landowner gets it wrong, he is a criminal. If a walker misses a sign, it is bad luck; but if a landowner leaves the wrong sign up, it is a criminal offence. The landowner who abuses his rights could end up with a heavy fine or even in jail; but the hooligan who abuses his rights is at best off the land until tomorrow.

Furthermore, walkers who trip on a stile or hurt themselves on dry stone walls—presumably not natural hazards—can sue; but the landowner whose wall is destroyed has to rebuild it at his own expense. It is no good arguing that the liability is reduced from what currently exists by the provisions to which the Minister referred. At present there is no open access, so the issue of liability applies only in relation to trespassers.

The whole purpose of the Bill is obviously to increase access and the number of people walking across the land, which will enormously increase costs for farmers and landowners. That will be reflected, at the very least, in their insurance premiums, and in all likelihood in their ability to maintain their livelihoods and restore their walls, which is bound to affect their future appetite for conservationist measures.

Secondly, the Bill provides wholly inadequate protection for wild birds and for hill-farming livestock. Many access areas include SSSIs and many involve remote hill farming, where lambing takes place far away from the homesteads and supervision. The result will be that even towards the end of the lambing season, in June and July, lambs and other livestock will be at risk from roaming dogs and walkers crossing the land.

The 28-day closure provisions are wholly inadequate. They are too short and inoperable. How will people know when they apply, given the fact that access will come from all different directions, not one single point at which signage will be available? How will farmers pay for the costs of signage and information? The Bill is opaque on that point. How will the ewes know not to lamb at weekends or when dogs are around? How will the plovers know not to nest where people will tread?

Mr. Hilton Dawson (Lancaster and Wyre): Does not the hon. Gentleman acknowledge, in all the criticisms that

[Mr. Hilton Dawson]

he is making of the Bill, the joy, optimism and hope that is felt by thousands of decent people who want nothing more at the weekends than to get out into the wild places and the freedom of open spaces and to get away from the black tarmac of the supermarket car park?

Mr. Norman: The hon. Gentleman will know that we already have one of the most extensive networks of footpaths in the world. It has always been the intention, on both sides of the House, to find ways to extend voluntary access, but all the evidence is that demand is for access close to where people live and along defined paths and waymarks.

The Bill's provisions in relation to dogs are especially worrying. Hon. Members will know that many farmers have already expressed great concern about the provisions for dogs to roam freely, and those remain a major threat. Whatever the Minister may claim, requests for dogs to be kept on a leash for four months of the year will be flouted. A recent survey on Saddleworth moor—which is near the Minister's constituency and he presumably knows it well—showed that 66 per cent. of dogs on the moor were running off the lead and 8 per cent. were effectively running wild. How will those dogs know where ordinary moor or mountain land ends and where an SSSI starts? What provision is there to ensure that landowners have the effective ability to keep dogs under control?

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid–Sussex): Does my hon. Friend agree that the best way to get round the question of the nesting and lambing season is to say that for that period no dogs should be allowed on the hill at all?

Mr. Norman: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point, and it is clear that the provisions on dogs could be greatly strengthened in several respects. The problem is not only that the provisions are loose, but that people coming on to the land will have no way of knowing when the restrictions apply and in what form, because open access means that they will arrive from many different points and the landowners will not be able to provide proper information.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas (Harrow, West): The hon. Gentleman will be aware that similar legislation on access already exists in Germany, Austria, Norway and Sweden. Is he aware of any significant problems in those countries with nature conservation or the impact on wildlife?

Mr. Norman: The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that it is ludicrous to compare England and Wales with Norway where the population is much sparser and concentrated in the south. [HON. MEMBERS: "Germany."] The land mass of Germany is more than double that of the United Kingdom. At risk of repetition— *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. If the hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mrs. Organ) is seeking to catch my eye later, she is not going about it the right way.

Mr. Norman: There is already a much greater provision of footpaths and wayleaves in this country than in any of those that the hon. Member for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas) mentioned.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): I cannot understand the hon. Gentleman's concerns about lambs. My constituency is in the Lake district, and for thousands of years people have spread across the fells. Hundreds of thousands of people go to the lakes every year, yet we do not hear from farmers about problems with their sheep or loss of lambs. In 20 years, I have never had a letter from a constituent complaining about any of the issues that the hon. Gentleman mentions. I think that he is exaggerating.

Mr. Norman: I regret that the hon. Gentleman has never had a letter in 20 years from a farmer complaining about damage to lambs. I have managed to break his record in a very short time. One has only to listen to the remarks of the National Farmers Union to realise that this is a credible issue of widespread concern to those who live and work in the countryside at a time of crisis for rural incomes.

Our third major concern about the Bill is that it will be impossible to make any of the protections work without agreed points of access as opposed to open access to the mountain and moorland. Agreed points of entry and exit would at least create a chance to provide marked wayleaves and better information for walkers about how the moor is maintained, its special features, any SSSIs, the wildlife, the behaviour that is expected of them and the enjoyment that they can derive. Such defined points of entry would be better for farmers, conservationists and walkers.

Fourthly, on security and liability, the Minister will be aware of the rising concern about rural crime and the inability of the police, at a time of falling police numbers, to cope. People in the countryside feel helpless when it comes to rural crime and agricultural crime against livestock, horses and equipment. Tighter restrictions on night access and approach to buildings would help address the problem. However, it is a fundamental problem that derives from open and unfettered access, and is of great concern to the agricultural and rural community.

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North): I want to comment on crime and link it to the hon. Gentleman's earlier remarks about dogs on Saddleworth moor. I live very close to Saddleworth moor; I do not know who conducted the survey, but I assure right hon. and hon. Members that it would be impossible to conduct any accurate survey of the number of dogs on a lead.

I endorse the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours). I am one of the people whom my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment mentioned earlier as owning chunks of the countryside. Mine is about 60 sq m, not far from Saddleworth moor, and it has a right of way through it. What does the hon. Gentleman think has caused more damage to conservation over the years—people walking over the countryside or the common agricultural policy?

Mr. Norman: The hon. Gentleman raises an interesting and important point. There is widespread concern among Opposition Members about the common agricultural policy. I have already said that it is regrettable that, at a time when we are discussing radical changes to the European Union, the CAP is not even on the agenda. The Prime Minister is going to Lisbon this weekend, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman will be asking him to raise this issue, and so he should.

Finally, the fundamental problem in the practical operation of the Bill is cost. The Bill comprehensively fails to provide for the cost of implementation for local

authorities or farmers. Most of the cost will undoubtedly fall on the farming community, the landowners and the conservationists. Those costs include maintenance of dry stone walls, restoration of stiles, provision of information on access, provision of car parks by the local authorities, the prevention of parking on land, signage to provide information for the enjoyment of individuals coming on to the moorland, repairs to damage, loss of livestock and the extra labour required in supervision to protect the wildlife species or lambs at sensitive times of year. The £2.2 million annual cost estimated in the Bill falls wildly short of any sensible estimate, such as those provided by the National Farmers Union and other bodies.

It is hard to avoid the impression that the Bill is being pushed through to meet the political agenda of the Labour party and the sincere socialist instincts of the Minister, despite the fact that the Treasury is not prepared to pay the price. Conservation costs money. The cost of the Bill will not fall on the Government. In practice, it will fall on the council tax payer, on the agricultural community, which can scarcely afford it, and on the well-intentioned conservationist.

Mr. Richard Livsey (Brecon and Radnorshire): The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about the cost of the measure. Does he realise that one third of the land involved lies in Wales? If the Bill is passed, what will his party do to ensure that adequate payment is made to the Welsh Assembly to cover those costs?

Mr. Norman: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that point about Wales. I do not want to make any unwarranted commitments, but if we introduce a measure of such fiendish impracticality and complexity, I share his sentiment that it must be paid for properly. In the five critical respects that I outlined, the access provisions are inequitable, inadequate and unenforceable.

Some aspects of the Bill are welcome, but it represents a great missed opportunity. Worse than that, it contains provisions that are objectionable in principle and will undermine its own objective of bringing about greater access and enjoyment of the countryside. It will bring intrusive regulation and division to the countryside rather than partnership and unity. It will deal another body blow to the hill farmer, who can ill afford it. It tries to achieve conservation on the cheap, without proper funding from the Treasury. It will do precious little to address the real problems of the countryside and the rural economy at present.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I remind hon. Members that there is a 10-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches.

4.48 pm

Mr. Andrew F. Bennett (Denton and Reddish): The House can rarely have heard a meaner speech than the one made by the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman). It seems so sad, because it was the Conservatives who gave us the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. There was some controversy over that measure at the time, but it was a landmark. It would have been much nicer if the Opposition had wanted to build on that achievement to make the Bill a success. I am disappointed.

However, I rejoice in the fact that the Government have introduced the Bill. The access provisions will give much pleasure to a large number of people. Vast areas of forbidden Britain, such as the Berwyns and the Arans in Wales, the eastern Pennines around Sheffield and the forest of Bowland will be opened up for many people to walk in and enjoy. There might not be so much extra access for rock climbers, but I am sure that many of them will enjoy being able to climb on Bamford edge or Sype Land above Ranskill. The Bill will give people greater access.

The measure will not just give people access to areas of moorland where they are currently not allowed to go; it will give them confidence when they walk on footpaths where there are existing rights. Many people are frightened that, if they stray off the path, they will be in difficulty. Once the Bill becomes law, they will be able to use rights of way confidently, knowing that if they deviate slightly, they will not get into trouble. Let us welcome the Bill for providing extra access, and let us welcome it for giving people greater confidence to go out and enjoy themselves.

Let us also welcome the Bill for the fact that it will do something to reduce the overcrowding that occurs at so many of the honeypots in our countryside. As a result, there will be slightly fewer people on Snowdon, on the Old Man of Coniston and on Pen-y-ghent, and places such as Stanedge will not be quite as crowded with climbers. The Bill will give people a chance to spread out into the countryside, and ensure that, when they visit it, they can enjoy peace and quiet.

We should not only welcome the access provisions but very firmly welcome the protection that the Bill will give sites of special scientific interest. The destruction of SSSIs in recent years has been a scandal. I firmly congratulate my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment; he has done extremely well to get the Bill so far, and I look forward to its being law by the end of the year.

The Opposition and the Country Landowners Association have come up with a myth. First, they make the perfectly tenable argument that very few people want the right of access. However, they then say, "Ah, but it will cost a great deal because so many people will go out into the countryside." They cannot have it both ways. If very few people will take advantage of the new provision, there is no problem. If lots of people will, there is very good reason for introducing it. We should make it absolutely clear that a lot of people will want to enjoy access, and that we must facilitate it. The idea that there is no demand for it is rubbish.

The CLA has started working on the idea that the new legislation will be in breach of the Human Rights Act 1998, and that the passage of the legislation will in some way take away property rights. I suggest that the CLA should not try to reignite a conflict in the countryside. We want peace and harmony, not conflict, in the countryside. However, if members of the CLA want to develop that conflict, there will be lots of other people who will start to say, "We should question their rights of ownership," because for many people who own big estates in the countryside, their ownership actually came about as a result of successful war crimes. They were the people who benefited from the destruction of the monasteries. They often benefited from the destruction of a previous king, and they gained their ownership. We do not want to go back into that, but I would suggest that, if they question

[Mr. Andrew F. Bennett]

the rights of individuals to go out and enjoy themselves, other people will want to question the way in which some of those big estates were established.

Mr. Gray: It is, of course, nonsense to suggest that Conservative Members do not want people to go out and enjoy themselves. However, the hon. Gentleman is president of the Ramblers Association, which for a long time has lobbied for the right to roam in its full sense. Will he therefore say whether he is disappointed by the provisions in the Bill?

Mr. Bennett: I believe that the Bill has the makings of a very good compromise. It will allow people into the countryside in large numbers. I am amazed that Opposition Members do not want to encourage it, because, as I was about to say, if there is a demand for payment, there is a payment. The more people go out into the countryside and understand it, the more they will be willing, as taxpayers, to subsidise the agriculture that must continue there. It is obviously in everyone's interests to encourage people to go into the countryside and to understand it; keeping people out will simply increase misunderstanding.

Not only do farmers benefit when people visit the countryside and gain an understanding of it, but many farmers have diversified into tourism, which is an important part of the economy of many rural areas. However, we must find ways to compensate farmers where there are very real costs, such as the costs of creating footpaths to enable people to get up to access land, of building stiles and of putting in necessary features. I believe that there are the makings of a very good working compromise in the legislation.

I want to voice one or two concerns in the brief time that I have in which to speak. First, there is nothing in the Bill about marine nature reserves. One of the tragedies from 1981 is the fact that a provision that was put into the Wildlife and Countryside Act has hardly ever been used. The Bill should mention marine nature reserves.

Then there is the question of field boundaries. The report of the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs leaves us in no doubt that hedgerows and walls need better protection. When he came to the Select Committee, the Minister for the Environment conceded that the present legislation was not adequate. We need to do something about that.

Headlands are another problem. It is useful that many landowners have been able to have wide headlands so that field birds and wild flowers can flourish. It is regrettable, however, that European Union auditors have said that a headland should be a narrow strip. That matter needs to be dealt with quickly.

I wish to make a couple of brief constituency points. Inland cormorants take fish from fishermen's ponds and there is the problem of raptors killing homing pigeons. Both those issues need to be examined.

I have described what I would like to have seen in the Bill, but I would not be too disappointed if the Government dropped the footpath provisions, which I do not think are ideal. The Government were sold a pup at some stage. They were told that footpath legislation would be easy, and that everybody would be pleased with it. I am afraid that it is not easy and I do not think that this Bill's provisions on footpaths will last for the next 50 years. I hope that we can find time in Committee and in the House of Lords to improve those provisions and to make them workable. However, if the Government are worried about the number of provisions in the Bill, they should drop the footpaths provisions and deal with issues such as field boundaries and marine nature reserves.

I welcome the provisions on the obstruction of footpaths, but it is important to record that footpaths are part of our history. Just as no one would believe in destroying stocks or any other artefact from the past, we should destroy or divert the footpath pattern of a village only for very good reason. We should be clear that footpaths are part of our history and we should cherish them.

I hope that the Bill will enable us to get on with mapping and that the appeals will be even-handed. I ask the Minister to consider the issues of high-level camping and bivouacking. The provisions for them need to be clear in the Bill.

For many years, the countryside has been subject to intensive farming activity. As a by-product, it has also offered sport for the aristocracy. We should pay tribute to all those people who have nurtured our countryside and made it a green pleasant land, with neat fields, vast heather moorlands, mile upon mile of stone walls, beautiful hedges, banks of wild flowers and a vast array of small animals and insects.

We must ensure that we protect the countryside and that it continues. I believe that the Bill will provide the opportunity to protect the countryside and to ensure that many people can get out and enjoy access to it.

4.58 pm

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): Before I came to the Chamber, I looked up the definition of the word "roam" in the "Concise Oxford English Dictionary". It defines it in three ways. First, it defines it as to

travel aimlessly over a wide area.

Secondly, it is defined as to

wander over, through or about;

and, finally, as "an aimless walk".

We will all be greatly helped if we drop the expression "right to roam" from the debate, because I am sure that the Minister does not intend "roam" in any of those definitions of the word. Instead, we should talk increasingly about managed access or—even better—contractual access. That would convey the idea that we intend people who have access to the countryside to take on obligations and, equally, that we expect those who concede access to assume obligations—that is a matter of definition—and to receive some benefit as well. The more we talk in terms of a form of contract between the people who own the countryside and the other people whom they need to make a livelihood from it, the more we can put the debate on to a sensible footing.

We could argue about the Bill in principle or in practice. I am a realist. With the Government's majority, the sensible thing is to argue the practicalities of the Bill. If the notion of management or a contract is to prevail, the existence of a set of rules, effectively policed, is essential. We should debate the nature of those rules and the policing of them.

I represent a large constituency in upland Britain, and clearly the proposals will apply to that area. The Yorkshire dales national park is one of the management agencies that will have responsibility under the legislation. I want therefore to talk about the countryside not in an abstract way but in terms of the practical problems that are brought to me every day in my capacity as a Member of Parliament.

I note that much of the debate is about the pressure on the countryside. In Yorkshire, access to the national park and the management of traffic into the park are live and important issues. We have also realised that there are pressures on physical access, including the ability to move hardcore up to certain areas to reinforce footpaths.

I represent many people for whom the countryside is a working rather than a recreational environment, as it is for others. One group does not exclude the other. I represent a significant number of gamekeepers. I realise that the nearest that many members of new Labour have come to a gamekeeper is reading "Lady Chatterley's Lover"—and they might wish that all gamekeeping were as romantic and exciting as that—but in reality it is much more humdrum. Gamekeepers' livelihoods depend on the maintenance of the open spaces. The sport of the rich is the livelihood of the ordinary countryman. We should be careful about assuming that such sport is exclusively for the rich, and recognise that many people's livelihoods depend, even in an ancillary way, on access to the countryside. One form of access may occasionally be at odds with others. Even the sporting activity to which the Minister referred is a form of access.

I am conscious of the number of small and tenant farmers, to whom my hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman) referred, who have a vested interest because their livestock graze the moorland and common land. They are already facing pressures as a result of the proposals to change from a headage basis to an area basis the arrangements for payments under the common agricultural policy—rightly in my view. They find that some of their support is taxed to help the rural development proposals with which the Minister will be familiar. All that adds to uncertainty and pressure.

It is important that in passing the legislation we should try to iron out the most obvious problems about which people have concerns. The Minister may say that those concerns are not justified or that they have been dealt with, but they come up repeatedly, so it is important that, in Committee, the Government demonstrate a willingness to try to deal with uncertainty or legitimate concerns about how the rules will work in practice. For example, who will man the local access forums? Will the local culture be dominant in those forums, or will pressure group appointees be nominated? It is important that people feel confident that the forums are manned by people who understand the environment for which they are responsible.

The local authorities have only a discretionary responsibility for management; for example, they must provide wardens and access points. It is difficult to understand how, in the present financial circumstances, many local authorities will find the money to make that provision, even though most of us think that it would be beneficial.

I am bothered about the Minister's apparent lack of interest in access points, which are important. In my constituency, roads across the moor become ribbon parking lots at certain times of the year, as people park on the edge of the moor. The landscape that we enjoy is visually compromised by the volume of people who come to benefit from it.

There is particular concern about the fact that the Bill permits closures. How does one notify the public of a closure for a particular reason? If there is no central access point, how do people who come to the area know that the closure is in effect? That is a practical difficulty. It is a small issue, but it is important for the sensible operation of the legislation.

I see no objection to dawn-to-dusk access, but I am conscious of problems of rural crime—not just the wildlife crime to which the Minister referred. I know that stone and slate are stolen from barns in my constituency; we know that there is poaching. The incidental, collateral damage resulting from such activities often causes difficulty.

Sheep theft is not very frequent at the moment—one would have to be economically illiterate to want to steal a sheep at present—but such theft has been a problem. People enjoying such illegal access have left gates open, and policing at night is difficult. I hope that the Minister will be open to persuasion that there should be dawn-to-dusk rather than 24-hour permits.

I know that the issue of dogs is emotive. The Bill sets out a period in which they are required to be on a leash in the vicinity of livestock. It is easy to make fun of those who ask what "vicinity" or "being close to" sheep means, but the problem is a practical one, particularly if dogs are not well trained and difficult to bring under control once off the leash. The Minister must again address himself to a practical concern because the sanction throughout the Bill is extraordinarily weak. The law of trespass in the United Kingdom is a weak instrument, which would put the fear of God or of the law court into nobody's mind.

There is the question of liability. As my hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells said, it is closely defined. There are manmade features of the landscape that are tantamount to being natural features because, in a sense, almost all the countryside is man-made. We are trying to preserve stone walls, which are under threat because of difficulty of maintenance, but if people stand on them, they become unstable. A dry stone wall is just that, and the danger of accident is real.

On the 28-day closed period, I know that the Bill provides for people to apply to a designated authority—in my constituency, the national park will probably be the main one—for an extension. We need to know that the procedure will be rapid and clear and that the response will be rapid, too. We all know of difficulties experienced by those who have had to apply to some official body—28 days later, they are still waiting for an answer because the next committee meeting is umpteen weeks away. Will the Minister ensure that there is a mechanism for rapid response and evaluation at short notice of such applications? In the light of circumstances, that would be very helpful.

I welcome the provision for rights of way improvement plans; they do need to be amended more rapidly. I welcome particularly the banning of vehicles from green lanes. Vehicles cause enormous damage on such lanes; when the snow comes, great potholes fill up—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Time is up. I call Mr. Pickthall.

5.8 pm

Mr. Colin Pickthall (West Lancashire): I have been a hill walker ever since my boyhood in Cumbria, so I suppose I must declare an interest in what I have to say. First, however, I very much congratulate my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment on a magnificent achievement in getting the Bill thus far. I also congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Denton and Reddish (Mr. Bennett), for Sherwood (Mr. Tipping) and for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) on their long crusade on this issue.

Part of the pleasure of hill walking lies in seeking a different route every time one is out, and in the map and compass work that that often involves. Even in the Lake district national park, where access is about as free as it can be, it is still possible to be trapped by private land, deer fences or wire. In my experience of fell walking over 45 years or so, very few walkers have wanted to invade private property. The vast majority of the time, especially in poor weather, they want to stick to well-trodden paths.

I take enormous pleasure not only in walking myself, but in seeing others walking, many of them trekking up hills and along ridges: they are not sitting in front of television screens or on cosy football terraces, but exercising body and spirit, and many of them become addicted. Walking plays an essential part in maintaining the nation's health and its sanity. The ability to visit the countryside on foot is vital to those who do not live in the country. Walkers tend to be observant and careful; for the most part, they help to take care of the countryside through which they pass. Hill walking is one of the few occupations that is available to people regardless of age and almost regardless of income.

By contrast, the attitude of some landowners—not all, thank God—and their spokesmen is often marked by extraordinary snobbery. The Country Landowners Association regional secretary for Leicestershire, Rutland, Northamptonshire and Warwickshire wrote:

> We don't want all and sundry roaming our land, especially not criminals, drug pushers and vandals.

I am sure the House can imagine a drug pusher on top of the trough of Bowland, waiting for the walkers in woolly hats to come up and buy his illegal goods.

The CLA regional secretary for the east midlands wrote that the freedom to roam

> would apply to everyone, including the minority of vandals, sheep stealers, badger baiters, horse slashers, illegal hare coursers, poaching gangs, birds eggs thieves and those responsible for a rising tide of crime in rural areas.

Picture those people, staggering around the mountains looking for a horse to slash. The hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman) summed up walkers as trespassers and hooligans.

One does not need to read many such comments to get a clear idea of what landowners think of the citizens of this country. They appear to hold the extraordinary belief that walkers are all from the towns. Writing in *The Daily Telegraph*, Quentin Letts refers to my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment as "Minister for Townie Ramblers", as though those of us who live in the countryside never put one foot in front of the other.

Another argument advanced is that the Bill represents the thin end of the wedge. Such an argument could be used to negate every piece of legislation ever proposed. Jolyon Dodgson, the CLA regional secretary for the north-west—a fine man, pleasant company and an old friend of mine—writes that the Government's decision

> is nothing more than the expropriation of private land rights and we would advise other owners of private property to take note.

Next, Parliament will legislate to allow people to wander through other people's gardens.

A third argument that is often advanced has already been put by the right hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King)—the people will not understand the legislation. Apparently, we are all too thick to understand such complicated legislation, so we should not do anything about it. A hint of that attitude has been heard in suggestions made this afternoon about the right people not being put on the access forums, and the need to choose carefully people who can understand the legislation—and, no doubt, who own a lot of land as well.

The key to the Bill is balance: it not only extends rights of access, but provides the means to protect wildlife from disturbance at sensitive times of the year and allows for the protection of the land itself from hazards such as fire. In the existing national parks—in the Lake district, the Peak district, north wales and so on—the most serious problem caused by walkers is erosion of footpaths, as continuous overuse grinds them down to gravel. One need only visit the Old Man of Coniston or Kinder Scout to see that that is a problem. However, better access in other parts of the country might help to prevent such problems by diverting walkers elsewhere.

My hon. Friend the Member for Pendle and I had an interesting meeting a short time ago with representatives of the CLA in the north-west. They told us that they did not expect a vast mushrooming in the number of walkers—such as the total population of Greater Manchester and Merseyside suddenly wandering out into the trough of Bowland. However, existing walkers and their families and new walkers—we hope that there will be more, for all the reasons given by my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish—will be given a wider choice and greater access closer to their homes, involving less travelling. For me, the trough of Bowland, most of which is out of bounds, will become accessible and it is only a short drive away.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Minister on clause 65, which deals with the danger to limestone pavement, which has exercised me for some years. It is appalling that limestone pavement in south Cumbria, north Lancashire and the Pennines has been quarried for gardens and for massive export to Japan. It is therefore reassuring to see the clause.

The problem of dogs has been mentioned. I understand the restrictions contained in the Bill, but I ask my right hon. Friend to consider further restrictions. Human beings, as well as sheep and birds, are in danger from unleashed dogs in mountainous country and country where there are quarries. My two daughters and I have been knocked flying in the mountains by other people's dogs racing ahead of their owners. It is a problem that needs addressing.

In the last couple of minutes available to me, I shall deal with the provisions on footpaths. The CLA is right to argue that most people want to use footpaths in their neighbourhood—the footpaths that connect or ramble round villages and hamlets, such as those in my constituency of West Lancashire, which are often under

threat from development as well as from farming. The Government are right to be impatient with the slow progress in producing definitive maps in some areas and the huge delays in sorting out disputes and diversions.

The footpath network in this country is one of our greatest national assets. The fairly frequent creation of new paths, both long-distance and short-distance ones, proves that local authorities and other agencies are aware of their popularity and the fact that they will be used. The footpath system has even spawned its own literature, as can be seen in every book shop.

However, there are persistent attempts by some landowners to block or plough up paths. That has naturally led to equally bloody-minded resistance from walkers organisations, such as ramblers organisations and local footpath groups. The Bill's provision for local authorities to produce right of way improvement plans, to be prepared and published within five years, is to be welcomed. Will my right hon. Friend tell us what mechanisms there will be to deal with authorities that fail to produce such plans, or afterwards fail to publish the 10-yearly reviews that are provided for?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

5.18 pm

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Mr. Pickthall) and, in particular, the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry). I found myself in agreement with so many of the points that the right hon. Gentleman made during his speech. He juxtaposed the two positions of opposing in principle and opposing on practicalities, and rightly said that it was the practicalities that mattered.

I am at a loss to understand the position of the right hon. Gentleman's colleagues on the Front Bench, who want to oppose Second Reading in principle. Leaving aside the irony—which will be lost on no farmer—of the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman), with his business history, now purporting to speak for farmers who are finding it difficult to make an economic living, I fail to understand how the Conservatives can oppose in principle a Bill that has not been opposed in principle by the vast majority of people in this country, including those who speak for countryside and agricultural interests, who all find parts of the Bill that they can support, but nevertheless have serious doubts about some of the practical applications of the legislation and want those explored in Committee.

Mr. Damian Green (Ashford): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Heath: As the hon. Gentleman has not yet spoken, I am delighted to give way to him.

Mr. Green: If the hon. Gentleman reads our reasoned amendment, he will realise that while we object in principle to parts of the Bill, we welcome other parts. I recommend that he reads the amendment.

Mr. Heath: I hope that the hon. Gentleman does not believe that I would come to the debate without reading the amendment. I question the position that Conservative Members have adopted of opposing parts of the Bill in principle. The detailed briefings from the many interests that have examined the Bill oppose not the principle but its detail. Those interests include the National Farmers Union, the Country Landowners Association and the Countryside Alliance. If we accepted the amendment tabled by Conservative Members, we could not amend the details in Committee; we would not have the opportunity of clarifying the access provisions, extending environmental protection or reforming rights of way. That would do the country a disservice.

I am indebted to the hon. Member for Ashford (Mr. Green) for the concept of the blue-green dimension of Conservative policy. That was included in a recent press release. However, the response from the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells was reminiscent not so much of cyan as of the purple of the grouse moor. That is unfortunate because we have an opportunity greatly to strengthen legislation on the environment and rights of access. We do not oppose the principle of the Bill; we welcome the principles that underlie much of the measure.

A succession of "buts" will now follow. The Bill does not tackle some practicalities properly and we will have to explore them in Committee. The Bill is disappointing in many ways, and its lack of aspiration is sad—*[Interruption.]* Hon. Members mumble from a sedentary position that it is overdue and overhyped; it is over the hill and far away in terms of the aspirations of many people who wanted environmental legislation to be strengthened during this Parliament. We want to explore the Bill's limitations.

The right hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King) was right when he said that one of the key anxieties was about definition. It is important that we all understand how the Bill will work. Even our brightest and best educated constituents will not understand several definitions and some of the working practices in the Bill because they will not be on public display or in a digestible form. That will cause confusion and create tensions where none previously existed. That is sad and should be tackled.

Our second major concern is the scope of the Bill and some of the missed opportunities, which we hope to remedy in Committee. That applies especially to environmental protection and to reforming the rights of way system. The latter needs reforming and the Government have ducked the issue. They may want to revert to the matter; perhaps the Bill is half written and they will table a plethora of amendments in Committee. However, the measure is currently undercooked.

Our third major anxiety is about resources. For the Bill's intentions to be realised, it must be backed by a substantial amount of money. I have my doubts about that. My hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) and I wrote to the Minister about that very issue on 1 March, but I have not yet received a reply, nor has my hon. Friend. That is not surprising from this Government, but what worries me is that the collusion between the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food may mean that the contagion that has overcome MAFF for the past three years may have spread to DETR. We may have to wait months.

[Mr. Heath]

The success or otherwise of the Bill ultimately depends on adequate resourcing. The Secretary of State started the process of consideration by saying that the cost would "not be significant", but that is belied even by the explanatory notes and all informed commentators say that the likely cost will be more than the Government estimate. There will be significant costs for supporting the mapping process, the administration, the appeals and the new procedures—that is all self-evident—but there will also be a significant cost for creating the liaison structures, which will underpin its functioning on the ground. We need firm commitments not only to produce the resources required at this stage, but to continue that resourcing for a considerable number of years. There will be not only start-up costs but a continuing need, and meeting it will be critical to the success of the countryside bodies, local authorities and farmers themselves if they are to meet the Bill's requirements.

I want to deal with the access provisions. We welcome public access to uncultivated countryside. That is the basis of the Bill and we support it. However, we have concerns. First, the regional forums will be critical to its success, but their structure, the way in which they will operate and their existence are not dealt with by the Bill. The forums simply will not work unless the various interests with a direct concern in this matter are properly represented. We have always said that the forums represent a local matter that needs to be dealt with locally.

The definition of what land falls into what category is a problem, as is the fact that the mapping procedure is not yet complete—the cart has been put before the horse. We have to recognise and quantify the associated environmental costs and the Government have to meet them. I am concerned about restricted access because it will cause a lot of difficulties. The provisions are not workable and, for example, 28 days of restricted access is not sufficient for a double lambing. That has to be addressed, as does the exclusion of high days and holidays and the nonsensical idea that the farming calendar can somehow be put on hold during such periods. Is not it possible to encompass partial restrictions on a general area to establish sequential use of land for a particular purpose in 28-day periods—or whatever limit is prescribed—to achieve proper economic land use without restricting public access?

I am also concerned about night-time access and the more I think about it the more I question whether it is necessary. Will not it produce more access problems than it solves? The proper security of individuals is an issue, as are liabilities, and perhaps the Minister needs to reconsider that provision. I am worried that the code of conduct may not have the force of law. Where possible, codes of conduct should be transformed into byelaws so that everybody is absolutely clear about the way in which they apply.

I listened carefully to what the Minister said about liability and compensation, but still was not persuaded. How is a natural feature defined? Is a tree a natural feature? Is a tree doing what trees do—dropping a branch every now and again in a high wind, acting as a natural feature?

Mr. Bennett: Of course it is.

Mr. Heath: The hon. Gentleman says, "Of course it is," but is that the landowner's responsibility? There is a lack of definition and that is precisely what we need to explore in Committee.

I do not believe that the Government have gone nearly far enough in reforming this country's rickety rights of way system and they probably recognise that their proposals are incoherent and represent unfinished business. Local authorities are being given a new duty, but it is a duty to provide plans, with no duty to implement them. I have some experience of local authorities and they are always producing plans. The question is whether they ever bring them to fruition and whether they have the resources to do so. We cannot have a coherent and definitive—that is perhaps an unfortunate word to use in this context—rights of way system until we address that issue.

We should reconsider signposting, so that the public know exactly what they can and cannot do. We also need to address the issues of freedom from obstruction and bridleways, and establish a hierarchy to make the position clear when access through rights of way and conservation interests clash. My view is that conservation interests must take precedence, but that is by no means clear at the moment.

I listened carefully to the comments about RUPPS and their transition to restricted byways, and about the fact that there could be a challenge on vehicular use. I hope that it will not be all or nothing—either a restricted byway closed to vehicular traffic or a BOAT and open to all vehicular traffic—because that is nonsense. People may have proper rights of access because they need to use a particular restricted byway, but it should not be opened up to general vehicular use. It would be nonsense if local authorities had to go through the process of a road traffic order and had to put up a plethora of signs on the top of hillsides to stop what everyone knows should not be happening.

We welcome the strengthening of the current framework of conservation and wildlife protection as far as it goes. We regret the fact that there is no statutory underpinning of what was developed as a result of the Rio conference. Biodiversity action plans are not to be put on a statutory basis, as I believe they should be. We regret that there is no provision in the Bill for making good existing damage to SSSIs, but perhaps there will be provision elsewhere. Protection of SSSIs over the past few years and the amount that has been lost has been a disgrace.

We regret the fact that there is nothing about species protection outside SSSIs. I understand how difficult it is to produce definitions in that area, but the Government must address that problem if they are to take wildlife protection seriously. To echo an earlier point, we regret that the Bill contains nothing on marine conservation. Many years ago I was involved from outside the House in producing the amendments to the Environmental Protection Bill—as the right hon. Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark) will recall—which has never made a

great difference. We need to address that issue. We should also consider the position of interim development orders. That applies particularly to peat moors and the effect that they can have on mineral workings. The Bill does not contain provisions for areas of outstanding natural beauty. They should be included, and we must address that issue in Committee.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Mr. Livsey) hopes to catch your eye later, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to talk about Wales. My view and that of our party is that the Bill should not cover Wales, because this is a devolved matter for the Welsh Assembly and for the conservation and countryside bodies in Wales to deal with. It is wrong for the United Kingdom Parliament to retain this matter under a devolved system, because what happens in Wales has no effect outside the Principality.

The principal point is that it is possible to have environmental and societal benefits at the same time as agricultural sustainability: the two are not mutually inimical. Sustainability in environmental terms is not only compatible with but essential to the development of our rural communities, the rural economy and agricultural interests. There is a synergy between offering better protection and redirecting the present price support to farming through the CAP, which is wasteful and wholly indefensible. The Bill can go only a little way in that direction. It is for the Government to argue elsewhere how they achieve that.

Paradoxically, although the Government are making progress, there is limited progress on the common agricultural policy. We have the nonsense of the new IACS—integrated administration and control system—regulations and their effect on our hedgerows. The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food should be arguing with Brussels about that. We have the nonsense of environmental support for agriculture being effectively capped, and certainly not meeting the aspirations of the industry.

We need joined-up government. We need improvements in the Bill during its passage. However, we also need the underwriting of environmental support for rural areas by the Government, through the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and through MAFF. We understand that the Bill is no more than a platform in terms of some of those developments, but it is a good platform. We shall not oppose it in principle, although we shall seek to improve it during its passage.

5.35 pm

Dr. David Clark (South Shields): I congratulate the Minister and his colleagues on the Bill. We have waited a long time for it, but it is good to have it now.

This afternoon's sideshow was provided by, in a sense, two Conservative parties. I felt that what the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) said about managing society and the countryside—it was echoed by the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath)—formed the kernel of the debate. I find it sad that Opposition Front Benchers have not yet grasped that we should be trying to manage our countryside for both environmentalists and farmers. That is possible and practicable, but sad to say, it is not the official Conservative line. It is sad that the Conservatives do not appreciate the needs and aspirations of our citizens, who are demanding today what they have demanded for many years.

I have been examining the history. When I looked at the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, introduced by a Conservative Government, I realised that its hallmark was the wish for conciliation and consensus. We have heard no conciliation or consensus from the Opposition today; they simply do not understand.

I digress, however. I want to thank the Government for realising the aspirations of many people, including many Members of Parliament, throughout the decades, who have tried to secure the right to roam in Britain, and to extend people's rights to enjoy our beautiful countryside for the purposes of air and exercise.

The first legislation was introduced in, I believe, 1888—even before old Labour—by James Bryce, a Liberal. Thereafter, the point was taken up repeatedly by MPs—mainly, ironically enough unless we think about it, MPs representing the older industrial areas. I am thinking of people such as Charles Trevelyan, who gave Wallington to the nation and represented Newcastle upon Tyne, Ellen Wilkinson, who represented Jarrow, Hugh Dalton, who represented Bishop Auckland, and Chuter Ede and Arthur Blenkinsop, who both represented my constituency.

Indeed, I find that back in 1980—20 years ago, almost to the day—I introduced a private Member's Bill in an attempt to effect the purposes of this Bill. I am surprised and encouraged to discover that at least two of the likely suspects, my hon. Friends the Members for Denton and Reddish (Mr. Bennett) and for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours), sponsored my Bill. As I have said, we have waited a long time for this legislation, but it is good to see it now. As for the accusation that it is political, I thought that that was why we were here. We are honouring a manifesto pledge to our citizens.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Workington said, the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman), the Conservative spokesman, built his case on exaggeration, myth and half-truths.

Let me try to reassure the House. The Lake district national park is one of the two oldest national parks. By a quirk of history, under the National Trust Act 1907 and the Law of Property Act 1925, almost all the commons in the national park have a right of access along the lines that the Bill proposes; in fact, it is far more liberal than is proposed in the Bill. That has been the position since 1925.

Over the years, that has caused problems, but as someone who was born within sight of the lake district national park and who grew up there, I see those problems diminishing as the years go by, with farmers realising that their business opportunities increase as more people are attracted to the national park. We should try to develop and to build on that. The Opposition have to build their case on practical experience, not on half-truths and myths.

The Government could be on weaker ground in respect of the public rights of way. Some forces argue that that part of the Bill weakens and reduces our network of registered public footpaths. A definitive numbered footpath is the Queen's highway; it is not a concession, but a right. One has as much right to walk along a registered public footpath as a registered road, but there is a fear that the network will be reduced under the

[Dr. David Clark]

Government's proposals. I hope that the Minister will make it clear that, although there may be cases where footpaths are redirected or, indeed, closed, that is not the general purpose of the Bill. Incidentally, I take the point that, in certain urban areas where footpaths encourage crime or vandalism—clause 68 recognises it—diversions may be a better way forward.

I make one suggestion to the Minister on footpaths. Will he consider the possibility of each local authority area creating a footpaths panel that represents all interested groups: country landowners, the National Farmers Union, ramblers, the Open Spaces Society—whoever it may be? In the early 1970s, we tried that as an experiment in the Kirklees district. I sat on the forum for a number of years. Although at the beginning there was much suspicion between the opposing sides, on no occasion did the council refuse the panel's recommendations. It was a good way in which to build consensus and understanding. It was the right way forward.

I ask the Minister to address certain other issues: for example, marine nature reserves. I thought that they had already been covered by the Wildlife and Countryside (Amendment) Act 1985, which I introduced and got on the statute book. I was surprised to learn that so little progress had been made. Equally, I was surprised that there had been so much discussion, deliberation and confusion about mapping of open land in the national parks—I emphasise, in the national parks. The national park authorities were required to do that under the 1985 Act.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) said, we are losing hundreds of thousands of kilometres of hedgerows. It looks as if the pace of their removal is still quickening. However, they are part and parcel of the fabric of our countryside. It is very important that the Government should take this opportunity—if they cannot provide another one in the near future—to try to deal with the problem.

I end where I began, by thanking the Government for their action on the right to roam. So many people in the United Kingdom would feel better—one cannot describe it in words or in literature—if they could get out into the countryside. When they do get out there—on the mountains, the moors or the downs—aspects of life will become much more meaningful for them. The more we encourage people to get out into the countryside, to exercise their legs and their lungs, the closer we will be to having a much more balanced society. I should have thought that both sides of the House are trying to achieve that objective.

5.45 pm

Mr. Peter Atkinson (Hexham): I declare an interest which is in the Register of Members' Interests: I am a consultant to the Countryside Alliance. I should also say that I am a member of the Country Landowners Association and the National Farmers Union, so that the House will have no doubt about where I am coming from in the debate.

In countryside debates, it is always a pleasure to follow my north-east neighbour, the right hon. Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark). He has a very detailed and deep knowledge of the countryside, and I respect him for that. However, he was completely wrong when he said that Conservative Members should not object to the Bill on principle. Of course we should object to it on principle. My right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) said that there is not much point in arguing about principle today because the Government's majority will force the Bill through. In his speech, he therefore wanted to address management issues.

A fundamental point of principle is raised by the Bill: it will take away the central right of property owners to say who may or may not come on to their land. It is a matter of profound principle. However, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon said, it is not worth arguing that particular point of principle today, because Ministers will not listen to such arguments.

My main criticism of the Bill is that it is a wasted opportunity, particularly to provide for reform of the rights of way network. Proper reform of the United Kingdom's rights of way network is one quid pro quo that would have gone a long way to pacifying landowning and farming interests. It is not—as the right hon. Member for South Shields said—a matter of diminishing the number of public rights of way, but a matter of making rights of way more suitable for modern recreational use. I should have liked the Bill to contain a far tougher and more detailed section on rights of way.

The Bill does effectively nothing on rights of way. It simply says that it will give local authorities a duty to produce a plan on how to improve the rights of way network in their area. In most country areas, county councils will produce such plans. However, county councils have for years been fiddling on about rights of way. They have neither the money, nor the will, nor—in many cases—the resources properly to improve rights of way.

Farmers, particularly, wanted the Bill to make it far easier to divert unsuitable rights of way, making a right of way not only more sensible for their agricultural purposes, but more user friendly for those who want to walk it. However, the Bill does absolutely nothing about that.

Currently, farmers who want to divert a footpath have a right to apply to the local highways authority to that end. If the highways authority refuses to make a diversion order, the farmer has a right to appeal against the decision. However, even if the authority agrees to a diversion, the usual mechanisms for making the diversion will apply. We have an incredibly cumbersome and expensive system to divert a right of way. Once again, that system is being enshrined in legislation.

The Government should have done something much braver, by giving parish councils, for example, the right to draw up plans to provide people with proper recreational footpaths through the countryside. That is what people want. The right to roam is an old-fashioned socialist idea—dating back to the Kinder Scout trespass, in the 1930s, at the thought of which old socialist ramblers go jelly-eyed. They should go and see how much wildlife there is now on Kinder Scout. There is an awful lot less now than there was when it was private. Most people who live in towns want proper reform of rights of way, and that is what the Bill will signally fail to do.

My constituency probably contains some of the largest areas that will be affected by the Bill. It includes some of the best heather moors in the country, in the north

Pennines. There is an area of de facto right to roam around Hadrian's wall, and the problems that stem from that right are well known to farmers. Any pretence that the Bill will cause no difficulty to farmers is pie in the sky.

There is first-hand evidence. Farmers who try to farm along Hadrian's wall and in that area know only too well about the problems that an unrestricted right to roam causes. Inevitably it leads to gates being left open, which cause flocks of sheep to be mixed up and cattle to wander into areas where they should not be. There are also the usual problems of litter and disturbance. These are serious management problems for farmers on Hadrian's wall.

If it is discovered that, through the workings of the Bill once it is enacted, there is damage to the environment—let us suppose that the right to roam causes damage to a well-managed grouse moor, which substantially reduces its value—is there provision for the farmer or landowner to seek compensation? The answer is that there is none. That is entirely wrong.

There are important detailed questions that have not been answered. Perhaps the Minister will respond to them when he replies. For example, who will sit on the access forums? It is vital that local people be involved. When the previous Government were setting up new national parks committees, we insisted that parish councils elected representatives to them. That made a substantial difference to the respect in which national park authorities are held by the local population. I hope that there will be room for parish council representatives to be on the access forums. Without that, townies will be seen as imposing their demands once more on the countryside.

I reinforce what has been said about resources. Northumberland county council, which is my local highways authority, is chronically short of cash. It is never short on criticising Ministers of both parties for not providing sufficient funding. If it receives no additional funding after the Bill is enacted, there is not a chance that it will be able to put in place some of the things that will be required of it.

Landowners are asking—no doubt these questions will be asked of Ministers time and time again during consideration of the Bill—how they are to close a grouse moor to public access. The Minister said that they could close it for 28 days without permission, except on weekends and bank holidays. That means that anyone who wants to close a grouse moor or an upland area because of lambing will have to apply for permission. The area will have to be closed for more than 28 days, and there will have to be 28 unbroken days. How will they tell people that the moor is open or closed on a particular day?

What of common land? There is common land in upland areas that will be affected by the Bill, and in parts of East Anglia where there are shooting interests. How is that common land to be closed on shooting days? Who will come out from the Countryside Agency? Will its representatives have to stand round the common and say, "You can't go on there today because it is a shooting day"? Will it be necessary to put fences round common land bearing notices stating, for example, "No access today"? Farmers, landowners and those who look after commons have a right to know how these things will be done and whether it will be to their cost or someone else's.

How do we define cultivated land? Is Newmarket heath, for example, uncultivated land? The House will know that it is used by trainers for exercising their horses. There are gallops that are used by other training establishments. Will these areas be regarded as cultivated land? What will happen if a farmer decides to plough some uncultivated land? That is frequently done these days before re-seeding. Would that uncultivated land with a right of access become cultivated land with no right of access? How will that be shown on a map that the Countryside Agency will produce?

I reinforce what others have said about the problems of night access. It seems nonsensical that there should be 24-hour access each day to certain land. It will be impossible for many management tasks to be undertaken if there is access at night. The Minister will be aware that a great deal of predator control—for example, the shooting of foxes with the use of lamps—is done during the night in upland areas. If people have a right to roam at that time, there could be serious danger to them and to those who are engaged in the control operation. There is no reason why moorland should be open during the evening.

Finally, when the Bill is considered in Committee, I plead with the Minister to accept amendments to the definition of common land, which will be helpful if the—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

5.56 pm

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): I welcome the Bill, and I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment on bringing it forward when all about him were ranged the forces of conservatism. What a glittering speech he made. What a tonic it was, compared with the dire contribution of the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman), who spoke from the Opposition Front Bench. The speech of the hon. Member for Hexham (Mr. Atkinson) was not much better.

Whenever Conservative Members speak on issues such as this, they bang on about compensation. They want compensation for this and compensation for that. In effect, they are saying, "Hand it out, give us the money." What happened during the previous Parliament? I note that the hon. Member for Hexham is disappearing. I believe that a head deboning firm in your constituency, Mr. Deputy Speaker, went out of business without compensation. We must understand that, under the Conservatives, there is compensation only when it suits them.

The Conservatives come to the House with spurious arguments from, for example, the Country Landowners Association and the so-called shooting and conservation lobby. They will do anything to keep out the great unwashed. That is what it is all about. It is their countryside, not ours. That was exemplified by my parliamentary neighbour, the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry), when he talked about those who owned the countryside.

This may sound like a revolutionary sentiment to the House, but the land belongs to us all. *[Interruption.]* It does. Conservative Members may laugh, but the last laugh will be on them because the Bill will give millions of people the chance to enjoy countryside that is now out of bounds.

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): My chief recreation is walking. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that over 25 years of doing it I have trespassed on innumerable

[Mr. Dominic Grieve]

occasions on other people's land. On no occasion do I remember having been ordered off the land or objection being taken to my activities. However, the keeping of the law of trespass is a residual power to the landowner that is vital to prevent abuse.

Mr. Prentice: I hope that the Bar Council was listening to the hon. Gentleman's intervention. There is a practising barrister who is a lawbreaker in the House.

We have heard about what is and is not principle. My principle is that there are good reasons for keeping people off open land, but ownership is not one of them. Was it last year that someone was going to buy Snowdon? Sir Anthony Hopkins, with his Welsh antecedents, came forward. He said that he would put up the money to ensure public access to Snowdon. Are Conservative Members seriously suggesting that if someone has a pot of money and wants to buy a tract of beautiful countryside in this country, he can do so and keep people off it? If that is not what they are saying, let one of them intervene now, because that has always been my understanding.

I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark) that the Bill has been a long time coming. The Countryside Agency is busily mapping the country, and I understand that the exercise will be completed by the end of 2003, which will be six and a half years after the general election that brought Labour to office. Why is it taking such a long time? Because my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister likes to bring people with him.

The Countryside Agency is doing a good, enthusiastic job and showing tremendous commitment. We must ensure that it is properly resourced. We must also ensure that we listen to the arguments and reservations expressed by people such as the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath). The Prime Minister does not want to be ideological about this. He is a hugely pragmatic politician. If there are problems about exercising the right to roam and the farmers and landowners have legitimate grievances, he will want to listen to them. He is a Prime Minister who consults like mad. No Bill has ever been consulted on more than this one. I think that we have consulted 60 million people in the United Kingdom.

The Bill is a good Bill, and should be welcomed, but—there is always a but—it can be improved in Committee. Inexplicably, it contains nothing about areas of outstanding natural beauty. I listened carefully to my right hon. Friend the Minister, and I think that he said that there would be a ministerial statement on AONBs at a later date; but why not have it now? We pass countryside legislation about once every 10 or 15 years. The Bill should be the vehicle. I would appreciate a response to that in the winding-up speech.

We all know that the Prime Minister wants to ban fox hunting, as all Labour Members here do. He said as much on television. The Bill could be a vehicle for that. I have an amendment in mind—when the Whips put me on the Standing Committee—that will allow us to ban fox hunting painlessly by saying that no hunt can take place within a mile of a public footpath. I am sure that that will be in order. It will be very effective when the entire country is criss-crossed with public footpaths.

There is a power to extend the right of access to coastal areas such as beaches, but why stop there? Why not extend the right of access to lake shores, river banks and canal tow paths? Why not go the whole hog? We have come a very long way from what the Country Landowners Association said a couple of years ago, just after the general election. I have used this quotation many times, because I just love it. They wanted a "right of visual access". I do not want a right of visual access. I do not want to look at the hills. I want to walk on them. That is what the Bill is for.

I want the landscape to be improved. What incredible hypocrisy we see in the reasoned amendment, as if we had inherited a glittering legacy of a thriving countryside and it all went dreadfully wrong in May 1997. The Tories left the landscape in a terrible state. Much of it was derelict. I have already referred to the 158,000 km of hedgerows that were ripped out. Walls were left to fall down: almost a third of dry stone walls are derelict. That is the great legacy. Every time I walk up Boulsworth hill, I pass a rusting tractor graveyard. The planning system has never tackled the piles of rusting machinery, and it should.

The right to roam is central to the Bill and I welcome it. The opponents who regularly go over the top do their arguments a disservice. People have stopped listening. The National Farmers Union has given a briefing to Members of Parliament. It says:

> Much of the upland area that is to be mapped as open country also play an important role as water gathering grounds. As a result the risk of pollution must be increased by allowing increased public access to it.

That is just ridiculous; it is farcical. In the forest of Bowland, North West Water has a catchment area that is open to the public. Why does the NFU still peddle that rubbish and ask us to give weight to it?

Nicholas van Hoogstraten has been our greatest ally. The Ramblers described him as a bullying millionaire. I can think of a choicer description, Mr. Deputy Speaker, which you would—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order.

6.6 pm

Mr. David Tredinnick (Bosworth): The hon. Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) spoke with great passion. I cannot understand why he is not sitting on the Front Bench, considering the way in which he spoke about the Prime Minister. I remember him well from the year that we spent together on the Channel Tunnel Rail Link Bill. He spoke with passion then, too.

There is a certain irony about the Bill. Part III is about endangered species. Following the Ayr by-election, when I look across the Chamber I see about 200 endangered species. The probability is that many Labour Members will lose their seats. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Bradford, North (Mr. Rooney) may yawn, but that is the fact.

I declare an interest in that I come from a farming background. My father farmed. I do not own any land, so it is not a registrable interest, but I love the countryside and I am very concerned about conservation and access. I resent the idea that all Conservative Members are against the principle of people enjoying the countryside. There is

much to be done to improve access to the countryside but the Bill contains a lot that needs changing, and it will probably spend a very long time in Committee.

Farmers will feel threatened by the Bill as it stands. If we are to have a happy compromise, with the constituents of the hon. Member for Pendle and others enjoying the countryside, the farmers' fears must be allayed. I was taken by what the right hon. Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark) said about our needing conciliation and consensus to manage the countryside. In fairness to Conservative Members, he referred to the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, which was a triumph of our Government. It was a great Act, and much care went into it.

Those who live in the countryside feel under threat in many respects, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) said. Rural communities are desperately concerned. Their livelihoods are under threat. We have lost many small farmers in Leicestershire recently, and there are problems with transport costs, planning and countryside sports. I attended the countryside march and rally in London. If ever there was an example of country people expressing their worries about the future of their way of life, that was it. It was not just about hunting.

One of the major bones of contention will be clause 21(6), about when landowners can exclude the public and whether they can do so on weekends, Christmas day and other holidays. The Minister for the Environment avoided the issue, which is crucial. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon said, how on earth are we supposed to deal with the problem of nesting birds and other breeding animals if there is an automatic right of access and the land cannot be closed off for more than four or five days at a time?

The message from the countryside march was, "Listen to us." I say to the Opposition—I still think of the Government as the Opposition—

Ms Candy Atherton (Falmouth and Camborne): The hon. Gentleman is three years out of date.

Mr. Tredinnick: We were in power for a very long time—a lot longer than this Government. To make the Bill work, the Government must seek the co-operation of the rural communities. At the moment, they are on a collision course, and that is regrettable. The Wildlife and Countryside Act was steered through the House with great care and consensus. New Labour has demolished much of the old structures of the other place, but many of the hereditary peers spent hours pondering that legislation to try to get it right. I do not claim that this Bill will not be carefully considered, but the 1981 Act certainly was.

What are the other issues of concern? Unrestricted access to sites of special scientific interest is bound to lead to damage. It takes only one careless or negligent person to do tremendous damage. As for dogs, I get the feeling that Labour Members have never walked a dog. If dogs are taken out into open countryside, they do not want to stay on the lead. Once they are off their lead, many owners find it difficult to get them back on the lead. That will lead to sheep worrying and other problems.

I am also concerned about the effect of clause 21(6) on ground-nesting birds and lambing. However, a devolution issue arises, which most people have missed, in connection with wildlife and nature conservation provisions. The improvements in management and enforcement envisaged in the Bill must be accompanied by adequate funding for the conservation agencies. The Minister can deal with English Nature in that respect, but the Countryside Council for Wales comes under the auspices of the Welsh Assembly. I wonder how the hon. Member for Cardiff, West (Mr. Morgan) will look at those issues. The hon. Members for Brecon and Radnorshire (Mr. Livsey) and for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) also raised that issue.

Other problems include statutory rights of access to village greens if they have not already been registered. What will happen if a disgruntled person decides to disrupt a cricket match? Will he in future have a statutory right to interfere with the match? The requirement for the mapping of all-access land will, I suspect, cause much repetition and should be closely monitored. The Ordnance Survey has, over the years, produced copious maps of the countryside.

I welcome the exclusion of woodland from the scope of the Bill. If it had been included, even more wildlife damage would have been likely, especially for nesting birds and other animals. I am sure that Labour Members believe that they understand the damage that can be done by a dog or one person walking in the wrong place at a particular time of year, but it is not unless one has lived in the countryside on a farm that one is truly aware of just how much damage can be done. I hope that that problem will be thoroughly addressed in Committee.

What appeal mechanism will exist for access points to the new open areas? "Local access forums" is a lovely phrase, but who will hear an appeal if that is necessary? How many wardens will be needed to enforce the measures and where will the money come from? The Bill provides no statutory protection for areas of outstanding natural beauty nor any duty on local authorities to maintain wildlife sites. That is another weakness.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Mr. Atkinson) mentioned a greater role for parish councils. I agree with him. For example, they could examine the possibilities of exchanging footpaths and creating new ones. That could be one way to provide the access that Labour Members want. I approve the safeguard in clause 74, which allows an appeal to the Secretary of State if a local authority refuses to act on a request for a diversion. It often happens that responsible landowners and other parties request a diversion—for example, for a housing estate—and the requests are refused or ducked.

The report "The state of the countryside 1999" found that the three main concerns of people living in the countryside were development, pollution and the removal of hedges and woods. The removal of hedges is a legitimate concern, and I have always hated the idea that the countryside could lose all its hedges. I confess that I think that the previous Government should have done something about that, and the Minister should do something now to ensure that we do not experience the mass removal of hedges when economic circumstances change.

Farmers face a desperately serious situation. We need co-operation, not confrontation, and I look to Ministers and my Front-Bench colleagues to make the Bill what it should be—an excellent Bill.

6.16 pm

Ms Candy Atherton (Falmouth and Camborne): I am very pleased to be able to take part in this debate, and I am proud to represent a constituency and a county known throughout the world for their great natural beauty. I welcome the Bill because many of its elements relate to causes and issues that are close to my heart.

I shall begin with a personal perspective. Like many other hon. Members, I am a keen birdwatcher. For me, a great day is a day spent watching little egrets feeding in the Exe estuary, or red kites in Wales. My interest in wildlife conservation grew out of my love of birds, and it is obvious that if we do not take care of the landscape, wildlife cannot thrive. In that context, SSSIs are rightly described as the jewel in the crown, and it was for that reason that I introduced a ten-minute Bill last year, which was supported by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and many other countryside and wildlife organisations, in which I sought to place obligations on landowners and users of land to repair damage sustained on SSSIs. The then Minister kindly agreed to adopt my Bill as part of the consultation. I am delighted to see that this Bill will enable conservation bodies such as English Nature to serve management notices on those landowners or occupiers who persist in refusing to co-operate in the best interests of the land.

I have at the moment a SSSI in my constituency which many feel could be under threat from development at Swanpool in Falmouth. Like many other hon. Members, I could give some of the worst horror stories chapter and verse, but we are all too well aware of the problems. I propose instead to look at the answers that the Bill provides.

When I introduced my Bill, I met local conservation bodies, including English Nature, which knew and made it quite clear that, while I wished the wrath of God to fall on the heads of transgressors, co-operation was the preferred way forward. They argued that, in the first instance at least, they wanted to work in partnership with landowners to seek agreement and find common ground. The Bill offers that possibility, and should be commended for the sensible path that it treads. The support that it has received from a wide spectrum of sources is testament to its skilled approach to this issue. It is right, for example, that compensation can be paid to those severely inconvenienced by a management scheme.

Of course, the sad reality is that a few would rather hinder this process than move it forward. The provision in this Bill for compulsory purchase where agreement proves impossible may be a last resort, but it is a necessary resort. Equally, while the Government are dangling the carrot of financial support, those found guilty of damaging SSSIs will rightly face a fine of up to £20,000 and—perhaps more important—will be forced to reinstate the land.

Compulsory restoration may prove far more effective than the fine as a preventive measure. The costs of repairing land where it has been deliberately despoiled could amount to hundreds of thousands of pounds, and the threat of financial repercussions must be the most powerful of disincentives.

I now turn to another part of the Bill that I particularly welcome—the protection of wild birds. To me, the egg collector and nest stealer represents the lowest form of life. I once visited a warden working for the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds on a remote Scottish island. He described coming across a peregrine nest thief hanging by his fingernails after slipping in pursuit of a nest. He graphically described the internal conflicts that swept through him as he pondered whether to rescue that sad individual. That may sound unduly harsh, but that warden saw the effects of such crimes all too often—the distraught parent birds and the depleted numbers the following season. Perhaps most disturbing of all, he saw birds deliberately poisoned by a sick minority of people—a practice that is thankfully in decline.

It will come as no surprise to the House to hear that I welcome the increased penalties and enforcements provided in the Bill. Those who seek to deceive by snatching birds from the wild and rearing their chicks will face their comeuppance. The ancestry of birds will be traced. Inspectors will have greater powers—and quite right too. If we cannot protect these birds, who will? I hope that some exemplary sentences will be meted out to those who hoard and steal wild bird eggs. They make big money from those birds—they should face big sentences.

Access and rights of way have received more attention than most aspects of the Bill—both during its preparation and since its publication. We have heard some excellent speeches. I have little to add to the comments of the majority, to the effect that these provisions are overdue and are to be applauded. They will open up vast tracts of our countryside and will enrich the relationship between the public and our natural heritage.

I have had many letters from constituents outraged by blocked footpaths, and I take this opportunity to pay tribute to my constituent Hazel Perham from Treverva, who has led the campaign in Cornwall for a number of years. Hazel is very supportive of the Bill, and for her, as for many like her, its successful passage through Parliament will be the realisation of a dream.

I believe and hope that landowners and farmers who oppose such measures will stop to consider the opportunities that they offer. The Bill is another key step in the creation of a living, breathing countryside, protected and embellished for the enjoyment of us all. What attracts people to living or visiting the countryside is its beauty, its landscape and its serenity. The more people experience the joys of the countryside, the more they will appreciate its value and value its existence. Alternative forms of income may be sought by those who maintain this natural heritage, through farm tourism and the sale of local produce. Our natural heritage will increasingly become a recognised label of quality—whether for the life style that it embodies or the produce that it supplies. To use the parlance of the time, this is a fine example of joined-up thinking and should be encouraged within the rural economy as well as within government.

It is partly in that context that I suggest that the omission of measures providing for the improved management of areas of outstanding natural beauty is disappointing, although I am heartened to hear that there may be an announcement. Again, I choose to focus more on the opportunities such measures would offer rather than on the supposed problems that they would cause.

Cornwall has a high proportion of areas of outstanding natural beauty. Some 20 per cent. of England's heritage coastline is in our county and is enjoyed by the whole nation. Unfortunately, existing legislation does not provide for its proper management, and there are not

sufficient resources to handle the task. By making management a statutory duty of local authorities, that deficiency could be addressed. This is not simply a question of landscape management, but of integrating the economic management of rural areas and building local partnerships that include landowners, local interests and national agencies.

It is my belief that that would benefit the rural economy. The potential would exist for the improved marketing of local produce and for the sensitive development of tourism. Such areas would be given an enhanced identity, to be used to their advantage in a number of ways. I encourage Ministers to give the question some thought. I also make a plea for Cornish hedges to be debated in Committee.

Notwithstanding those suggestions, I believe that the Bill represents an important step forward. It contributes to the creation of a living, breathing and working countryside. It facilitates an improved relationship between the public and the countryside, and it is with pleasure that I give it my enthusiastic support.

6.24 pm

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): In opening the debate, the Minister for the Environment said that changing the workings of the common agricultural policy was more important than the Bill. I agree with that, and I believe that there will be widespread disappointment in the countryside at the Government's choice of priorities. There is a fear that by the time the Government get round to tackling the real problems in the countryside, many involved in agriculture and the allied industries will have gone to the wall. That process will not be arrested or obviated by the prospect of the much-vaunted rural White Paper.

My hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman) pointed out, quite rightly, that there is a fundamental issue of principle at stake in this debate. That view was not shared by the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath), who seemed to cast aspersions on us for raising a point of principle in the debate. Second Reading debates are traditionally the right time at which to voice reservations about the principle of the Bill under discussion: if we do not raise matters of principle at this stage of the Bill's passage, it will be inappropriate to raise them at a later stage.

The point of principle is an important one. It has to do with the fact that we are increasingly a property-owning democracy. Ownership of property in this country is protected by the law of property. Millions of homeowners will appreciate and understand that an important principle is at stake. They want someone to defend the principle that if one owns a property, one has full rights over that property, which should not be encumbered by the public or anybody else. The Bill, of course, seeks to change that principle in a fundamental way.

When I intervened on the Minister and asked what precedent there was for this departure from what has previously been the case—the sacrosanct right of ownership over property—my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames) said, from a sedentary position, "Soviet Russia." That opinion would not be shared by my constituent Mr. Parish of Lydbury North, who wrote in respect of the statutory right of access:

> this is an infringement of the basic rights of free and unfettered possession of one's property . . . Not even in the thankfully-departed Soviet Union was the public allowed access at will . . .

It is no defence for the Government to say that a majority of the 2,000 responses to their consultation paper supported the statutory right of access. There are potentially far more users of rights of way or rights of access than landowners. At the risk of appearing somewhat trite, it is like asking the general populace whether they are in favour of free beer when there are more beer drinkers than brewers, or asking whether they want lower taxes when there are more taxpayers than tax collectors.

I have a very lovely constituency in the south of Shropshire. It has notable landmarks such as the Clee hills, the Stiperstones, Long Mynd, Caer Caradoc. Some of them are in private ownership, some are in the ownership of the National Trust. I have never, in my 13 years in the House, had complaints from constituents about access to the countryside. Indeed, the access provided is adequate—certainly in my county—and that is praiseworthy.

Furthermore, as a lifelong recreational walker I have never, in any part of the country—whether in the south-west, in Wales, Scotland, or the Pennines—

Mr. David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Gill: In normal circumstances, I would, but as the hon. Gentleman knows, there is a 10-minute limit on speeches.

I have never experienced any problems when walking anywhere in the country. When I walk in those places, I accept that I do so at my own risk—on that matter, my views might differ from those of Labour Members. In Committee, it is important that we thrash out the limits of the liability of landowners. In a moment, I shall expand on that point in relation to one of my constituents.

There is already a huge network of rights of way. I have never received any complaints about the extent of that network, or about access to it. The hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Mr. Bennett) is a keen walker, who is dedicated to achieving the aims and objects of the Bill. He pointed out that footpath legislation is not an easy matter. That is an understatement: as we know, the matter is fraught with difficulty. If time had permitted, I should have liked to give the House many examples from my constituency to demonstrate that point.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) was correct to point out that, if the Bill receives its Second Reading, we must be careful to get the detail right in Committee. If we do not, there will be many disputes—possibly leading to litigation. I appeal to Ministers to bear in mind the increasing needs of recreational horse riders, who sometimes experience difficulty in finding paths that they can use. We must ensure that we take their requirements into account before the Bill is enacted.

Will the Minister consider the legal position of my constituent Mr. Hunter of Beckbury, who told me that

[Mr. Gill]

three sides of his three-acre garden are bounded by a footpath and agricultural land? The whole area was fenced with chain-link fencing. His letter stated:

> Over the last few years, people have broken down my fencing, allowed dogs to foul my land, and dumped their cans and rubbish. The last straw was when some men dumped an old three piece suite of furniture.
>
> To protect my property I have had part of my boundary fence replaced with a four strand barbed wire fence.

Mr. Hunter asks what risk he runs of being taken to court for any injury that ramblers might do themselves on his barbed-wire fence. He rightly points out:

> Surely, if people are allowed to roam over other people's land, they should do so at their own risk.

That is also my view.

As the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Mr. Pickthall) said, the footpath network is a national asset. I agree. However, it is important to understand how and why that national asset came into being. As most Members will be aware, footpaths were established because in previous centuries, families living on farms used those routes to go to church, to the pub, to their neighbours, to the mill to get their corn milled, and so on. I am keen that the legislation should offer a suitable and simple means whereby those historical paths are rationalised sensibly for both landowners and walkers.

I caution against the law of unintended consequences—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

6.35 pm

Ms Chris McCafferty (Calder Valley): It is always a great privilege for hon. Members to speak in the Chamber on an issue of major importance—locally and nationally—to their own constituents. This is just such an occasion.

I wholeheartedly support my constituents' demand for a right of access to local moorland and heath from which they have been banned for centuries. Furthermore, I wholly support the national campaign for access to the 4 million acres of mountain, moor, heath, down and registered common land, denied by so few to so many.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment on introducing the Bill. I also acknowledge the inspiration of lifelong campaigners whom it is a privilege to know and to call friends. Benny Rothman, now 88 years old, is one of the six campaigners who were sent to jail for leading the mass trespass on Kinder Scout in 1932. He did so much to raise awareness and interest in access issues. Local campaigners, Alan and Elsie Gaskell, have been involved in the struggle for the past 50 years. Alan is now retired, but his mere presence at the local authority rights of way committee is still enough to give any ill-informed councillor pause for thought.

In my constituency of Calder Valley, much of the upland has been designated an area of outstanding natural beauty. Significant areas have been designated sites of special scientific interest. Always wild, always beautiful and sometimes unforgiving, there are secret places that calm the brain, expand the mind and make the spirits soar.

Regrettably, the wildest and most beautiful places are often the most inaccessible; not because of the selfishness and perversity of nature, but—sadly—because of our fellow man. One such place is known locally as Boulsworth moor. Lad Law is its summit; at 1700 ft, it is the highest point in the south Pennines. That is the very landscape that inspired the Brontë sisters, who lived nearby.

As long ago as the 1950s, a public inquiry found in favour of access to Boulsworth, but nothing was done to achieve it. Attempts to negotiate access have been continuous since the 1970s, but with no success at all. The land on the Yorkshire side still cannot be walked on without the prior consent of the landowner.

In 1977, a three-mile concessionary path was allowed by the North West water authority on the Lancashire side of Boulsworth. At present, North West Water does not object—to its credit—to walkers on its land. Unfortunately, most of the area is in Yorkshire.

There are five landowners on Boulsworth. Four are opposed to access for walkers, although they encourage numerous groups with shooting rights; only one does not object to walkers. When Tom Stephenson, who was responsible for establishing the Pennine way, wanted the route to cross Boulsworth, he was stopped by a local landowner—Lord Savile—and was forced to devise a route that passed over lower ground. Why?

Of course, it is true that SSSI land in an area of outstanding natural beauty deserves and needs special protection. I look forward to the Minister's statement on that aspect of the Bill. It is right that access to open country is linked to care and respect for farming, landowning, shooting and nature conservation interests. It is important that the Bill provides a duty of care on all who use the countryside to respect the country code and the needs of a working landscape. For the majority, walking is an innocent and harmless activity, but we must protect the countryside against the destructive minority, whoever and wherever they are.

Ironically, when it comes to harming the countryside, it is not walkers who are the main culprits. It is not walkers who have rooted up 100,000 miles of hedgerows in the past decade, and it is certainly not walkers who have polluted our rivers and aquifers with pesticides and chemical fertilisers.

No farmer, landowner or conservationist has anything to fear from the Bill, which provides the proper protection that their crops and livestock and the natural habitats on their land require. It would be wrong, and indeed foolish, to offer anything less.

We have heard many prophets of doom today, especially from the Opposition Benches, claiming that the countryside will be irrevocably changed for the worse if the Government grant access to the countryside. We have heard the same arguments used in connection with the banning of hunting with dogs. Yes, the countryside would be irrevocably changed, but I believe for the better—and not just for visitors to the countryside.

My constituents live in a semi-rural community, often working in the countryside, yet they are powerful advocates for change. How can that be? Well, we might say that it is because they are bloody-minded, proud, pernickety and independent, as they have been recently described in a book about the area, and perhaps our character is formed by the landscape and the weather, but I would add that it is because they are also canny Yorkshire men and women, with a generosity of spirit, who are proud of their heritage and happy to share it with

others. They acknowledge a common interest in the natural beauty and special qualities of the uplands, and the need to work together for their protection and enhancement. They recognise that improved access will require better local public transport, so that everyone can access the countryside without using their cars. That would be good for visitors, and even better for the local community. They would welcome the increased revenue that sensitively managed tourism will bring to the area, and they recognise that the interests of walkers and of people who work and live in the country can, and do, coincide.

The Bill is the most significant piece of legislation in 50 years, and it marks the pinnacle of a 116-year campaign by countryside lovers everywhere. It fulfils Labour's manifesto commitment to give people greater freedom to explore our countryside. It dramatically increases access to open space and it modernises our rights of way for the first time in 100 years. It provides for a balance between the rights and the responsibilities of people enjoying the countryside, and will give a major boost to everyone who wants greater access.

I believe that the new rights and responsibilities in the Bill will produce a countryside partnership that benefits everyone. We shall all be better off. That is why we need to change the law. That is why I am supporting the Bill, and that is why all Members of the House should support it.

6.43 pm

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire): It is a great shame that the Government have decided to combine in the same Bill a considerable amount of legislation to protect the countryside and further protect sites of special scientific interest—legislation on which there is cross-party consensus, and with which the vast majority of the House will concur except on matters of detail—and measures dealing with the right of access, on which it is well known that there is huge disagreement on principle. It is an even greater shame that the Government have decided to do so at this late stage in the parliamentary timetable, when only a third or so of the parliamentary year remains for the Bill to complete its stages. As a result, there is a risk that the Government will lose the whole thing because of discussions on one aspect, or that, in order to keep to a timetable, they will be forced to introduce unfair guillotine motions and so risk damaging the good bits of the Bill by cutting short debate.

As I have said previously in the House, I oppose the idea of the right to roam or the right to access. I oppose it because, as is abundantly clear from many of the sedentary remarks made by Labour Members during the debate and from one or two speeches, it is based on what I believe to be that most ignoble of human traits—envy. It is an anti-landowner, anti-property and anti-privacy aspect of their Bill. *[Interruption.]* It is all very well for Labour Members to laugh; they were not sitting here listening to comments of the type that were made throughout the opening speeches, which showed an unwillingness to accept the rights and responsibilities that go with land ownership.

I believe that the Government would have achieved their objectives, which I wholly support, of allowing people to walk in the countryside, enjoy the countryside and, let us hope, learn a bit more about the countryside—especially agriculture—as they walk in the countryside, far more effectively and for far more people if they had chosen to develop a comprehensive network of footpaths. For the Minister for the Environment to use the argument that the voluntary approach has not been wholly successful as a reason for introducing the right to roam is of course—

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Chris Mullin): It has been tried and does not work.

Mr. Paice: The fact is that, under the voluntary approach, there has been an increase in access to footpaths. It may not have been as big an increase as we might like, but it is a red herring for the Minister to use that as a justification, because I would be quite happy if there were some element of statutory—

Mr. David Taylor: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Paice: No; I will not.

I would be quite happy if there were some statutory basis for that comprehensive network of footpaths, but the Government have made no attempt to create it. As a result, for the vast majority of people in the south-east of England, including my constituents, the right of access provided by the Bill is relatively immaterial. Most would need to drive considerable distances to reach the open land to which the Bill applies, whereas a comprehensive network of footpaths would apply to them near their homes.

However, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) said, we must accept the parliamentary arithmetic. Therefore I want to make some constructive comments about the Bill and about measures that I hope that the Government will accept in Committee.

The Government have identified all the key issues of concern on the access issues, but I fear that they have fallen down on the solutions. I hope that that is because the Minister does not fully understand the implications of what he proposes. I fear that perhaps he does understand and has dismissed the concerns on several issues.

Such issues include the potential damage to heathland and moorland. They also include the inadequacy of 28 days' temporary closure, the impact of access on nesting and sporting activities, and the absurdity of ignoring that closure at weekends and on bank holidays—as though the birds would understand that. The issues surrounding temporary closure were raised by many of my hon. Friends. There are also problems relating to dogs on the lead.

There are problems of liability relating not to natural features, but to man-made features even if they were made millennia ago, which is quite possible on some of our moors. There are ancient man-made structures, very ancient mine workings or quarries. What about gates and those dry stone walls that we have heard so much about? What about ancient peat cuttings? All present hazards and yet they are not natural features.

[Mr. Paice]

There is also the issue of the penalties in the Bill, which are simply to ban an individual for the rest of the day or to declare that they cease to have the rights under the Bill and therefore become a trespasser under common law. Wowee! The latter will not strike fear into the average walker, because we all know that the law of trespass is highly ineffective; whereas the landowner is, as my hon. Friends have said, at risk of incurring much greater cost and liability as a result of the Bill. As several hon. Members have said, there is no justification for the right of access during the night, for all the reasons that have been stated.

The proposals will require landowners to police the legislation. At present, people understand the position on access, but they are not necessarily able to recall, for every piece of land, all the constraints that will be put on them. Simply maintaining the status quo on liability or on trespass is not enough. That fails to take on the purpose of the Bill, which is to increase access and to encourage more people to walk in the countryside and to range over much greater areas of land. The dry stone wall that they could not go near on a footpath is one that they might be able to clamber over as part of the right to roam.

In the few minutes left to me, I wish to consider other aspects of the Bill. I welcome, as far as they go, the changes on public rights of way and road traffic. In particular, I welcome the constraints on the use of cross-country vehicles on green lanes. As the Minister knows, the British Horse Society is concerned about the implications of those proposals for horse users, and I hope that that issue will be addressed.

I also welcome the concept of restricted byways. However, as I said in an intervention on the Minister for the Environment and as the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) made clear, some people need to use vehicles—and perhaps agricultural vehicles—to access property along such byways, but they do not want the byways to become open to all traffic. The two options in the Bill are not enough and I hope that the Government will consider this issue.

The Bill's provisions for the creation of stopping-up and diversionary powers move in the right direction. I particularly welcome schedule 7, which allows for stopping up where footpaths cross school grounds. In my constituency, a footpath crosses the campus of a large secondary school which was once two schools. The school had to spend a large sum of money to put up security fencing on both sides of the footpath to salve its own conscience and to do what it thought right to protect children. The proposals in the Bill would have prevented that.

Clause 56 refers to obstructions to the carriageway. I note that it does not include provisions for temporary buildings, and my constituency faces serious problems with travellers' caravans obstructing the byways. I hope that we can consider that issue.

There is a need to upgrade the protection of sites of special scientific interest. However, I emphasise that the damage that we all know is taking place is not, as Labour Members have implied, just the result of the activities of farm owners and landowners. Often, the damage is caused by developers, sometimes with the Government's compliance. For example, the Cardiff bay scheme, which was the result of a Government-sponsored Bill, and the Newbury bypass are among many developments to which the Government agreed, but which damaged SSSIs.

Missing in the provisions is a consideration of cost. Nothing in the Bill will enable landowners to be provided with the money to carry out the management notices that are submitted. I do not advocate that they should receive every penny for every minor improvement, but some management programmes are costly to develop and resources should be made available for them. As others have said, it goes without saying that, given the current state of agriculture, landowners cannot afford to undertake such developments.

6.53 pm

Mr. David Lepper (Brighton, Pavilion): My speech will be largely congratulatory in tone. First, I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment and the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin), on having secured a slot for the Bill in the legislative timetable. Over the past year or so, their approach has drawn together all the appropriate organisations with an interest in the related issues of access and protection. They have listened to the concerns and fears of those organisations, and this Bill is the result.

The approach of bringing people together is reflected in the national countryside access forum. In advance of the Bill, it brought landowners, farmers, ramblers and local authorities together to consider some of the detailed problems that might arise and the practicalities of putting the proposals into action. How different that is from the approach of Conservative Members. Divisiveness has characterised every one of their speeches. The hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman) seemed to make the longest speech that I have heard in my three years in the House. He managed not only to patronise people whom he described as simple farmers, but to characterise ramblers as hooligans. Similarly, Nicholas van Hoogstraten, to whom my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) referred, and about whom I shall say more shortly, described ramblers as riff-raff. That divisive approach has been most regrettable.

However, I welcome the speeches of Opposition Members. If they are widely publicised, they will put new heart into Labour voters throughout the country. The Opposition criticise us often enough for not implementing our manifesto promises, so it is a bit rich for them to criticise us for implementing two of them—on wildlife protection and the right to roam.

I have congratulated Ministers, but I wish also to congratulate those Back Benchers who, in the life of this Parliament, have kept the issues of wildlife protection and access to the countryside high on the parliamentary agenda. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle for his Right to Roam Bill, of which I was pleased to be a sponsor. In this Parliament, there have been 22 debates in the House of Commons on wildlife protection; nine private Members' Bills including, in 1998, my own Wildlife Bill; 62 early-day motions on related issues, including my own—let me congratulate myself—which received the backing of 349 Members from all the parties in the House; and eight Select Committee reports on wildlife protection.

I also congratulate the non-governmental organisations which have helped to keep these issues high on the political agenda. It would take me all my 10 minutes to list them all—I am sure that I would forget some even if I did—so I shall pay tribute to the Wildlife and Countryside Link, which has brought so many organisations together, and to the Ramblers Association. Those organisations have made careful and well-argued points, lobbied individual Members and Ministers and have kept the issue alive with members of the public. The campaign that they have waged is already seen, and will continue to be seen, as a model of its kind. Those organisations secured 250,000 petitions nationally on the issue of wildlife protection. People from town and country called for exactly the type of legislation that we have in the Bill. To be inclusive, I add that the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake), who is not present at the moment, and I presented those signatures to No. 10 Downing street about a year ago.

The Bill is welcome and much needed. I first became aware of problems facing sites of special scientific interests three years ago, when a farmer ploughed up part of Offham down near Lewes, close to my constituency. When in opposition, my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment went with me to that site and his intervention helped to secure action to prevent damage to it. That site, which is on the Clayton and Offham escarpment, is now subject to a long-term, managed restoration programme, and far too many sites have had to become subject to such programmes.

The need for protection has been well argued, but this Bill shifts the emphasis from preventing damage to positive management for important SSSIs. I welcome the proposals that allow for the formulation and, if necessary, the imposition of management plans; an increase in the penalties for damage to those sites; the power to order restoration of damaged sites; and an increase in the penalties for damage to sites other than SSSIs. I also welcome the proposals for greater access. It has always seemed to me that access goes hand in hand with environmental protection, rather than being at odds with it. Other hon. Members have mentioned measures that could have been included in the Bill, and I am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister will address those in his reply.

I come now to two issues of particular local concern. I represent a Sussex constituency that includes part of the south downs. I did not know until recently that, taking East and West Sussex together, Sussex is the second most wooded county in England. Unlike the hon. Member for Bosworth (Mr. Tredinnick), who welcomed the exclusion of woodland from the Bill, I ask the Minister to think again about that exclusion—otherwise, parts of the south downs that should be open to access will be excluded.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Lepper: No, I regret that time is too short.

Finally, I return to the subject of Nicholas von Hoogstraten and his company, Rarebargain Ltd., which was, thanks to the Ramblers Association, recently fined £1,600 and required to pay costs because of the obstruction of a footpath on his estate near Uckfield, where the building of his mausoleum is in progress. I am concerned that the Bill might not prevent obstruction such as that perpetrated by Mr. van Hoogstraten because it does not provide a right to require the removal of buildings that obstruct rights of way. It is a building that obstructs part of the right of way on the van Hoogstraten estate.

That is a point of detail, but it is of local concern to me, to my constituents and, I am sure, to Mr. van Hoogstraten. I believe that he was once one of my constituents, but thankfully he is one no longer.

Mr. David Taylor: Where has he gone then?

Mr. Lepper: I hope, as I am sure my constituents do, that he is incarcerated in his mausoleum.

I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will address those two points of detail in his wind-up speech. I end as I began, by congratulating all those who have brought the Bill before us and by welcoming it.

7.3 pm

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): When the Minister for the Environment announced these proposals on 8 March last year, I questioned the wisdom of allowing a general right to roam over extensively grazed land because that is the very environment that is under the greatest ecological threat. Typically, the areas that we are referring to are moorland, heath and heather uplands. They are delicately balanced areas, and I warned against putting them under ever-greater pressure with the inevitable further decline in upland ground-laying species of birds. I was greeted with howls of derision and even anger from Labour Members. I repeat that warning.

I was born and brought up in a rural environment, and I would welcome more access to it, but access that is managed and does not destroy the very environment that we all seek to enjoy. I am not rowing a boat for any landowner or sectional interest, but we must ensure that the environment is not destroyed as a direct result of ill-thought-out measures.

I hope that the debate will not descend to howls of derision. There are basic truths that need to be repeated. I do not object to increased access at all. The hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Mr. Bennett) mentioned the Berwyn and the Aran mountains. As a lawyer, I was directly responsible for opening up the Aran mountains and negotiating voluntary agreements between ramblers and local landowners. Those agreements stood the test of time and still operate 20 years later. No one should say that the voluntary approach has utterly failed; in some areas it has succeeded rather well. The Berwyn mountains is another example, and there are others in England and Wales.

It has been said that some 12,000 miles of footpaths have fallen into disrepair because local authorities are not taking their responsibilities seriously or, more likely, do not have the money to maintain them. Reintroducing those paths to the UK network would make a considerable difference. I note that the Countryside Commission has said that £30 million would be required annually for five years to reinstate those paths. That would be money well spent.

Mr. Gordon Prentice *rose—*

Mr. Llwyd: The hon. Gentleman, who I will not allow to intervene—I do not insult him, but time is short—

[Mr. Llwyd]

rightly said that most land in the UK is within a short distance of the footpath network. That is fine, if it is true, and I want there to be more footpaths in the network, but it begs the question whether we need the Bill at all. Should we not have started on the footpath network first? The Government may be ducking that issue so that they can provide access on the cheap.

I may be wrong about that, but I am sure that we need a careful balance in the Bill between the expectations of ramblers and walkers and those of the occupiers of land. We need a balance between the needs of walkers and the need to nurture the birds and wildlife on the uplands. There must also be a balance between the legitimate right to use the land for animal husbandry and the right of access. I do not see that balance in the Bill. On the one hand, the occupier who damages a site of special scientific interest will be fined £20,000, but a person who trespasses and does the same damage will be told to go away for a day. That is not the balance that I seek, and any sensible, right-thinking person would agree with me.

In any event, as other hon. Members have said, the law of trespass is in complete disarray and has been for centuries. As any law student will know, the old wooden lie is that "Trespassers will be prosecuted." They cannot be prosecuted, apart from under limited provisions on criminal trespass. It is no use saying that the law exists to back up the occupier—it is of no use at all.

We need to consider fragile habitats and to ensure that there are sufficient conservation safeguards. Again, the Bill appears to be deficient. Commentators far more informed than I am will tell the House that the merlin, golden plover and others would be at great risk from unrestricted access during the breeding season. The Bill does not allow only for linear access; people will be able to walk side by side across a heath and cause destruction. Again, I say let us have access but we should be careful about how we allow that access. Clause 1(1)(d) says that "access land" includes any land which

> is situated more than 600 metres above sea level.

Does that make sense? That environment is very delicate.

I appreciate that this is a Second Reading debate, but I ask the Minister whether the definition of "cultivated land" refers only to land used for crops or whether it covers grassland that is cultivated regularly. That is an important point. The devaluation of land with no compensation may well breach human rights legislation, and that will be a live issue. I hope that the Government will think again about that, despite the section 19 statement at the start of the Bill.

Common land is vital to the smaller farmer because he or she will graze animals on that land. That is especially true in Wales. Even at this late stage, I echo the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) in asking for that matter to be left to the National Assembly for Wales because it is a local matter for Wales and Wales only. It is only right that we should do so. There are particular strains on the Welsh uplands. The lambing season is extended owing to inclement weather and the need to try to vary it in order to capture the market. Twenty-eight days is of no use whatever.

I shall hurriedly refer to one or two comments from my constituents. Mrs. Rogers, a keen horse rider, asked me to raise the following points:

> Any plans to improve rights of way must carry total commitment.
>
> Section 56 needs to be amended to allow diversionary routes to be arranged.

A sitting Justice of the Peace refers to the climbing of Cader Idris by about 80,000 visitors a year. That leads to erosion but, as he says,

> I am not against . . . Open Access.

He continues:

> I do believe that if we are not careful in a National Park the visitors will destroy the uniqueness and the charm of what they have come to see. Also in livestock areas like Meirionnydd it would ignore the public's need for way-marked routes because most of them are fortunately sensible to the dangers to livestock that their rambling can bring.

He says finally:

> there . . . seem to be double standards . . . here. On the one hand Landowners face criminal prosecution"

and on the other, trespassers will be subject to the archaic law of trespass. I agree with him.

The steward of the internationally renowned Aberdovey golf club refers to many people in the area walking their dogs on the common. He asks that we ensure that dogs will be on leads, as the Bill stipulates, and that there will be some financial support to assist landowners with the erection of notices to inform the public of their duties.

I heard the Minister's comments on liability for injury with regard to clause 13, but we need to consider the matter further. I agree with what has been said about the doctrine of volenti non fit injuria—one enters at one's own risk. That would be entirely reasonable in the circumstances. I know that farmers are concerned about the matter.

I am speaking not on behalf of large farmers, but those who are struggling to make a living in the present economic climate. They are desperately worried about the cost of insurance and of compliance. Thus I return to my original premise—I am not against access per se, quite the reverse, but the Bill has many grey and potentially problematic areas which must be clarified and amended. Above all, such matters should be left to the National Assembly for Wales.

I warmly welcome the excellent provisions in parts II and III on public rights of way and road traffic and nature conservation and wildlife protection. It is very good to see them; I am pleased that they are in the Bill. However, for the reasons that I gave earlier, I and my party cannot support Second Reading and will reserve our opinion on Third Reading.

7.13 pm

Mr. Martin Caton (Gower): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd). I did not agree with many of his reservations about access, but until this evening, I was not aware of the part that he played in opening up the Aran mountains to the public. As someone who has benefited from that, I take this opportunity to thank him.

Like all my hon. Friends, I celebrate the introduction of the Bill. I join my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Mr. Bennett) in rejoicing at it. It is a major piece of legislation that moves us forward considerably in

the right direction. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment and his Front-Bench team. Their understanding that the future of our countryside—the way in which we use it, value it and protect it—is all about balance shines through the Bill.

The Bill balances the legitimate claims of landowners and land managers and their need and right to produce food and other goods from that land, with, first, the equally valid claim of the public to enjoy the freedom of the countryside and its precious and varied qualities, especially those of our least tamed areas, and secondly, the claim of the countryside itself—the flora, fauna, landscape and high-quality natural and man-made environments. The Bill is about striking the right balance for this first century of the new millennium. I am sure that that was the Government's objective, and that is how we should measure the Bill's success.

On the whole, the Government have been remarkably successful. In the value of its separate measures, I believe that the Bill will work. It also provides a new framework for considering that balance between agricultural production, freedom of access and environmental protection—a framework in which we may stop regarding such claims as competing or even conflicting, and instead recognise that, in future, we must, for the benefit of all three interests, make them increasingly complementary.

In these few minutes, I want to say something about the countryside and wildlife protection parts of the Bill. Before doing so, I put on record my full support for the creation of the new rights of access to mountain, moor, heath, down and common land. That should not be underestimated or downplayed. It is a significant extension to the freedom of the people of this country. It is motivated not by envy but by a desire to improve quality of life. The extension is made without in any way endangering the livelihood of the farming community, contrary to what some of the scaremongers on the Opposition Benches have suggested.

I welcome the modernisation of our rights of way laws, although I hear some of my hon. Friends' reservations. I look forward to hearing those arguments developed in Committee. I also welcome the requirement on councils to improve the network and to take into account the needs of disabled people and others with mobility problems in considering applications for new stiles and gates.

The target for completion of the historic record of rights of way—25 years—sounds a long time, but I know from my council that to deliver on that will probably require a doubling of the activity rate in the department responsible—and I do not think that my council is the furthest behind in England and Wales by any means.

On the countryside protection arm of the Bill, one need only look at what has happened to so many of our sites of special scientific interest over the years to realise that the way we treat them must change and that the penalties for damaging them must increase to constitute a real deterrent. The Bill deals with current deficiencies and I am sure will result in much better protection for those special sites, but new legislation is also required for another group of special countryside areas: our areas of outstanding natural beauty.

I declare my enthusiastic interest: I represent the first designated AONB in the country. Gower, like all the 40 other AONBs in England and Wales, was designated under the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949, which in many ways the Bill succeeds. The 1949 Act was flawed in its provisions on AONBs. It granted power to designate, but did not make anyone responsible for the areas' management. That was in marked contrast to provisions on national parks.

Over the decades, Ministers of various Governments, including this one, have assured us that AONBs, in terms of landscape quality and wildlife conservation, are equal in their value to the nation to our national parks. Yet over that same time, we have seen very different approaches, failures of approach and enormous variation of approach to individual AONBs.

The lack of any requirement for anyone to take responsibility for managing AONBs has resulted in a loss of some quality landscape features and valuable natural habitats. We can put that right by a straightforward and simple amendment that would give local authorities statutory responsibility for the management of AONBs, including a requirement to draw up management plans. That would be building on best practice. We should grab the opportunity to provide better protection. It would be totally in line with the approach in other parts of the Bill and with the philosophy underlying it.

I hope that, during the passage of this important piece of legislation, Ministers will be prepared to look again at the subject of AONBs. I heard what my right hon. Friend the Minister said about resourcing, and those changes are welcome, but we must reconsider the way in which we look after such areas and not just think about the amount of money involved. The Bill is excellent, but it would be better if it also tackled the management of AONBs.

The Bill would also be improved by amendments to provide better protection for hedgerows, other field boundaries and landscape features. Ministers have acknowledged the damaging consequences of the loss of many of our hedgerows in the past half century—indeed, they set up the hedgerows review, which made several recommendations in 1998. As my right hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark) says, the Bill provides no opportunity to implement some of those recommendations, especially the provision whereby local authorities identify important local hedgerows in consultation with the communities they serve.

It might also be useful to investigate whether the protection we provide for hedgerows could be extended to cover features that are often regarded locally as hedges, but are not defined as such in legislation. I have in mind the cloddiau found in Wales: they are often valuable in terms of their antiquity, the wildlife habitat they provide and their landscape quality, but they are really banks covered with grass, ground-cover plants and gorse or bracken.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice), I suspect that it will be some time before another major countryside Bill is introduced. It is vital that we use the vehicle now available to us to improve the prospects for our rural areas, the people who live and work in those areas, visitors and the quality of the countryside itself.

7.21 pm

Mr. David Atkinson (Bournemouth, East): I support the principle of Bill, as I did that of the private Member's

[Mr. David Atkinson]

Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) almost exactly a year ago, which is to allow access to those areas of the greatest beauty in England and Wales, which, until now, has been denied to our constituents. As a hiker and a mountaineer, I have always shared the anger of those who complain that there remain mountains and moors, heath and downland, coasts and beaches that can never be seen by the public, except with special permission. That denial is a legacy of feudalism, persisting rather like those ancient covenants that prevent our constituents from building a swimming pool in their back garden—as remains the case in parts of my constituency today.

Of course I accept that the legitimate interests of the owners of such land must be protected, and the Government claim to have recognised that in their proposals. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman) and others have said, some of the proposed protection for landowners falls short of that which is required and there remains inadequate protection for wildlife, especially native plant life. I share some of those concerns and I expressed them in relation to the Right to Roam Bill last year.

It is right that we now proceed with the right legislation to enable access, as the Bill would provide. A voluntary approach, as advocated by representatives of landowners, will never deliver the degree of access required. In that respect, the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949, which attempted to improve access, has failed, the comments of the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd) notwithstanding.

Moreover, there has always been a misunderstanding on the part of some landowners and farmers of the protection that legislation would afford them. My constituency is predominantly urban, but there remains open rural space that is farmed, although it continues to be threatened by development. When I participated in the Second Reading of the Right to Roam Bill last year, I received a letter from a farmer constituent who noted that I was advocating the notion of the public having the freedom to trample over his ploughed fields; he had not appreciated that that Bill contained protection against such intrusion. Today's Bill, while providing for and protecting rights of access, certainly makes clear the responsibilities, obligations and restrictions on those who seek such access to protect the rights of farmers and landowners.

I have several reservations about the Bill, the first of which relates to clause 13, which addresses the fundamental issue of occupiers' liability. Everyone exercising the right to roam has to assume responsibility for his or her own actions; thus I welcome clause 13, which amends the Occupiers' Liability Acts of 1957 and 1984. However, I remain concerned about the wording of the amendment to the 1984 Act, mainly the use of the word "natural" in respect of obstacles. That term does not include reasonable and necessary land management measures which, although essential to the good of the land and to access, provide an obstacle or hazard. It would be better to distinguish between obstacles that are intentionally placed so as to create a hazard and those that are either natural or the consequence of legitimate land management. I hope that that can be clarified in Committee.

My second reservation relates to the access provisions contained in clause 21, which deals with exclusion or restriction of access by the landowner. Under the clause, the "entitled person" can apply for access to the land to be restricted, but such restrictions are limited to 28 days a year and cannot include Saturdays, Sundays, Christmas day, Good Friday or a bank holiday. However, without harbouring any malicious desire to deny others enjoyment, a landowner may have good reasons to restrict access on a weekend. Would it not be more sensible for the access authority to make a reasoned judgment on the merits of each case?

The question of who should bear financial responsibility for access concerns many of my right hon. and hon. Friends. The Bill is vague on that point. The owner bears the responsibility, in agreement with the access authority, for carrying out work to provide reasonable access, and the authority is to provide a contribution to the cost of that work—but what constitutes an appropriate contribution? Is the landowner expected to shoulder 50 per cent. of the costs, or 10 per cent? What happens if the relevant parties do not agree on the issue?

Under the Bill, local authorities have an option to employ wardens, but the cost of employing them is not covered. What is to be the source of funding for such wardens? Moreover, is it wrong for the owner of the land to have to pay for signposts to guide members of the public on to his land? I look forward to hearing the Minister's response to those points.

Last year's Right to Roam Bill was withdrawn because of the Government's commitment to introduce a more comprehensive Bill which would also provide greater protection for wildlife. There can be no one who does not welcome greater protection for wildlife; there is more awareness than ever before of the need to protect what is left of our completely natural environment and our endangered species. However, the Bill does not provide adequate protection from those who abuse access and threaten wildlife.

First, abuses under schedule 2 that are not already covered by legislation on criminal damage fall under the civil law. That prevents the authority, the landowner or any legitimate user of the countryside from taking action necessary to deal with an immediate problem. Irreversible damage could be done in minutes to the habitat of creatures such as the great crested newt, but all the police could do is take names and apply for a court injunction. The punishment imposed on a trespasser who fails to conform with schedule 2 is that his or her right of access to that land is removed for the remainder of the day; even if it were possible to enforce such a restriction, it is hardly a disincentive to offending.

Secondly, on a more general point, the Bill does not appear to make provision adequate to meet the need to protect species that are ecologically vulnerable and declining, especially those that spend half the year in hibernation. Such species include the great crested newt, the natterjack toad, the smooth snake and, most endangered of all, the sand lizard. Those living in SSSIs are the best protected, those living in farm ponds, which are rapidly becoming obsolete, are less protected, and those in the way of development have no future.

Despite the general protection called for in the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, it strikes me that more positive management is needed in respect of such rare and

endangered species. The location of such species should be registered and the owners of the land informed. That would be a role for nature conservation agencies which, until now, have been administratively preoccupied with SSSIs. Such measures would answer representations that I have received from the Herpetological Conservation Trust, which is located in my constituency.

In anticipation of the Bill's introduction, I consulted interested organisations such as the Ramblers Association and the British Mountaineering Council. In calling for rights of access, those organisations are genuinely committed to the protection of the rights of the landowner. They understand that the interests of their members are best served by a co-operative and productive relationship.

It is therefore in the interests of both parties that the obligations imposed upon them in the Bill are clear and do not prejudice the landowner. I hope that in Committee the Bill will be clarified to enable all relevant parties to move forward together and ensure that greater access to our beautiful countryside is a success.

7.30 pm

Ms Joan Walley (Stoke-on-Trent, North): I am pleased to take part, however briefly, in the debate. I am conscious of all those who have spoken, especially my hon. Friends, who support the Bill, and all those who have gone before, instigating, organising and continuing the fight for the right of access, improved rights of way and countryside protection.

My right hon. Friend the Minister, who is not with us in the Chamber, can be especially pleased with his unique part in the great step forward that we are taking today. I acknowledge his understanding, persistence and consensus-building, which have helped to bring the Bill to its present stage.

We have cause for celebration. Over the years many people have believed in and worked for the Bill, including those who are present and people who may be following proceedings at home. Above all, we have a Government who said in opposition that they would legislate, and who have taken the minimum time necessary to set in motion the consultation processes required to introduce the draft legislation. We should celebrate the fact that we have done what we said we would do.

I am aware of those who were fellow travellers over the years, who pressed for the Bill, who were pilgrims to Kinder Scout and went on other rallies, and who were involved in the Ramblers Association and the Open Spaces Society, and those who are no longer with us. The campaign has transcended generations. All those who campaigned must celebrate this evening.

As on any long-distance walk, just as we reach the summit and get to where we intended, the horizon changes and we see things from a different perspective. Having reached where we are today, those of us who can see the next stage of the journey know that, above all, we must promote environmental integration. There is still a distance for us to travel to get access and protection for the countryside and wildlife on to the statute book and to make that workable, so that people in our cities, towns and countryside can responsibly enjoy the new rights that they will gain as a result of the Bill.

Ahead of us is an altered destination—sustainability. That needs to be firmly in our sights and mapped out in detail in the Bill. I noted earlier contributions, such as that of my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Mr. Caton), whose beautiful constituency I know well, as I lived there for part of my time in south Wales. He and others suggested topics that should be included in the Bill.

We are all time-poor. We must take account of the speed of change and the devastation caused to our wildlife over the past two decades. We have a greater awareness and understanding of climate change, and we know how speedily we must tackle it. We cannot afford to wait another generation and certainly not another century to legislate for further sustainability. We must manage wildlife in the context of the acceleration of global warming.

Gone are the days when we could afford to manage for the status quo. We must recognise the speed with which some species are dying out and the implications of global warming. Butterflies can, perhaps, move from place to place, but other animals and plants cannot do so. We must make sure that we provide stepping stones to survival and corridors that will lead them to the habitat in which they can survive. We must not only give enhanced protection to sites of special scientific interest, but build into the legislation ways of managing change.

As spectacular as our progress has been, if we are to cover the necessary distance, the Government must consider going the extra mile. My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment has brought us this far. Only once in a lifetime does such a legislative opportunity arise. I hope that he will steer us still further.

In my remaining time, I shall speak about what I should like to see in the Bill. As always, my starting point is north Staffordshire, where I grew up. As a child, I always knew where to go for the first celandines and coltsfoot. I knew where the lanes and open fields were and where the foxes went. I knew the meadows where we had marsh marigolds and ladysmock, ponds full of frogspawn, woods where the wood sorrel and bluebells grew, before the new housebuilding. Back then, the abundance of wildlife was part of my life—something that we all took for granted.

The wildflower meadows were uprooted for new housing. I knew then that if we were to value, save and protect our countryside, we would have to go about it differently. That is why I am so grateful for the work of Staffordshire Wildlife Trust, along with many other local and national organisations that welcome the stricter protection that the Bill gives to SSSIs. They are right to point out that too many of our top wildlife sites have been degraded in the past two decades. They recognise that the Bill offers them a more secure future.

However, wildlife is not found only in SSSIs. In Stoke-on-Trent, we have a multitude of wildlife sites and open spaces, many of which exist because of the long-standing policies and vision of the city council, which reclaimed former colliery and industrial sites. Those are important for all kinds of wildlife, not just protected species. The open spaces are valued by the local community. It is important that we have in our towns and cities places where people can be part of nature. It is good for our sense of well-being to be side by side with nature.

A further consideration is that on such land, animals and plants are not subject to pesticides. It is increasingly important that birds and animals that were once found only in open countryside can find refuge in city centres, and that we can prevent some of the problems that Rachel

[Ms Joan Walley]

Carson outlined in "Silent Spring". I should like urban wildlife sites to benefit from the protection afforded by the Bill.

In Staffordshire, as in most counties, we are fortunate to have partnerships for implementing our biodiversity plans. As in the rest of the UK, we have systems in place locally to identify, assess and protect wildlife sites. The partnerships have grown out of the biodiversity action plans that originated from the Rio summit of 1992, and we owe a great deal to them.

The problem remains that there is still no legislative base for sites of lesser importance than SSSIs, and no national standards for them—just a mass of ambiguity about their status. I am not suggesting an inflexible national standard. Much discussion is going on behind the scenes, in English Nature, about how the forthcoming urban White Paper can ensure minimum standards for accessible green space in urban areas.

I hope that the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions will recognise the need for a national framework that could offer local authorities guidance on individual targets, adapted to each local situation, and linked to indicators of sustainability.

The Bill should be made a vehicle for that. It could offer a means of delivering joined-up government, by extending the concept of species protection and enhanced SSSI protection, both of which are well covered in the Bill, to a third type of protection—protection through designation of wildlife and open spaces, linked to stronger planning guidance, such as a revised planning guidance note 9.

7.40 pm

Mr. Richard Livsey (Brecon and Radnorshire): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, North (Ms Walley). Whatever our perspective, a great love of the countryside enlightens all the participants in the debate. We are all trying to do our best to ensure that the Bill is appropriate in that context.

In his opening speech, the Minister for the Environment referred to Lloyd George's words that no one should be a trespasser in the land of his birth. No one is in Wales; Lloyd George saw to that by fiscal measures. There are not many big landowners left.

Mr. Keith Simpson (Mid-Norfolk): Then Lloyd George lived in Surrey.

Mr. Livsey: He did for part of the time.

We build stone walls, plant and go hedging to maintain our hedges, not to pull them out. I have been an instructor in those skills. In my constituency, there are three separate styles of hedging: south Breconshire, north Breconshire and Radnorshire. We protect our hedges.

However, the Bill does not deal with enclosed land but with open countryside, mountain, moorland and common land. We must concentrate on that. There is a cultural difference in people's attitude to access to land in Wales. It is replicated to some extent in Scotland.

The Government's proposals have not gone down well in Wales, and not only in rural Wales. As the Minister for the Environment and the Under-Secretary know, Wales has three national parks and much of the rest of upland Wales is owned or managed by public bodies such as the National Trust, the Ministry of Defence and Crown Estates. Mynydd Eppynt in my constituency comprises 32,000 acres, which are owned by the Ministry of Defence. The families who lived there were uprooted in 1940 and given six weeks to quit. They have never been allowed back.

The Forestry Commission owns a great deal of land in Wales. It is badly managed. It is almost impossible to get on to it because trees are blown down all over the place. My constituency includes such land.

In theory, rural Wales qualifies for inclusion in the Tir Gofal agri-environment scheme. It would qualify in practice if the Welsh Assembly were given sufficient funds to finance it properly. Tir Gofal covers a public form of conservation and environmental designation. More than two thirds of Wales is covered by such designation. The Bill would have a disproportionate impact on Wales because one third of the new statutory access areas that the Bill creates are in Wales. The cost of implementation will therefore fall disproportionately on Welsh people and Welsh public bodies and councils.

As a native of Wales, I have travelled to almost every square kilometre of the country, and I have a good understanding of the people. My constituency is in the county of Powys where 86 per cent. of the land is designated as severely disadvantaged. Indeed, 96 per cent. of the county is in the less-favoured area category. From that statistic, the Minister can visualise the sort of place that Brecon and Radnorshire is, and the huge expanse of open countryside that dominates it. He will also understand that the Bill could have a major impact on my constituency, which consists of 382,000 hectares or 750,000 acres. It is the third biggest constituency in Great Britain.

The Brecon Beacons national park is in part of my constituency. It is the jewel in the crown. It is an outstanding area of countryside, but my constituency is among the most beautiful places in Britain.

I cannot think of another measure whose application to Wales is so suspect. Landowners in Wales have traditionally taken a far more relaxed attitude to the public's use of open land than their counterparts in some areas of England. Other than the large areas owned by the Ministry of Defence or the Forestry Commission, I cannot think of a hill or mountain in the country to which the public does not have access. I have received only one complaint in approximately 15 years about denial of access. That is why we favour a policy of voluntary access. It is a slight on Welsh people to assume that they will deny access to anyone. I have experienced no trouble, nor have my friends—or, indeed, my acquaintances—in open countryside in Wales.

We do not have statutory access to those vast open tracts but we have de facto access. The Bill puts that pragmatic arrangement at risk. I am in favour of access, but if we are not careful, we could walk into a legal minefield. In some cases, landowners have allowed the local and visiting population to walk over their land without hindrance for centuries. The behaviour of those Welsh landowners has traditionally been in stark contrast to that of some of their more confrontational English counterparts, whose unreasonable actions have precipitated some aspects of the Bill.

It is essential that the Welsh Assembly deals with the Bill. I shall explain the reasons for that. In parts of Wales, there is land between open hills and enclosed land. It is known as coed cae in south Wales and ffrydd land in north Wales. Ewes and lambs are put there in spring before going up the hill. There are problems with access to that land, and the Countryside Council for Wales has been reasonable about it. I held a recent meeting of 85 commoners in the upper Swansea valley. The commoners were heard and the designation of the map, which is in a pilot area, was changed to exclude the land that I described. The Bill has to tackle such matters of detail.

We must consider the Bill's impact on family farms, which are economic units only because of their common grazing. What will happen to common land legislation? What will happen to graziers associations, which are based on democratic principles, and have elected chairs and often include as many as 100 graziers on various commons? Those problems must be sorted out.

I support the protection of SSSIs and the exclusion of four-wheel-drive vehicles, which are an utter menace in many upland areas. We should consider the 600-m rules carefully. Plynlimon is 3,000 ft high and has fences on the summit. The Bill must deal with that. Much land of that height is farmed well.

In my constituency, there are a million sheep. They constitute the livelihood of many farmers. The impact of the Bill has to be carefully framed so that farmers can continue to make a living. They are not currently making a living for other reasons such as the great pressure of global markets.

The Bill should be amended to take account of the fact that Wales is different from England. It should provide for the Welsh Assembly to make sense of the issues for Wales. The Assembly should decide whether it wants such a measure. If the Government insist on applying the Bill to Wales as well as England, they must amend it to allow the Assembly to make major changes. The Liberal Democrats will table amendments to that effect. The Minister must show that he is prepared to listen to the many representations that urged such a course of action. The Bill should contain a clause that specifically covers Wales.

7.49 pm

Mr. David Borrow (South Ribble): I was born in the west riding of Yorkshire and have lived for the past 25 years in Lancashire. I have become acutely aware of the extent to which working-class communities in industrial towns and cities in Lancashire and Yorkshire were the early pioneers of greater access to the countryside, particularly the uplands, in the first half of the last century. The tribute to them came with the establishment of the national parks in the dales, the peak district, the lake district, Snowdonia and the north Yorkshire moors. As this century begins, the Bill represents another major step forward. The people of Lancashire will welcome the opportunity for greater access, not least to the forest of Bowland area of outstanding natural beauty—and I support a number of my hon. Friends who have urged the Government to examine whether it is possible further to strengthen those areas through the Bill. If that is not possible, we would welcome Ministers' comments—if not tonight, in the next few weeks—as to what proposals they have on that.

However, in my few minutes I want to discuss a number of unrelated matters. I welcome the provisions for improving the possibility of closing or changing footpaths in urban areas to reduce crime. I spent 10 years as a local councillor in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Preston (Audrey Wise), working with residents in an estate that was built in the early 1980s with five footpaths on to it and one road off it. As a result of several petitions, I spent most of those years pursuing the convoluted process, which still exists, of seeking closure. Under the existing system, one person's objection will virtually stop a closure, and the mechanism does not allow for any objective judgment of the balance of merits between the rights of those who want the footpaths to remain open and those of residents seeking greater security from crime and vandalism.

Many estates of the 1970s and 1980s, and even of the 1990s, were built open-plan and with footpath access—thought at the time to be modern and attractive. Such designs would not be used these days, as we are crime-conscious and seeking to design out of modern developments a lot of the opportunities for crime and vandalism that were built into many of the estates of the 1970s and 1980s. I welcome the provisions on that issue.

I also want to touch on disputes. Before being elected to the House, I spent many years dealing with property taxation appeals, so I have a bit of experience of disputes. Many provisions, whether on access or footpaths, will give rise to disputes, as the decisions will be made by various public bodies—local authorities or whatever—as the process goes ahead. It is crucial that we build into the system a robust appeal mechanism, which must be local, efficient and quick. It must not get bogged down with lengthy consideration of local disputes by civil servants or processes based in Whitehall. It is also important that, as far as possible, hearings should be public, and that there should be a presumption that dispute appeals should be heard in private only in exceptional circumstances. Although there is provision for that to happen, I would like Ministers to consider the dangers of allowing disputes to be considered in private as a matter of course.

There is also an assumption in the appeals process that the only people with the right to appeal against a public body's decision are landowners or the occupiers of land. I see nothing in the Bill that allows those who do not own or occupy land and who disagree with a public body's decision to become involved, make an appeal and challenge that decision. It is important to examine that mechanism to see whether we can ensure that those who want access to land, who dispute provisions to close or amend footpath routes, or who want to open new footpaths have some right in the appeal process and the disputes mechanism.

I note that there is little to do with mediation in the Bill. As there is so much scope for disputes, we need to consider a mediation system and the method by which disputes could be resolved before coming to a formal appeal process. I am also concerned that we should be careful not to restrict the right to appeal against decisions by making it too narrow. I am aware that there is an administrative assumption in the Whitehall machine that the right to appeal against a public body's decision should be narrowed down as much as possible because appeals lead to bureaucracy, more work and more expense. We should be wary of narrowing appeal rights down too much on the basis of saving money or administrative expenses.

[Mr. David Borrow]

It is important that the appeal process is properly funded and that those public bodies with a role to play in it are able to do so properly. Sufficient finance must be made available for that to happen.

My final point concerns what I consider to be the worrying aspect of tonight's debate—the extent to which some people want to portray the Bill as an issue between urban and rural England. I represent a constituency that is a mix of urban, suburban and rural areas. The rural areas depend on agriculture. I am aware that, if we are not careful and if we try to polarise rural and urban Britain, rural Britain will lose out. The vast majority of the population live and work in urban Britain and there needs to be a partnership between the two. The extent to which rural Britain depends on support from urban Britain was mentioned earlier: £3.5 billion goes in subsidy to agriculture; there is considerable rate relief in rural areas, as farm buildings and farmland are not rated; and a range of supportive measures has been put in place.

The Bill can bring urban and rural Britain together by dividing rights and responsibilities between the two. If we are to ensure that urban Britain continues to recognise the importance of the countryside, we must allow access to the countryside and emphasise the partnership arrangement that is at the heart of the Bill, which does not provide an unrestricted right to roam across the countryside. It has been carefully drafted to achieve restricted access to certain parts of the countryside. Those with that access must behave responsibly, and there is a clear method of arriving at many of the difficult decisions concerning when people can and cannot have access. That is crucial.

Some Conservative Members go over the top by saying that access to the countryside for people from urban areas is wrong. They speak strongly about the right of landowners to refuse anybody access to their land. They must remember the extent to which we as a nation support the countryside in many ways. That partnership means urban Britain accepting its responsibilities to rural Britain, but it also means rural Britain accepting its responsibilities to urban Britain.

7.59 pm

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): It is a great pleasure to be called in this debate, and to follow the hon. Member for South Ribble (Mr. Borrow). Coming as I do from a rural constituency, I do not want to fight about the urban-rural divide. However, on the hon. Gentleman's last point, the problem is that those in the Ramblers Association who fought that skilful campaign may be friendly and responsible, but many of the people who will take advantage of the legislation are not.

I am astonished that the Government have introduced the Bill when we have the worst rural crisis of this century. Pig farmers in my constituency are leaving for Saskatchewan after four generations of farming in north Shropshire. Ten to 12 quota holders a week apply to the main agent in Shrewsbury to get out of dairy farming. Welsh sheep farmers who come down from the hills to Oswestry are constantly talking about the crisis in the hills. The increase in the number of buzzards and ravens that I see is a manifestation of the fact that the countryside in the hills is going backwards.

There is so much that the Government could do if they wanted to help the countryside that it is astonishing that they have produced this Bill. The Cabinet Office has stated in a report that Shropshire has been the hardest hit of the west midlands counties, and is one of the poorest in the country, with people there 22 per cent. less wealthy than the average Briton.

The countryside is not a playground. It looks as it does thanks to private landowners. Much of the Bill is a direct assault on the principle of private land ownership. Most landowners are extremely responsible, with a deep understanding and love of the countryside. The Bill legislates with prejudice against the many to catch a tiny few.

For a start, there are already 140,000 miles of footpaths and rights of way with a right to roam. There are 13,000 hectares under the country stewardship scheme; 48,000 hectares of national parks; and 58,000 hectares set aside by exemption on inheritance tax. In a free society, voluntary agreements must be right and compulsion must be wrong.

Landowners understand the countryside. My objection to the right to roam is that the first half of the Bill totally contradicts the second half, as 60 per cent. of heath moorland is SSSI land. Under the Bill, people with dogs, who will not always be well-meaning, will be let loose 24 hours a day. They may not understand where they are going and what they are about. Why do we need access to moorland 24 hours a day? That is a burglars and poachers charter. Labour Members may laugh, but I know a landowner who has had to put half-inch steel plates over the hasps that cover the padlocks to prevent deer poachers from getting down his farm tracks. I can tell the hon. Member for South Ribble that those are the people whom I am worried about, because they will take advantage of the Bill.

The 28-day exclusion is far too short. I have re-read clause 21. How on earth are lambing ewes, merlins and curlews to be told to watch out on public holidays, weekends, Christmas day and Easter day? It is ridiculous. Nature does not work like that.

Heather-burning is vital to keep moorland healthy. That cannot be planned months ahead: it has to be done at the right time according to the weather. Various other such provisions show that the Bill has been drafted by people who do not have practical knowledge of the countryside.

The one question that I would ask the Minister is how he would define "cultivated land". Many crops in the spring look like grass. I have already had reports of members of the public walking on to farms thinking that there is a much wider definition of the right to roam. Is a field of grass that is being grown for silage or hay cultivated land? I should be grateful if the Minister would reply to that question when he winds up the debate.

I am very worried about the liabilities. As I read the Bill, the landowner would be responsible if someone fell off a barbed wire fence or tumbled off a stone wall. In a reply to an intervention from the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd), we were told that the landowner would also be responsible if someone fell down a mine shaft. Land with a mine shaft is probably worthless, but now it will be a cost on the landowner as insurance premiums go up.

Further costs will be imposed on landowners for providing stiles and points of access at a time when most farmers are losing money. The only way in which the

Bill could possibly work would be a massive increase in resources to provide wardens. It is not clear in the Bill who would be made to pay for that. Shropshire county council reckons that to establish the legal right to roam in places such as Prees Heath, and others, in my county, more than £200,000 will have to be found. According to the Countryside Agency, the money for the existing rights of way programme will be cut by £50,000.

As I see it, this measure is all cost and pain for the landowner, and the real problem is that there is no incentive—no carrot—to encourage the landowner to co-operate. That is what is so sad: co-operation has been lost as the voluntary approach has been thrown away. That applies particularly to SSSIs. The incentive is now for any landowner of an SSSI quickly to plough it up, because it will become a liability. The countryside is a living place, and cannot be set in aspic. A landowner whom I know had an open field which was ripped up for opencast mining. He has restored it, and now has a lake. A fishing club from the local village uses it, and there are otters and kingfishers. It is a totally admirable environmental programme coming from opencast mining. That site has not yet been spotted by those who designate SSSIs. The danger of this legislation is that the incentive for the landowner will be to fill in the lake, so it will achieve exactly the opposite of what is intended. There must be flexibility. Land use must be allowed to move on: there must be mobility in what people do with their land.

My other fear concerns the power that the Bill gives to those who decide the consequences arising from SSSIs. I am privileged to have a vast moss in my constituency. Whixall moss is part of a huge moss alongside Bettisfield and Fenn's moss, which is in Wales. It has been dedicated as a national nature reserve since 1990, and is a Ramsar site, which is about as high a designation as it can have. It is a site of international importance. It is astonishing. I went round it last spring. About 2,400 acres have been restored by English Nature and the Countryside Council for Wales. No one could fail to admire what has been achieved there: it has 130 species of birds, 1,700 species of invertebrates and numerous extremely rare bog plants. It is a very successful example of restoration of a rare and exceptional site.

The problem is that relations with surrounding farmers will become more fraught. There are already SSSIs in the near boundary, and there is also a 2 km consultation zone around the whole moss. One of my constituents wanted to put up a free-range poultry unit, and had great trouble. There were costly, lengthy negotiations, and the matter was finally resolved when it was agreed that the muck would be carted away at his cost. Dairy farmers nearby are worried that they will be prevented from putting cow muck on the land. There is a delicate balance to be achieved between English Nature carrying out its extremely important work on the moss, which is admired locally, and dairy farmers who are struggling to make a living.

Another danger is that other benefits may be ignored when a site is designated as an SSSI. The Montgomery canal is well worth restoring. It would bring substantial investment to the area, and a possible 570 jobs in trades alongside the canal. The bed of the canal is a dedicated SSSI, so the restoration of the canal could be held up. The biggest restoration project so far has been to build a new SSSI alongside the canal. When designating such areas, we should also consider employment, architecture and historical assets.

On that note, I hope that I shall be called to make further comments in Committee.

8.9 pm

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas (Harrow, West): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr. Paterson), although the only part of his speech that had any substance was his description of the Ramblers Association as skilful, which was somewhat understated praise.

Like my hon. Friends, I warmly welcome the Bill, not least because it locks into law the principle that everyone should have the opportunity to enjoy the countryside at its best. The natural majesty of Britain's mountains and moors should be available to everyone, not off limits to all but an exclusive few. Wealth should not be a bar to people's ability to gain access to some of the most beautiful scenery that our country offers.

James Bryce, who led the first parliamentary effort to protect access rights, said in a debate in 1892:

> All I ask to-night is to bring forward the grievance and suffering caused to the people . . . by their exclusion from their right to enjoy the scenery of their own country, and to seek healthy recreation and exercise on their own mountains and moors.

More than a hundred years on, the debate remains essentially the same, and similarly simple. Do we believe that the citizens of this country should have the ability to enjoy—I accept that responsibility is needed—the scenery and beauty of their own country? There are undoubtedly genuine issues to be resolved, once that principle has been conceded and accepted, regarding the protection of wildlife and the safeguarding of the environment, but those are not, and never have been, reasons for denying legislation on the right to roam.

A remarkable feature of the debate on this subject over the past hundred years is the extent to which a range of issues have been used to create a smokescreen for those opposed to access to hide behind. To be fair to the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Mr. Livsey), he came up with a new one today: the idea that the right to roam is an insult to the Welsh is a new one on me. The hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman) repeated the claim in the amendment that wildlife and nature conservation would somehow be threatened by access. Where is the evidence to back up that claim? The hon. Gentleman could cite no evidence from countries that already provide the access that the Bill will deliver.

I do not rule out the idea that increased access could have an impact on wildlife and the environment. Clearly some restrictions and safeguards are needed, and they are included in the Bill. In general, however, I believe that access will have a positive impact on wildlife. The Wildlife and Countryside Link commented:

> Enhanced public access to the countryside is an invaluable mechanism for building public understanding and appreciation. In general, access benefits protection of landscape, wildlife and heritage.

The issue of cost to the landowner has long been touted as a reason for denying access. Indeed, the hon. Member for North Shropshire peddled the point. The Country Landowners Association's estimates of the costs of access last year were, to be generous, highly inflated, and were debunked to a considerable extent by the Ramblers Association's investigation. We heard echoes of such claims in the speech of the hon. Member for Tunbridge

[Mr. Gareth R. Thomas]

Wells. Last year, the Government's own independent consultants' cost benefit analysis found that landowners would not suffer significant losses or costs for reasons of access, and I know of no research from Germany, Austria, Norway, Sweden or Switzerland, where access on this scale already exists, that suggests that landowners' costs are higher as a result.

The Bill rightly deals with occupiers' liability. It holds out the possibility of direct and indirect financial assistance for the provision of means of access and warden services.

The right to roam has long been described as a future cause of crime. Speaking at the Tory party conference last October, the hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) described it as a trespassers' charter, and I think that the hon. Member for North Shropshire spoke in the same terms. There is no evidence linking footpaths with a higher incidence of crime. The Dartmoor Commons Act 1985 delivered, effectively, a right to roam over 40 per cent. of land within Dartmoor national park. Voluntary agreements already exist for some 50 per cent. of that land. There is no evidence that the passing of the 1985 Act resulted in a greater increase in crime. One would think that, if anything, the additional eyes and ears of members of the public using their rights of access would be beneficial in preventing crime.

Another argument used to justify opposition to access is that it is not needed—that there is no need for legislation. That claim has passed through several stages. Back in 1892, it was argued that exclusion from mountains or moorlands was exaggerated; in 1938, it was said that landowners would nearly always give permission, and that walkers were seldom stopped. Those obvious fictions have been brought up to date by the argument that we have heard from Opposition Members that voluntary access agreements would somehow deliver high-quality permanent access to our mountains and moors.

Last year, the Country Landowners Association's voluntary access efforts failed spectacularly. Just 18 per cent. of the sites on its register provided proper access. That came nowhere near delivering the permanent right of access to 4 million or so acres of open countryside for which people have been campaigning.

Mr. Green: The hon. Gentleman said that there was no evidence that the use of footpaths would have any effect on crime. Perhaps he will he explain to the Minister the purpose of schedule 7, entitled

> Stopping up and diversion of footpaths for purposes of crime prevention etc.

There is clearly a real issue here, which the hon. Gentleman's Government recognise.

Mr. Thomas: With respect, I suggest that increasing access will help crime prevention, because there will be more people in the countryside to prevent the crime that Opposition Members fear and hype up to such an extent.

I was talking about the Country Landowners Association's rather desperate efforts to promote voluntary access. The inclusion of land for fox hunting and strawberry-gathering in its register did not help its case at all; but perhaps most telling is the fact that traditional supporters of the voluntary approach, the Peak national park authority and the Countryside Commission, backed legislation when consulted in 1998.

Extending the right of access will present exciting new opportunities to walkers. It will help to improve fitness and health, and it will inevitably benefit the rural economy. I encourage my right hon. Friend the Minister, and those who will serve on the Standing Committee, to consider again the issue of access to woodland. Surely, if the Woodland Trust, with its 16,500 hectares of woodland, can deliver access without concern, we should give serious consideration to the issue, and also to the issue of access to river banks.

I welcome parts II and III, and suggestions made to me about the possibility of a statutory duty on local authorities to maintain local wildlife site systems. I look forward to further clarification of the issue of areas of outstanding natural beauty.

An unintended function of this excellent Bill will be to throw into stark relief the problems that remain in regard to access to water. As a canoeist, I must point out that, although 10,400-odd miles of rivers are suitable for canoeists, only 2.8 per cent. of that—376 miles—is accessible. As the agreements do not cover 365 days a year, the figure is actually less than 1 per cent. I canoe on the River Dart, and some 12,000 canoeists annually take advantage of the access agreements there. Not one complaint has been received about the impact of canoeists on wildlife. Canoes cause no erosion, no noise and no pollution, and leave no trace of their passing—not even footprints. I simply ask, is there a more sustainable form of transport?

This is an excellent Bill, and I warmly welcome it.

8.18 pm

Mr. Andrew Hunter (Basingstoke): I oppose the right to roam part of the Bill in principle, for two overriding reasons. First, it is an infringement by the state of the fundamental rights of ownership, and, as such, is illiberal and dangerous. Secondly, nothing in my experience of nearly 17 years as a Member of Parliament leads me to believe that a right to roam is necessary. Countryside access exists: it is a reality which my constituents, for example, enjoy, as do visitors to the borough of Basingstoke and Deane. The north of Hampshire, like the rest of the country, is criss-crossed with paths. I do not accept that the case for a right to roam has been made.

Because time is short, I will concentrate on just one aspect of the Bill: the reclassification of RUPPs. I have raised my concerns with successive Governments, not least in two Adjournment debates. The basic problem, as I see it, is that the reclassification process under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 has failed to provide protection, and has proved to be a legal minefield. I greatly fear that, despite its best intentions, the Bill in its present form will not resolve matters.

As hon. Members know, vast tracts of the country's green lanes are extensively damaged through misuse by modern motorised vehicles. Without doubt, some of the damage is caused by agricultural vehicles, but much of it is caused by 4x4s and other recreational vehicles. The root cause of much of the misuse by vehicles of green lanes remains the reclassification process under the 1981 Act.

The problem is inadequately addressed in the Bill. It is a tragedy that the Government have retreated on what is an important and environmentally sensitive issue.

I understand that the aim of part II is to remove the burden on local authorities of reclassifying each road that is used as a public path individually. I applaud that objective. It is right. The requirement for individual reclassification has created a backlog of cases. It has given rise to some extraordinary inconsistencies and created some bizarre rulings, so the move away from individual reclassification is the right way to approach the matter.

In so far as it goes, I welcome the new category of right of way: the restricted byway. It is right that there should be byways that allow access only on foot, horse and by non-mechanically propelled vehicles, but the Bill fails badly when it comes to RUPPs and existing vehicle rights.

As hon. Members know, the Bill provides that, where vehicle rights exist on a RUPP, there will be an option for reclassification as a byway open to all traffic, but that is a modification of the proposal in the consultation paper. That suggested reclassification of all RUPPs as bridleways, not restricted byways—as I mistakenly said in an intervention to the Minister. That would have excluded all types of vehicles. It is regrettable that the Government have not stood their ground on that issue. Hon. Members should be in no doubt that the Government's approach will leave the difficult issue of vehicle rights unresolved. They will still have to be proved on a case-by-case basis.

The Bill does not tackle the problem of enforcing existing driving regulations. As the Minister may be aware, magistrates have been declining to convict motorists who drive on bridleways where the defence is offered that there is doubt as to whether the rights are limited to bridleway rights, even though the way is shown on the definitive map as a bridleway. I understand that that is a reflection of the criminal test, the "beyond reasonable doubt" requirement, being influenced by civil matters—establishing rights "on the balance of probability"—and is thwarting the operation of the law. Magistrates are increasingly taking the view that they have to assess the probability factor of rights existing, not to make an absolute judgment. That is the core of the problem under the 1981 Act.

As I read it, the Bill does not change the situation. Clauses 44(4) and 44(5) restate, rather than resolve, the "no other rights problem." I fear that the Bill fails to recognise the weakness in the Road Traffic Act 1988 and the discrepancy between that Act and the Wildlife and Countryside Act.

Our ancient green lanes are a rich part of our environmental and natural heritage. Under existing legislation, we are not looking after them properly. Unfortunately, the Bill does not completely redress the position. The ambiguity of the Stevens judgment remains. The difficult issue of vehicle rights is unresolved. As the Bill stands, they must still be resolved on an individual basis. Those are matters that must be revisited in Committee.

The Bill does not address an issue of which I have only recently become aware; perhaps it is a new development. It involves common land. The situation has arisen in my constituency. I have heard about it in newspapers elsewhere. Common owners are adopting the custom of charging residents for access to their homes if driveways pass over common ground.

I know of three or four instances of that arising within recent months. I hope that the Minister will be open to amendments in Committee that will allow the matter to be explored to establish precisely what rights residents adjacent to common land have to free-of-charge driving along driveways over common land.

8.25 pm

Mrs. Helen Brinton (Peterborough): Like all Labour Members and, indeed, many more individuals and groups outside this place, I was enormously relieved and delighted to hear in the Queen's Speech that the legislation would be introduced in the current Session, 50 years after the first major wildlife Act—the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act—which was introduced by a previous excellent Labour Government in 1949. I was equally pleased when the Bill was published earlier this month.

I pay tribute, as so many other Members have, to all the people who have worked so hard to bring the Bill to its present form. They include non-governmental organisations, which, coming from different perspectives and having different ideas, have worked together through the Wildlife and Countryside Link, representatives of which are here; the Government agencies; the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, which has more or less succeeded in translating the recommendations of such organisations and groups into workable legislation; the Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister for the Environment, whose personal commitment has given vital impetus to the whole process; and last but not least, the many Back Benchers on—despite the tone of the debate—both sides of the House who have campaigned to such effect.

I personally have been most concerned with the aspects in part III—wildlife protection and conservation—but I am equally glad to welcome the mostly complementary proposals in part I, which I have seen described as the culmination of 150 years of attempts to legislate effectively to provide widespread permanent access to the countryside.

I understand that the Bill is by and large consistent with the advice of the many agencies concerned and that it will ensure that all people have the right to enjoy and, thus, to learn better to conserve and to appreciate the countryside. However, access should be sensitive to certain times of the year: for example, the breeding and nesting period for birds. Additionally, care must be taken to protect the wider public interest concerning water quality. No one would want that compromised by unrestricted access.

Part II on rights of way should ensure much needed rationalisation and modernisation of the law and form an essential accompaniment to the provision of greater access. There may be a need for considerable clarification of some of the provisions in that part. It seems essential, for example, that there should be no arbitrary time limit to completing the legal record of rights of way. Rather, a prescribed number of steps should be taken in every case. Funding will be key if local authorities are to fulfil their duties and the legitimate interests of landowners must be respected.

Part III on nature conservation and wildlife protection proposes fundamental changes to the way in which SSSIs are protected and managed. They have been described as

[Mrs. Helen Brinton]

the crown jewels of our wildlife heritage. They must be protected from damage, whether wilful or, more frequently, due to neglect. That part is urgently needed.

As we have heard in debates of all types in both Houses, almost one SSSI a day is lost or damaged. On the Government's own figures, up to 45 per cent. are reported as in an "unfavourable" condition. The Bill will provide conservation agencies with new powers to prevent damaging activities in SSSIs.

The Bill also makes much stronger provision to halt—with higher penalties and custodial sentences—the increase in wildlife crime that we have heard described in this debate. I very much welcome the introduction of those increased penalties and custodial sentences. Very importantly, the Bill will also make it an offence "recklessly" to disturb a nest site or shelter. However, it is very difficult to prove an intent to damage or disturb. Overall, the legislation should ensure a better balance—a word that has been used often in today's debate—between the rights and responsibilities of people enjoying the countryside and the greater protection and conservation of the countryside.

Nevertheless, nothing is perfect, and the Bill has omitted some provisions that I believe should be considered in our subsequent consideration of the Bill. In some cases, the omissions serve mainly to highlight the need for further legislation, or even for non-legislative action. As hon. Members know, much could be done in this place to address those issues in other ways and on other occasions. I hope that it will be possible to amend the Bill to address those issues without impeding its successful passage.

Areas of outstanding natural beauty are the first issue. Many hon. Members have spoken today about AONBs, which comprise 15 per cent. of our land. In the 1949 Act, it was intended that AONBs would receive treatment equal to that provided for national parks. However, legal protection for AONBs has not been developed, and no one has the legal duty to protect and look after them. Consequently, there is no effective long-term planning for those areas and there is no sound basis for local managerial partnerships between agencies, landowners and communities. The Bill could be the only opportunity for some time to give AONBs the protection that they so urgently need. Such provision would certainly complement the Bill's provision for wildlife protection and improved access.

Habitat beyond SSSIs is the second issue. It is another issue about which hon. Members have expressed their concern today. I believe that very simple changes to the Bill could give essential protection to very important species of plant and animal life that are being threatened by habitat destruction. I also understand that only last Friday, the Joint Nature Conservation Council published various recommendations to the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions on how agencies could be enabled, when they identify the need, to extend their management agreements beyond SSSIs.

The third—but no less vital—issue is the fact that the legislation could be greatly strengthened by underpinning in law the United Kingdom's biodiversity action plan, which was developed as a consequence of the United Kingdom's commitment to the 1992 Rio earth summit's convention on biological diversity. The Government strongly support the convention. As I understand it, the problem in developing species and habitat biodiversity action plans is that they require the voluntary involvement of many stakeholders. Although voluntary involvement is good—it helps to build the partnerships necessary for the plans delivery—without a foundation in law, long-term commitment and planning is vulnerable to changing political priorities and administrations, whether at local, regional or national level. I believe that we should explore the extent to which the legislation might not only protect species and habitat, but actively promote their recovery, as happens in other countries. The United States's Endangered Species Act provides an example of that.

The lack of legal protection for marine wildlife is the final issue, which is addressed also in my ten-minute Bill on marine conservation. My Bill is part of the campaign—to which I was alerted by *The Sunday Times* campaign—to develop better control over use of personal leisure craft, such as jet skis. As I said, I was very pleased to see the offence of recklessness included in the Countryside and Rights of Way Bill—as it was in my very much smaller Bill.

I was very disappointed that in the Bill, as defined, the offence of recklessness does not seem to be appropriate for application in the marine environment. Dolphins and porpoises do not nest and they also do not have easily definable places of shelter. I hope that something can be done to change the definition. The scenes around our coast and elsewhere are urgently in need of protection and recovery. Many marine species are threatened by very inappropriate international policies and economic activity. I wonder whether, in the Bill, we could not make at least a little progress towards taking the much wider action that is so urgently needed, so that the greater protection that the Bill will deliver on land and in other terrestrial habitats could be extended also to our seas.

Overall, I give a very big welcome to the Bill. However, I hope that we recognise that we have to get as much as we can right now if we are to make wildlife protection as comprehensive as possible. I hope that we also recognise that we act in a wider global context, in which factors beyond the simple scope of national legislation are most powerful. As the Minister for the Environment will know, climate change is the most general demonstration of that fact. Climate change is already happening, and it is affecting wildlife and wildlife habitats—not tomorrow, but now. The sooner that we do as much as we can, the better.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. Time is up.

8.36 pm

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Peterborough (Mrs. Brinton), who is an acknowledged expert on many countryside and wildlife issues. She will be concerned to hear that I agree with much of what she had to say, with the exception of her comments on the right to roam. I shall return to that issue in a moment.

I felt uneasy about the beginning of the hon. Lady's speech—which sounded like the beginning of most of today's speeches by Labour Members—as it seemed to express a type of triumphalism and class war. They

seemed to be saying that, after 50 or 100 years of campaigning, they have finally given birth to this shabby and thin little piece of paper that we are debating today. The triumphalism is based on some idea that Labour Members are the champions of the cause of freedom of access to the countryside, and that Opposition Members are ideologically and fundamentally opposed to such access. However, nothing could be further from the truth.

I am very much a grammar school educated non-landowner. However, as guardians of the countryside for many hundreds of years, my colleagues who are landowners, and people in the countryside whom I represent, have always gone to great lengths to ensure that they make as much of their own land and the countryside available as they possibly can to all types and classes of people across the nation, so that they may have some pleasure in it. Labour Members seem to be suggesting that Mr. van Hoogstraten—whom various Labour Members have prayed in aid—is typical of landowners, but that is an absurdity. To create law based on one such example is to create extremely bad law.

The reality is that across this great nation of ours, all of us—people from all towns, cities and elsewhere—have been ramblers. I am a strong supporter of the Ramblers Association in Chippenham, although I have not yet been able to go out with it as it tends to go out on Sundays. I wish that it would change its outing to Saturdays, and I shall certainly send it a copy of today's *Hansard* to ensure that it does.

We are all strong supporters of the rights of people in cities, in towns and in the countryside to walk, to ramble and to enjoy the countryside. Of course we are. The issue is not whether the principle is a good one but the means by which we implement it. We must ensure that the countryside, which we all enjoy, remains the fine place that it has always been. I rather resent the hon. Lady's implication that somehow Conservatives have kept people out of the countryside.

The hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Mr. Bennett), whom I respect greatly on this issue as the president of the Ramblers Association, said, "They are trying to keep them out." We will be able to check the record tomorrow. Others have said that access to the countryside should not depend on wealth. What marvellous old Labour rhetoric. "It is those Tories who kept people out of the countryside for 18 years because they look after wealth. We new Labour people look after the ramblers." What tosh. It is nonsense, and it is important that we lay the ghost to rest before we do anything else.

We all support safe and secure access to the countryside. I pray in aid a fine landlord who is just outside my constituency on the Marlborough downs, who over 20 or 30 years has gradually changed rights of way. He has gradually improved rights of access, pathways, walkways and bridleways. His estate is now acknowledged as being one of the finest in England for access to the countryside. That is acknowledged by the Ramblers Association in Swindon, Chippenham and elsewhere. It is an example of what can be done with proper, voluntarily managed access.

Mr. Bennett: Will the hon. Gentleman explain how it is that the Duke of Westminster has stopped the regular walking over Bousland that took place in the 1930s, and has been extremely obstructive in letting people get on to that area of high mountain?

Mr. Gray: I am not in a position to comment on that example. I am not certain whether the Duke of Westminster is necessarily an hon. Friend of mine any more. If the hon. Gentleman writes to him care of the House of Lords—that is if the duke is still a Member of it—the matter will be clarified.

Labour Members are talking about the right of people—the extreme ramblers as I would call them, the really keen people—to get out into remote areas where they are now not allowed to go, while we Conservatives would prefer the managed access approach. There is a conundrum because I am not aware of any huge demand for access to most of the areas of the countryside about which Labour Members have been talking. I spend my holidays in north Cornwall on the National Trust cliffs. Even in mid August, during the peak of the walking season, one rarely sees a walker. North Wiltshire is a key walking area, but the people of Swindon do not come out in their hordes. Many Labour Members have talked about opening up great areas of woodland or farmland. The idea that many of my constituents would go out to them seems misplaced.

I do not believe that there is any demand for what is being proposed. It is an imaginary demand that is based on the notion that something is being denied to the public and therefore the Labour party must find a way of making it available to them. There are a few odd characters like Mr. van Hoogstraten, but I am not aware of landowners and farmers who deny access. Perhaps there are a few exceptions such as the Duke of Westminster. I find that surprising because I know of his love for the countryside. I suspect that we may be talking about that one example. I am not aware of any more than one or two isolated examples of farmers who are not perfectly happy for people to walk across their land in a properly managed way. Many of them, as in the example to which I referred, go to great lengths to provide ways to enable the public to get on to their land. They adopt a systematic approach to giving them proper access to the countryside.

There is no evidence of any demand and there is no evidence of any obstruction. I am not convinced of the need for the Bill and I suspect that we might be setting the country against the town, although Labour Members have used new Labour expressions such as, "We are seeking a partnership between town and country". Of course that is what we are seeking, but we will not achieve it by requiring people in the countryside to do things that they currently do not do and do not wish to do. The partnership will be achieved by saying, "Together we will provide access for all to the countryside. We shall allow you as landowners and farmers to prosper. We shall allow you also to do the things that you have always done in the countryside. However, people from the towns also want access to it." That is the right approach. By doing otherwise, people will be set one against another.

I am not convinced about the right to roam and the principle behind it. I am also concerned about specific problems that arise from the Bill. We are told that cultivated land will be exempt from the right to roam, but what is that land? If the extensive grassland in my constituency were ploughed one year—much of it has not been ploughed for many years and has probably been

[Mr. Gray]

extensive grassland for 100 years—would it become exempt? There are many definitions and words in the Bill that need to clarified, and I hope that the Minister will consider doing so.

There have been references to the 28-day rule and exemptions for weekends and public holidays. That is all absurd. No shooting estates could possibly operate on the basis of a 28-day exemption. The prerequisite of a shooting estate is to make it pay, and the exemption would have to be many more days than 28. I shall be interested to hear what the Minister has to say about that and subsequent clauses.

The multiple points of entry argument is crucial and unanswerable. How can one say whether an estate is open on a particular day when there could be 100 or 1,000 points of access? This is a licence to trespass, because no one will know whether a place is open.

The Government have not thought about night access. Why are nearly all urban parks—other than unfenced ones—closed at sundown? It is thought that it would be bad for people to walk in them at night, but apparently people are to have the right of access to estates and farms at all hours of the day and night, regardless of whether, for example, lamping of foxes is being conducted—it is normal to keep foxes down by shooting them at night. How are we to stop the roamers from getting in the way? They cannot go into the park in London, so they will decide to go out into the countryside and do a bit of roaming there.

The great question of owners' liability has not been properly answered, despite what has been said about clauses 14 and 15. Clause 13 does not address what happens if a rambler falls off a dry stone wall and damages himself. People should enter at their own risk, as the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd) rightly said.

A lot of the details have been badly thought out. It is important for the Government to accept a significant number of amendments in Committee. Of course, bits of the Bill are worth having, and we all support much of it. We all support increased access to the countryside, but that must not be—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

8.46 pm

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray). I am not sure whether I could be described as an extreme rambler, but I have certainly rambled at great length over many stretches of the Pennines and the lake district over many years. He commented on the language of new Labour, but he speaks the new Tory language that says that if the Bill is enacted it will be a charter for poachers, burglars, trespassers, drug addicts and hooligans of all kinds. I will tell my constituents with great pleasure this weekend how ramblers have been described by the official Opposition.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment and his ministerial colleagues: the Bill will bring enormous pleasure to many millions of people. My constituents and members of our party and of the ramblers movement will all welcome it. I see it primarily not as a piece of legislation with huge symbolic importance but as one with great practical importance, because it will open up the pleasures of the countryside, over time, to more and more people, at the same time as enhancing wildlife protection.

I want to reassure Opposition Members. I live in an area on the edge of the Pennines where we already have a well-established rights of way network and the right to roam over many thousands of acres, and in all the years I have lived there, I have experienced very little difficulty, other than with the occasional stray mountain biker or motorcyclist.

Every day of the week, ramblers walk past my front door and through the little bit of land at my back door, and I find great pleasure in seeing them enjoying the countryside. They are not urban hooligans. Most of the ramblers in the mid-Pennines are entirely responsible people who care for the countryside. With the additional access that the Bill will bring, they will continue to care for it and to promote conservation.

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that pretty much everywhere—and certainly in Wales—landowners, too, behave in a responsible way and that they may regard the Bill as something of a sledgehammer to crack a nut?

Mr. Chaytor: That may be so, but what is interesting about the official Opposition line is that it is in fact two lines. The Conservatives argue that there is no pent-up demand for access and that the Bill is unnecessary for that reason, and then they say that there is huge pent-up demand by drug dealers from the inner city to get into the landowners' estates and do their evil deeds. That is a completely contradictory argument from the Conservatives. We should not take any lessons on the countryside from the party which introduced BSE to the nation and enabled four supermarkets to control the nation's food supply and drive down the prices paid to farmers for milk and meat. The Conservatives cannot teach us any lessons about conserving or protecting the countryside.

My constituency is largely urban and suburban, although it contains some of the most attractive landscape in Greater Manchester and some very environmentally sensitive areas. I shall address one issue that is not in the Bill but which I passionately believe should be added to it. I welcome the extra protection given to SSSIs, but most people never visit one and do not know where their nearest one is. What we need to do is increase the attraction and the pleasure of the countryside and the quality of the environment for urban and suburban dwellers, so the Bill should include some protection for local wildlife sites. The vast majority of urban and suburban dwellers are unlikely to flood out into the countryside in hugely increasing numbers, now or in the future, but they need more access to green space and more experience of wildlife locally, in the towns and cities.

I pay tribute to the work of the wild life trusts across the country, especially the Lancashire wild life trusts. I pay special tribute to groups in my constituency which have worked hard to preserve important wildlife centres, such as Barracks Lodge, which is a large, important stretch of water that a local developer unfortunately wished to drain and build houses on. I pay tribute to the

work of people campaigning for the preservation of Chesham woods, a site that could easily have been turned into a golf course. I mention the work of the Holcombe Society, which has protected the landscape around Holcombe hill which, with its famous tower, is one of the most important landscapes in south-east Lancashire. I also pay tribute to those working to protect sites in the Hollins area of my constituency.

We must understand that most of our population—the 59 million now living in the United Kingdom—are urban and suburban dwellers, which is why we need better protection of the wildlife in the last green oases in our towns and suburbs. I also pay special tribute to three people in my constituency of Bury, North—Mr. Michael Wellock, Mr. Martin Prescott and Mr. David Bentley—who have campaigned vigorously in the past few years to preserve the last remaining green sites in the centre and fringes of the towns.

I understand that within the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions a review group has examined the issue of local wildlife sites. I understand that the group's report may be published in the near future, and I urge Ministers to consider seriously the recommendations that may be made and the possibility of giving statutory protection to local wildlife sites. That would mean giving local authorities the duty and responsibility to establish a network of local wildlife sites. It would also mean giving advice and information to owners of such sites about how best to preserve them, and it would mean protecting those sites through the unitary development plans and the planning process. And yes, it would also mean some investment in the preservation of wildlife in those areas.

As an adjunct, it is important, in the context of strengthening the statutory basis of wildlife protection, that statutory force be given to the UK biodiversity action plan, a point also made by my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Mrs. Brinton) and by the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath). Not many hon. Members will have taken their copies of the biodiversity action plan from the Vote Office, but I have and I commend it to all hon. Members as a fascinating and invaluable document, especially if they have children currently studying GCSE or A-level biology or geography. If the marvellous work that went into the production of the biodiversity action plan is to have its full reward, it must have statutory force.

In the time remaining to me, I should like to mention another concern that needs addressing more fully by the Bill. I refer to invasive species. I am all in favour of letting 1,000 flowers bloom. The difficulty is that two or three of them then tend to take over the rest. A remarkable feature of suburban areas in recent years has been the huge developments in gardens—the rapid growth of small ponds and water courses, the massive increase in all things aquatic and the growth of garden centres. People's understandable desire to increase and improve the biodiversity in their own back yards has led, unfortunately, to the import of a large number of invasive species. I should like to mention the 10 most dangerous species, which threaten the biodiversity of other species. They are—and as time is short, I shall not mention the full Latin botanical names—the Australian swamp stonecrop, also known as the New Zealand pigmyweed, parrot's feather, floating pennywort, Indian balsam, water fern, water lettuce, giant salvinia, water hyacinth and water chestnut.

This is not a trivial issue. The current estimate for controlling floating pennywort, for example, is about—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

8.56 pm

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): I am delighted to speak in the debate, and it is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor), although I shall not be mentioning the list of weeds to which he referred.

I wish to speak in favour of the reasoned amendment in the name of the Leader of the Opposition, and to commend it to the House. The amendment puts a new light on "roaming in the gloaming". I believe that the amendment, rather than the Bill, sums up the delicate balance that must be reached between the various interest groups. In doing so, I wish to declare an interest. I am the half owner of a smallholding—and when I say smallholding, I mean a small holding—with two fields in Teesdale, County Durham. My brother is the co-owner. It is opposite and across the river from the Pennine way, the part of the country where I was brought up, so I am very aware of the problems of access to such popular walks as the Pennine way.

I was amazed, a number of years ago, that Teesdale district council chose to use local residents' money, through the community charge—as it then was—to tarmac part of the Pennine way, accessing one of the area's well-known beauty spots, High Force. My husband and I chose to marry and hold our reception at High Force hotel. I should have thought that the money could have been better used building a swimming pool for the use of all those living in Middleton and Teesdale and in the villages up and down the dale. We all wish to improve access to the countryside, but I argue, as the reasoned amendment argues, that there are other and better ways of doing so than those set out in the Bill.

I am proud to say that we have at least two sites of special scientific interest in the Vale of York which I am going to visit in the next month. I am sure that Yorkshire wildlife trust would welcome ways of improving access to and protection of such sites. I believe, however, that a better and more appropriate way forward would have been through a voluntary, non-legislative and non-binding approach. Positive co-operation could be encouraged between all those involved, such as the wildlife trusts, English Nature and the landowners, whom Labour Members seem often to forget. The Bill does not adequately fund, on the basis of positive management agreements, adequate access to and protection of such sites of special scientific interest.

The House should consider the consequences of opening up, in the comparatively densely populated region of England and Wales, the blanket access over 4 million acres that the Bill proposes. The Minister and I are becoming familiar to one another; he gave a courteous response to my Adjournment debate in Westminster Hall last week. Will he explain the extent to which rural

[Miss Anne McIntosh]

development grants, under the revised EU structural funds, could be allocated to reimburse the costs to landowners of meeting the Bill's requirements for open access to the countryside? I realise that the matter may not be one for his Department; it might be more appropriately dealt with by the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food.

It is right and proper that landowners should be encouraged to diversify and to move away from food production. That has been agreed and strengthened under the Agenda 2000 provisions. Will the Government consider whether they could properly apply rural development funds for those purposes?

It is important for the Government to address the question of costs, because they will inevitably increase for landowners. I offer the House a local example, from my constituency, in which rights of way have not been properly resolved under the present arrangements. I was contacted by a lady who had recently been widowed and who felt especially vulnerable when she wrote to me. She and her husband bought their field and property in 1953; they lived and worked there for 45 years. On 1 October last year, she wrote:

> I have learnt recently that the proposed path goes by my back door, by the garage, then a further few yards by the workshop, then a few more yards past a free-range poultry house to the adjoining farmer's land.
>
> I live outside the main residential area of the village. Walkers would have to come some distance to even begin the path. Many people walk their dogs on the quiet bye lanes of Asenby.
>
> In the present climate this problem is causing me great distress, knowing of local burglaries, vandalism, etc. I have recently been widowed and feel very, very vulnerable.
>
> Please consider my peace of mind and look fully into this case: To have the "path" stopped; To have the "path" rerouted.

The lady's neighbour, happily, was minded to agree to reroute the path through her own property. That neighbour is Mrs. Blair—I assure the House that she is no relation to the parliamentarian of the same name. The land at Asenby, near Thirsk, has been farmed by her husband for several years. He discovered that 11 of the 13 fields have footpaths running through them.

The Blairs farm corn and keep a suckler herd; the farm is wholly managed by Mr. Blair. He is personally responsible for erecting stiles in 11 fields, for which he receives no help or financial support. In Mrs. Blair's view, that makes it extremely difficult for him to continue farming—especially at certain times of the year, such as just before and after calving, when the animals need to be undisturbed. I am sure that I do not need to tell you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, how upset a cow can be when she has a young calf.

If we added that example to the many others that hon. Members could cite from their constituencies, we would regrettably realise that such rights of way problems are not resolved by the measure. Indeed, the Bill would make the situation worse; it would be much more harmful to the farming community. The Government give the impression that they have no understanding of farming, or of the continuous crisis in the countryside. The Bill fails to provide sufficient improvements to the rights of way network. It brings no hope to people such as my constituents, the Blairs, in the Vale of York.

The rights of way network is an important and appropriate vehicle for improving access for most people, and I believe that the Government will have the opportunity in Committee to resolve that situation. I urgently beg them to do so.

The Bill is equally remarkable for its omissions. The Government plead their commitment, as they did tonight, to greater protection for hedgerow features and areas of outstanding natural beauty, yet the Bill omits any provision to assist those areas and is silent on living up to the Government's stated commitment to protect hedgerows, landscape features and areas of outstanding natural beauty. It is therefore defective in that regard. I believe that the Government have the opportunity in Committee to reverse that omission.

For all those reasons, I invite the Government to keep an open mind, with a view to amending the Bill in Committee. I am nevertheless minded to oppose Second Reading tonight, and I commend to the House the reasoned amendment in the name of my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition.

9.5 pm

Mrs. Eileen Gordon (Romford): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to speak in this important debate. I am happy to give the Bill my total support.

Some 45 million people walk for pleasure at least once a month. I represent a London constituency so, as some Opposition Members might say, we are townie ramblers as opposed to extreme ramblers—but why not? It is vital that people who have to put up with the stresses and strains of urban life should be able to escape into the countryside to recharge their batteries and breathe some fresh air. Many of my constituents have written to me supporting the Bill. With greater access, people will have more choice and freedom to walk in our wonderful countryside, on our moors, downs and mountains.

I believe that a side effect of that greater freedom will be a boost to the rural economy—which I am sure that all MPs representing rural constituencies would welcome—bringing more people to small village shops, shops that sell outdoor gear, hotels, bed and breakfast places and, for some, the local pub at the end of a long walk. The British Mountaineering Council says that tourism is the largest industry in the English countryside, generating some £13.6 billion in spending annually. In 1996, a survey by Highlands and Islands Enterprise estimated that mountaineering activities brought income of £162 million into the HIE area alone—more than double that attracted by shooting and salmon fishing in the whole of Scotland. Tourism is a very important part of the rural economy, and I believe that it will grow with greater access to the countryside.

I should like to raise two points. First, my constituent, Neil Brindley, a keen rock climber and hill walker, is worried about access to coastal land. Part I states that the Secretary of State "may" extend access to coastal land. I heard what my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment said on that issue earlier. Climbers such as Neil have managed to arrange access by agreement with several bodies, including the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, to climb sea cliffs at Swanage, in Cornwall and on the Gower peninsula.

Rock climbers are a responsible bunch of people—they have to be because they are very aware of their own safety—and have great respect for wildlife and the environment. It would be contrary to the spirit of the Bill if that present access was lost as a result of the Bill. I hope that my right hon. Friend will consider changing that "may" to "shall" in Committee. I am sure that the British Mountaineering Council would give the Government plenty of advice on the best way of doing so, and on current best practice.

My second point concerns the right of appeal. It appears from the Bill that if access is granted, the landowner will be able to appeal, yet if access to a certain area is withdrawn, the public will not have the same right. I hope that the Minister will confirm or deny that, because if access can be taken away without appeal, walkers may unwittingly find themselves being treated as trespassers.

I will not say much more, as I know that other hon. Members wish to speak. I very much welcome the Bill, including the right of way reform and extensions, although I am concerned, as are some of my fellow Members, about the already stretched resources of local authorities to implement the recommendations. I am worried that they will not see that as a priority when their budgets are stretched to breaking point. Therefore, I raise the issue of extra cost.

Bills have to be fairly complex to cover all eventualities, but I hope that the implementation of this Bill will be as streamlined, simple and transparent as possible. It would be wrong if too much regulation and restriction resulted in little more real access. However, I look forward to the Bill making speedy progress through the House.

Finally, on his performance today, the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman) has definitely qualified to be added to my sad people list. In fact, I think that he has gone right to the top.

9.10 pm

Mrs. Diana Organ (Forest of Dean): Like many other Members, I wish to congratulate the individuals and organisations that have played their part in delivering this historic Bill. All three parts—on access to the open countryside, on the modernisation of rights of way and on the improvement of wildlife protection and sites of special scientific interest—are much welcomed.

SSSIs are the gems in our landscape, but many other areas of the countryside are equally as precious and need protection. I would like to press for an amendment which, as my hon. Friends the Members for Gower (Mr. Caton) and for Peterborough (Mrs. Brinton) have mentioned, would enhance the Bill and would provide protection and better management for some of our finest landscapes. Such an amendment would do something about the status of, and provision for, areas of outstanding natural beauty.

The Countryside Agency, the 37 AONBs, including the Wye valley in my constituency, and the Council for the Protection of Rural England all feel that a trick has been missed. They want to add to the Bill an AONB package to improve them and give them proper management arrangements and adequate resources. We very much welcome the doubling of the funding that the Government have put into AONBs, but such areas need much more.

Existing AONBs and other fine landscapes, such as the forest of Dean, that do not have any protection need better management and protection now. There is no legal responsibility for protection and insufficient funding for their full management needs. The Government suggested that they wanted to review AONB status and Ministers have given the impression that they were sympathetic to that. I understand that certain difficulties between the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, the Treasury and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, which had caused problems in the past, have been sorted out, but there is no clause to cover it in the Bill.

The Countryside Agency wants to work for a new model for other landscapes. The Bill would be the best opportunity to take that aim forward in the near future. That is particularly important for the forest of Dean, which is an exceptional landscape. It missed out on the Hobhouse recommendations of 1949 and on being made an AONB in 1974. I have raised that point in an Adjournment debate and in other debates on AONBs.

Parts of the forest of Dean are a national forest. In the past, it was felt that the Forestry Commission and now Forest Enterprise, as the major landlord, would be the guardian of this wonderful landscape. That has been shown not to be so, because such a body is wholly inadequate for such an important task. The area is an important limestone escarpment covered in trees—mainly oaks—but with a wealth of distinct historical sites. It has rich cultural heritage; it is a rural area with a mining and industrial history and it needs rural regeneration.

Four years ago, the area was threatened with plans for large extensions of quarrying activity—mainly for the carboniferous limestone—that would ruin this wonderful landscape, threaten the tranquillity of the local community and distract from the tourist industry. Before the 1997 general election, Labour promised to consider protecting that landscape and offered plans for a special status for the forest of Dean that was much needed. Since then, the Government and the Countryside Agency have commissioned a full-scale land use consultants survey, which has resulted in the area being recognised as a landscape of national importance.

The Countryside Agency board then made a landmark decision that it was committed to that status, which was reflected in a commitment to social and economic issues as well as landscape and recreational matters. It would embark on a major project acknowledging the connections between landscape, culture and the industrial past, as well as present social and economic issues. It decided not to proceed with AONB designation, since it felt that it was correct to evolve a tailor-made approach for the Dean.

In the meantime, however, the agency asked for an undertaking that the Government and local planning authorities, such as the county council and the district council, would act as though it were an AONB and that the Minister would give a clear steer to Gloucestershire county council's minerals working party to recognise that the landscape is of national importance and needs protection. Has the Minister agreed to that, and has he made it clear to the minerals planning authority that the landscape must have protection?

The Countryside Agency wanted to create a large-scale, integrated rural regeneration and development project while offering landscape management and protection, particularly with regard to the local minerals plan. It was widely agreed that simply designating the area an AONB as those areas are constructed at present was not enough.

[Mrs. Diana Organ]

It was hoped that the Bill would provide an opportunity to develop AONB mark II, which would offer a new integrated approach to solving local environmental, social and economic issues. There may be a chance to develop that idea in the forthcoming rural White Paper, and landscapes such as the forest of Dean could be the location to pilot that innovative approach.

In the meantime, I urge that the Bill is amended to give AONBs—the forest of Dean is nominally considered an AONB—a body with a statutory duty to protect their landscape and the resources for effective long-term planning and care so that their scenic and other environmental qualities are not damaged or lost. The Bill should also give AONBs the potential to deliver a wide range of linked environmental, social and economic benefits. The Bill is the only opportunity in the foreseeable future to give the forest of Dean and similar landscapes the protection that they urgently require. Before Labour was elected, it promised to give that protection, and we could achieve it by being innovative and delivering the new status of different, strengthened AONBs.

Mr. David Taylor: I understand that there are substantial ancient woodlands in the forest of Dean. Does my hon. Friend accept that 85 per cent. of ancient woodlands are not covered by SSSI or AONB status and deserve particular attention in the Bill or in other legislation shortly afterwards?

Mrs. Organ: My hon. Friend is right. He represents a constituency that is part of a new national park, so he has a particular interest in conserving and protecting important woodlands.

We should not miss the opportunity in the Bill, as we have missed opportunities in the past, to preserve landscapes that are much prized by the local community and recognised nationally as needing extra management, care and protection. The Government are sympathetic, and I hope to see the Bill amended in Committee.

9.18 pm

Jane Griffiths (Reading, East): I shall be brief because of the lateness of the hour. I am privileged to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mrs. Organ), who is such a doughty fighter for her constituency and who loses no opportunity to tell the world about the uniqueness of the landscape that she has the honour to represent.

My constituency is rather different because it is urban and suburban, but like many other constituencies it has many sites that are sensitive, unique and important. I very much welcome the measures to strengthen protection for sites of special scientific interest, but I join colleagues, in particular my hon. Friend the Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor), in calling for the designation of urban wildlife sites. It is important to preserve the diversity of our habitats, and the Bill gives us a long-awaited opportunity to do so.

On Friday, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, whom I was pleased to see in the Chamber earlier, visited my constituency to open the splendidly refurbished Victorian town hall and museum. While there, he took the opportunity to see displays about a unique geological feature of part of my constituency known as Emmer Green, after the emmer wheat that has been grown there. I am told that the area is unique in the south of England as an earthquake zone—owing not to mine workings or anything of the sort, but to the geological formation of a finger of London clay that extends a long way west to abut the Berkshire downs. The unique geology has been studied over the years.

I cite that feature as an example of the special areas everywhere in the country, whether urban, rural, suburban, moorland, woodland, beach or coastal. I highlight it because, in an urban area such as the one that I represent, it is arguably more important for people to be able to experience a variety of habitats.

Otters are beginning to return to the Thames and the Kennet. My constituents who walk along the riverside—where it is not closed off to them—are reporting sightings of otters or evidence of them. Sometimes, that is the only way we know that such wildlife is returning. There is no evidence that such sightings cause any difficulty for otters or represent any disincentive for them to take up residence. If the land is closed off, there will be no way to find whether otters remain or have been driven out by mink—as can happen, because the habitats are similar.

This is a Bill whose time has come. There have been campaigns for access, mass trespass and so on over many decades. We all acknowledge that the law on trespass is a bit of a mess. The Bill is about more than that. It is about our changing attitudes to the countryside and the land on which we live.

I grew up in Bedfordshire—I apologise to the area because I am sure that it has since changed—and remember the south Bedfordshire countryside as a monoculture of chemical-soaked onion fields. I remember the poisonous green foam that got into the brooks as they flowed past the brickwork outfalls. That was in the 1960s, when agriculture was somewhat different from today. There was then perhaps less of a conscience about the use of chemicals.

The Berkshire countryside around my constituency is much softer and, in many ways, more accessible to the rambler and bird watcher than the arable prairies of eastern England. There too, however, diversity is decreasing and the protection of species and habitats is insufficient.

It is only a few years ago that the late and unlamented Berkshire county council thought that it would be a good idea to build a dual carriageway across the mouth of the Kennet, where it flows into the Thames. That is one of the few places where the loddon lily, a rare and endangered plant, flourishes. A dual carriageway would clearly have not allowed it to do so. The then Secretary of State for the Environment, the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer) took the right decision in squashing the plan. It has gone and I trust that it will not return.

Measures that allow access to the countryside must be linked with wildlife conservation measures so that we can experience diverse habitats and so that seemingly insignificant life forms—whether butterflies, plants or larger animals—can continue to flourish.

I shall not take up any more of the House's time except to congratulate all hon. Members who have had the opportunity to speak in this debate. I welcome the Bill wholeheartedly, I know that my constituents do, and I wish it success in its progress through the House.

9.24 pm

Mr. Tom Levitt (High Peak): The Bill comes during the Government's phase of delivery, as I believe this period is called. I welcome the opportunity to speak briefly on Second Reading.

My Derbyshire constituency contains large areas of open access land, as much of it opened by voluntary agreement as is part of the Peak national park. About 60 per cent. of England's voluntary open access areas are in the national park and a large proportion of those areas are in my constituency. The Pennine way starts in my constituency, and many areas that are not currently covered by open access agreements are crossed by footpaths and rights of way.

I receive a great deal of correspondence on the subject of people using motorised vehicles where they should not, thereby making a nuisance of themselves and a mess of the landscape. My constituents and I therefore welcome the provisions to tighten up restrictions on the unauthorised off-road use of motorised vehicles.

I am told that, especially on Sundays, there are more mountaineers in my constituency than in any other English constituency. I am therefore pleased by the indications that the Bill will not only encourage and foster mountaineering opportunities, but will allow no ambiguity about the fact that those who want to climb or clamber over Stanedge and similar features should be able to reach such sites without let or hindrance.

The activities of mountaineers, climbers, ramblers and traditional users of the peak park and the open access areas will be facilitated by the Bill. Walking is one of the most common pastimes enjoyed by the people of this country, and millions of people participate in the activity every weekend. They respect the countryside and, by and large, they want to use it in a positive way. They respect this country's wildlife and landscape, acknowledge the legitimate needs of landowners and respect crops and livestock.

The Bill provides opportunities to enhance our use of the countryside for leisure, pleasure and study, and it gets the balance right by allowing nature to take its course in rural areas. I welcome the Bill and I wish it godspeed.

9.28 pm

Mr. Damian Green (Ashford): The debate has proved what a sad waste of opportunity the Bill is. It need not have been so. Every Member of Parliament wants better protection for wildlife and wants to promote responsible enjoyment of the countryside. If the Government had been both competent and sensible, they could have achieved what they and we want. Instead, they have produced a Bill whose welcome aspects are dragged down by anti-farmer ideology, ignorance of the workings of the countryside and sheer risible incompetence. The parade of complacency combined with an undertone of spite that has passed for argument among Government Members tonight shows why the Government are an object of derision in the English and Welsh countryside. I shall deal first with what is in the Bill but should not be, and then with what should be in the Bill but is not.

Mr. Allan Rogers (Rhondda): I am pleased to understand that the hon. Gentleman is broadly in favour of the Bill and thinks that it presents us with a great opportunity. He decries the Government's proposals, but does he acknowledge that, although the Conservatives were in power for 18 years, they never made any attempt to introduce constructive legislation dealing with these matters?

Mr. Green: The hon. Gentleman may have forgotten the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. Some of the best provisions in the Bill update and improve the 1981 Act. If he can contain himself for a few minutes, he will learn that, although I welcome the wildlife protection parts of the Bill, I think that too many of the measures on access are wrong both in principle and in practice.

To help the hon. Gentleman and his hon. Friends, I shall start with the access provisions, which have been so well dissected by my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry), and my hon. Friends the Members for Ludlow (Mr. Gill), for North Shropshire (Mr. Paterson) and for Bosworth (Mr. Tredinnick). I am in favour of greater access to the countryside, but I want it to be introduced in a workable form and in co-operation with those who live, work and farm in the countryside.

The access provided in the Bill is perverse. The Bill creates most access on the land that is least accessible to most people. When the vast majority of people say that they want the right to roam, they mean that they want well-signed footpaths in green areas near the towns in which 80 per cent. of us live. What they do not want is people wandering around land that may contain endangered species of birds or plant life, where one act by a single thoughtless person could create an environmental disaster. That is where the Bill focuses, however.

Even in its own terms, the Bill is inconsistent. For instance, the exceptions that it introduces to access land are limited and inconsistent. Access is banned in quarries, but allowed when the former quarry is being filled with waste. It is banned in buildings, but allowed in mobile homes. It is banned around mobile telephone transmitters, but allowed around television transmitters.

Access land is not shown on maps at present. Landowners and walkers will have to try to apply exceptions as they come to land. For example, a walker will have to work out what the curtilage of a building is. Last month there was a case in the Court of Appeal in which it was admitted that even lawyers often do not understand what a curtilage is. If the walker gets it wrong, he is a trespasser. If the landowner gets it wrong and puts a notice in the wrong place, he commits a criminal offence.

There are worse inconsistencies in the activities that are allowed or forbidden on access land. The activities allowed are anomalous. Paragliding is banned, but hot air ballooning is allowed. It is against the law for a person to swim in a lake, but letting a dog swim in a lake is allowed by the law. Playing football is banned; holding a political demonstration is allowed. Camping is banned, but holding a religious service at a stone circle to mark the spring equinox is allowed.

[Mr. Green]

The Bill is full of such anomalies. We are in the third year of the Parliament. The Minister said in his opening remarks that this is an historic Bill, for which many Government Members have been waiting for most of the century. One would have thought that when the Government produce such an historic Bill, they might try to produce a half-way competent historic Bill.

The ludicrous 28-day exemption introduced by the Bill was referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray)—that is, the 28 days during which access may be denied. The Minister quoted Lloyd George in one of the oratorical flourishes in his speech. I shall quote back at him a real live Welsh farmer, farming in Caernarfon, Mrs. Karen Jones, who sent me a long letter pointing out a large number of anomalies and idiocies in the Bill.

Mrs. Jones notes, as many of my hon. Friends pointed out, that the right to roam would be allowed over the weekends and bank holidays, even inside the 28 days allowed for the owner. As she puts it,

> I must tell the ewes not to lamb at the weekends.

It is not just lambing that will be affected. Presumably, the agencies that will be involved in taking the decisions can decide what forms of activity they will permit. I dare say that in different areas of the country, different kinds of activity will be allowed.

I am not clear whether the Minister is aware that if he gets the wrong kind of bureaucrats in some areas, he will threaten not just a few landowners, but gymkhanas, village fetes, occasional friendly cricket matches and other activities that many people who once thought of themselves as new Labour supporters will not want to be banned.

The Government claim that local people judge how access works, but Government agencies rather than elected local councillors will decide about exclusions and restrictions. The Government need to tell us what they mean by land management; they should publicise exclusions and restrictions at public expense.

Land management is central to the Bill, yet there is no attempt to define it. Such a definition is essential if the Bill is to be workable. For example, most of the heather moorlands are managed for and funded by sporting interests. Many are designated sites of special scientific interest because of the careful management they receive. Unless shooting, burning bracken, spraying, gamekeeping and related activities are recognised as land management, the Bill will render vast areas of moorland unsustainable. It must therefore fully define land management.

The Bill fails to explain in detail how notification will be managed, or the source of funding for the wardens who will be needed to police the new restrictions. The Bill currently states that local authorities "may" appoint access wardens. They must appoint such officers to make the Bill remotely enforceable and to minimise the burden and potential loss inflicted on landowners and managers of access land.

The access provisions include further absurdities. Many of my hon. Friends have commented on the curiosity of the provision for 24-hour access. All hon. Members agree that one of the glories of living in this country is the ability to enjoy the scenery and views of the English countryside. How many people want to enjoy them in the dark? The Association of Chief Police Officers supports the case for restricting access to daylight hours, simply because of the likely effect on crime.

Mr. Bennett: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ms Atherton: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Green: I think the hon. Gentleman was first.

Mr. Bennett: Last night, there was an extremely good moon. Many people would have enjoyed walking in the moonlight. Does the hon. Gentleman accept that some measure is required for ensuring that mountain walkers get off the mountains safely? If those walkers had to be off the mountain by dusk, it would substantially limit the time that they could spend there.

Mr. Green: It is interesting that the hon. Gentleman wants the pleasure of walking in the countryside by moonlight when the Government ban doing so in urban parks. I know that he cares about that because we debated the matter in Westminster Hall last week. It is anomalous to claim that people can walk in the countryside in the dark, but not in urban parks.

The Association of Chief Police Officers believes that the provision is bad for crime prevention. The Government acknowledge the need to tackle crime, and threats to schools in urban areas, by providing for stopping up or diverting rights of way by night. They seem far less interested in preventing crime in rural areas. That is characteristic of them.

We must also consider the wider human rights element. I know that many Labour Members do not believe that human rights apply to landowners, but I should be interested to hear the advice that the Minister received on whether refusing compensation is legal under the Human Rights Act 1998. The statement on the front of the Bill claims that the provisions comply with that Act. The Government know that, according to many legal opinions, it does not.

Beyond the basic problem with human rights legislation, there is severe disparity in the enforcement of the access provisions. Any walker who does something wrong can be required politely to leave for a few hours, yet a landowner who does something wrong faces heavy fines and potential imprisonment. Labour Members believe that landowners deserve to be treated in that way. I would simply point out that in many areas where allowing access will prove most controversial, the landowners will be upland farmers. The average income of an upland farmer in England this year will be £4,600. In Wales, it will be £2,700. The Government are not attacking fat cats, but struggling upland farmers.

The final key point about access is that there should be well-signposted access points. That represents possibly the single biggest necessary improvement to the Bill. Those access areas need to be planned, practical and funded, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (Mr. Tredinnick) said, the access provisions will achieve none of that.

Rights of way provisions form a large section of the Bill, and the Minister, with the characteristic honesty for which we all respect him, gave the game away at the start

of the debate by saying that they are very complex and that he would accept any changes made in Committee. That ministerial code is easy to crack. His words meant, "The legislation is a complete mess; we haven't got a clue how to proceed; and we hope that someone tells us in Committee." Roads used as public paths were meant to be replaced by footpaths, bridleways or byways open to all traffic. Some local authorities have reclassified in that way and some have not, but, rather than a simple and complete reclassification, the Government propose to create a further type of right of way. Why do they insist on making an already complicated system more complicated? There are already at least six ways to stop up or divert highways under the highways and planning legislation: the Bill simply provides four new ones, making a bad situation worse.

We heard from the hon. Member for Gower (Mr. Caton) that 25 years is too brief a time in which to do proper mapping, but it is far too long for many people in the countryside who seek some certainty in those maps. I think that the Minister used the words, "25 years, as resources allow," which is not jam today or even tomorrow, but jam at no time this side of the event—jam never, that is.

The nature conservation and wildlife protection measures have some merit. We support the improvements to the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, which strengthen the protection of SSSIs, but the Government should do more. My hon. Friend the Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh) made that point, as have many others. The Woodland Trust says that the Bill should protect important sites outside the SSSI framework if it is to make a lasting contribution to protecting our native woodland heritage—85 per cent. of all ancient woodland lies outside the SSSI designation.

The Council for the Protection of Rural England points out that the Bill

> fails . . . to deliver promised improvements to the protection of . . . hedgerows, landscape features and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

The Wildlife Trusts wants

> greater recognition and protection to . . . wildlife areas . . . outside SSSIs;
>
> legal underpinning to the UK biodiversity process; and
>
> better protection for species.

The organisation Plantlife says that the Bill fails to safeguard

> wild plants from non-native invasive species;
>
> protection of the habitats of species which are in danger of extinction . . .

I am sure that the Minister will recognise that much more needs to be done—even to the wildlife protection provisions—in Committee. I do not wish to be churlish, but even the good parts of the Bill are inadequate and they are heavily outweighed by the badly thought out ones.

The Government have missed their opportunity to make practical improvements to access and rights of way. Instead, they are luxuriating in an ideological spasm. Labour Members may enjoy that short-term pleasure, but they are putting at risk the very countryside about which they care. I fear that, in 10 years' time, we shall look back on the Bill and say, "They should not have tried to protect wildlife with one hand while allowing a thoughtless few to endanger it with the other." Those genuine concerns about the countryside are not confined to a privileged few, but are shared by millions who care for our countryside and our wildlife. If the Government continue to get it wrong, they will stand condemned by the many, not the few. I commend our amendment to the House.

9.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Chris Mullin): We have had a wide-ranging debate.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): It is the aviation Minister.

Mr. Mullin: I am the Minister of many things: today I am a countryside Minister—tomorrow, who knows?

Many sensible points have been made, and some not so sensible. I am sorry to say that quite a few of the not so sensible points came from members of the Opposition Front Bench. The contribution from the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman) was a little disappointing. I felt that his heart was not entirely in it—I shall put it no higher than that. I know that he is a reasonable man, and I suspect that he knows that much of what is in the Bill, including the access provisions, are good, common sense.

I commend the views of the hon. Member for Bournemouth, East (Mr. Atkinson) to his Conservative colleagues. He described the present access arrangements as a legacy of feudalism. That sentiment will find widespread support in the House. I felt that the Opposition's heart was not entirely in their opposition: they were just going through the motions. I take heart from the fact that the squirearchy has been virtually unrepresented in the debate. There have been contributions from one or two aspirant toffs, but with the exception of a fleeting visit from the hon. Member for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames) we never got a real toff. It has probably dawned on the more sensible and perceptive Tory Members that many of their supporters are likely to be in favour of the Bill.

There were one or two predictable contributions, including, I am sorry to say, the ideological spasm that we have just heard from the hon. Member for Ashford (Mr. Green). There has been a cynical attempt to piggyback on the undoubted crisis in the farming industry so as to extract some cheap mileage. There is no basis for that.

The hon. Member for Bosworth (Mr. Tredinnick) said that we were on a collision course with the countryside. That is absolute nonsense. The Bill has widespread support in the countryside. As he may have noticed, these days we represent rather a lot of it.

The hon. Member for South-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Paice) accused the Bill of being anti-landowner. Many sensible and enlightened landowners would not recognise that description, and have long allowed access to their land. I predict that they will enter into the spirit of the Bill and will extend access.

The hon. Member for Ludlow (Mr. Gill), with characteristic understatement, compared the confiscation of property rights that he thinks are entailed in the Bill with those that occurred in Soviet Russia some years ago. He did not rest his case there. He went on to say that the situation was even worse than in Soviet Russia. I feel that he failed to carry the House with him on that point.

[Mr. Mullin]

We have, by and large, had a sensible debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) made it clear that one of the reasons for that was because the Government have gone to great lengths to consult those whose interests are directly affected. The result is a balanced Bill. The Government have bent over backwards to be reasonable and to enter into a constructive dialogue with the Country Landowners Association, the National Farmers Union and others whose legitimate interests are affected. When the huffing and puffing dies down, most reasonable people will realise that this legislation is inherently sensible.

After all, the right to roam already exists in millions of acres of our countryside. I have already referred to enlightened landowners who have allowed it for many years. My right hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark) referred to Sir Charles Trevelyan. There was an enlightened landowner, if ever there was one: I have spent many hours enjoying the rights of access on his magnificent estate at Wallington in Northumberland.

The right to roam has been conceded for years on most Forestry Commission land, and on most National Trust land. There is a de facto right to roam in Scotland. None of that has had any of the dire effects that have been alleged. My hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours)—who is not quite in his place—knocked a lot of this nonsense on the head. He represents some of the most beautiful countryside in England, containing numerous sheep farmers and hill farmers. He said that, in 20 years of representing his constituency, he had never received a complaint from a farmer who had been adversely affected by the right to roam, which exists throughout his constituency.

Mr. Soames: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Mullin: Most certainly: let us hear from a real toff.

Mr. Soames: The Minister, who has spent a good deal of time in the hills, knows perfectly well that what he has just said is not strictly true. Many farmers suffer regularly from the activities of people who walk, who leave gates open, who let their dogs run free and whose dogs attack animals. The problem is not so serious that such activities should not be allowed to happen, but it is foolish of the Minister to pretend that farmers, especially livestock farmers, do not experience a great deal of trouble from people walking.

Mr. Mullin: I acknowledge what the hon. Gentleman says, and I do not treat it lightly, but I do not think that such problems—which, as he says, do occur—are on quite the scale that some of his colleagues have alleged.

I believe that, when the smoke and fury clear, it will all go very quiet, and in a few years' time no one will recall what the fuss was about. I anticipate a day when a Conservative spokesman will come to the Dispatch Box to announce that he accepts the access provisions. After all, many of us never thought we would live long enough to see the day when a Conservative spokesman came to the Dispatch Box to acknowledge that the national minimum wage was a good thing. If it can happen with the national minimum wage, I am optimistic about the right to roam.

Some practical matters will, of course, have to be ironed out, and in many cases that will have to happen in Committee. Let me stress the importance of local access forums. It is important not to push such matters through in the teeth of local opposition, but to ensure that all local interests are properly represented. Some hon. Members asked who would be on the forums. The people whose rights will be affected must of course be represented.

The hon. Member for Ludlow mentioned the confiscation of ownership rights.

Mr. Gill: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Mullin: In a moment. The right of access is a modest one—

Mr. Gill *rose—*

Mr. Mullin: If the hon. Gentleman can contain himself, he will have something to reply to in a moment.

The right of access is a modest one. The Bill has been carefully constructed to minimise any adverse impact on landowners. It strikes a fair balance between the public interest and the needs of landowners, and landowners will be able to continue to use their land as they think best. I put it to the hon. Gentleman, however, that no rights are absolute: they must be balanced with the public interest.

Mr. Gill: All I wanted to say to the Minister, before he referred to me again, was that he should tell the truth, and not misrepresent what I had said.

Madam Speaker: Order. I ask the hon. Gentleman to withdraw that remark. No Member of Parliament speaks anything other than the truth.

Mr. Gill: I do withdraw the truth. *[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman can speak the truth. I ask him to withdraw just the remark that he made.

Mr. Gill: I do withdraw that word. May I draw the Minister's attention—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. Let me deal with the matter. The hon. Gentleman is withdrawing the remark. Is that correct?

Mr. Gill: That is correct.

Madam Speaker: What is the hon. Gentleman saying then?

Mr. Gill: The Minister took my words inaccurately earlier. What I actually said was that my constituent, Mr. Parish of Lydbury North, had said that not even Soviet Russia did what the Government propose to do, which is slightly different from what the Minister said that I said.

Mr. Mullin: As I said when the hon. Gentleman made the point the first time and, indeed, the second, he did not entirely carry the House with him, but I have no desire to rub him up the wrong way as I am rather fond of him.

We believe that there is no case for compensation. The public benefits outweigh the limited interference with landowners' rights. The statutory right will be limited and will not prevent agricultural activities or development of land. In addition, it will be possible to close the land for part of the year. We believe that a fair balance has been struck between the rights of landowners and the general interest and that there is no justification for compensation.

May I clear up a misunderstanding about the 28 days closure? It is for any purpose that the landowner wants. It is a bonus; it is on top of any closure that may be necessary for conservation reasons.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Mullin: Forgive me. I am running out of time and the hon. and learned Gentleman has not been here.

Therefore, there is no basis—

Mr. Garnier: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Mullin: No.

The hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells talked of criminalising landowners. That will not happen. The civil law will be adequate in just about every case. Local authorities will rarely need to use the enforcement procedures against landowners. Criminal procedures are very much a long stop. They cannot be used until the civil procedure has been exhausted.

There are many points that I should like to have replied to, but time does not permit me. No doubt in Committee, we shall have the opportunity to go over some of the points.

The Bill is a vital part of the Government's agenda to allow all people the opportunity to improve their quality of life. It fulfils our manifesto pledges. There has been extensive consultation and it is emphatically backed by public opinion. It offers the first opportunity in more than 50 years to legislate for improved access for the quiet enjoyment of our natural environment. It will bring rights of way into the 21st century, while at the same time protecting and conserving our natural heritage and native species.

The Bill is a balanced measure that recognises the needs and obligations of the many different groups affected: landowners, tenants, walkers, riders, conservation interests, local authorities and national park authorities. In taking it through the House, we will endeavour to maintain that essential balance. There will be a spring in my step when I walk through the Lobby to vote for it. I suspect that there will be a spring in the step of right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House.

9.59 pm

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): I am grateful to be allowed to comment on the Bill at this late stage.

I wonder whether the Minister could stop talking to himself and address the public. Will he let us know which article in the European convention allows him not to allow compensation to those who are affected by the Bill?

Mr. Kevin Hughes (Doncaster, North) *rose in his place and claimed to move,* That the Question be now put.

Question, That the Question be now put, *put and agreed to.*

Question put accordingly, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 138, Noes 334.

Division No. 117] **[10 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat–Amory, Rt Hon David
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jenkin, Bernard
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Major, Rt Hon John
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles

Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Willetts, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown and
Mr. Peter Luff.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Edwards, Huw
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr Evan
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keetch, Paul
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moore, Michael
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Raynsford, Nick
Rendel, David
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*

Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tyler, Paul
Tynan, Bill
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Wallace, James
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Willis, Phil
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Mike Hall and
Mr. David Jamieson.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 62 (Amendment on second or third reading), and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time, and committed to a Standing Committee, pursuant to Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of Bills).

COUNTRYSIDE AND RIGHTS OF WAY BILL
[*MONEY*]

Queen's recommendation having been signified—

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 52(1)(a),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Countryside and Rights of Way Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of—

(a) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums required by the Secretary of State for making grants to the Countryside Agency or the Nature Conservancy Council for England;

(b) any administrative expenses of a Minister of the Crown which are attributable to the Act;

(c) any other expenditure of a Minister of the Crown or government department which is attributable to the Act; and

(d) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums which under any other enactment are payable out of money so provided.—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

Question agreed to.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

LEGAL SERVICES COMMISSION

That the draft Community Legal Service (Cost Protection) Regulations 2000, which were laid before this House on 21st February, be approved.—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

LEGAL SERVICES COMMISSION

That the draft Community Legal Service (Scope) Regulations 2000, which were laid before this House on 21st February, be approved.—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

The House divided: Ayes 303, Noes 160.

Division No. 118] **[10.16 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Edwards, Huw
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin

Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheffld Heeley)*
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Raynsford, Nick
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tynan, Bill
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Mike Hall and
Mr. David Jamieson.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Butterfill, John
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Flight, Howard
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Harris, Dr Evan
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat–Amory, Rt Hon David
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Keetch, Paul
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Archy
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David

McLoughlin, Patrick
Major, Rt Hon John
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moore, Michael
Moss, Malcolm
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Wallace, James
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Peter Luff and
Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

LEGAL SERVICES

That the draft Conditional Fee Agreements Order 2000, which was laid before this House on 21st February, be approved.—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

ACCESS TO JUSTICE

That the Funding Code prepared by the Legal Services Commission in accordance with section 8 of the Access to Justice Act 1999 and as first approved by the Lord Chancellor in accordance with section 9(4) of that Act, which was laid before this House on 28th February, be approved.—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

The House divided: Ayes 295, Noes 149.

Division No. 119] **[10.28 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Edwards, Huw
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*

McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheffld Heeley)*
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Raynsford, Nick
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Ryan, Ms Joan
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tynan, Bill
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Mike Hall and
Mr. David Jamieson.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Butterfill, John
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Collins, Tim
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Flight, Howard
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Harris, Dr Evan
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Archy
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Major, Rt Hon John
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moore, Michael
Moss, Malcolm
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spring, Richard
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Peter Luff and
Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Madam Speaker: By leave of the House, I put together motions 7 and 8.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): Object.

Madam Speaker: Which motion is the hon. Gentleman objecting to?

Mr. Blunt: I should like motion 7 to be taken on its own, Madam Speaker.

CONSTITUTIONAL LAW

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

That the draft Scotland Act 1998 (Cross-Border Public Authorities) (Adaptation of Functions etc.) Order 2000, which was laid before this House on 1st March, be approved.—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

Question agreed to.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

That the draft Tax Credits Up-rating Order 2000, which was laid before this House on 3rd March, be approved.—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

Question agreed to.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made,

That the Competition Act 1998 (Director's Rules) Order 2000 be referred to a Standing Committee on Delegated Legislation.—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Mr. Nigel Beard be discharged from the Science and Technology Committee and Dr. Brian Iddon be added to the Committee.—*[Mr. Touhig, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.]*

PETITION

Free Television Licences

10.41 pm

Mr. Ivan Henderson (Harwich): I present a petition on behalf of my constituents. The petition seeks an extension to the Government's initiative—under which more than 12,000 pensioners aged 75 and over living in my constituency will be entitled to a free television licence, to all persons over the retirement age, of whom there are more than 30,000.

I beg to submit to the House the petition of residents in the Harwich constituency, which

Declares that we consider that free television licences should be provided for all persons over the retirement age. Many of these people before the age of 75 years are living on their own, and TV can be the only communication with the outside world.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport to consider this proposal.

And the Petitioners therefore remain, yours faithfully, Mrs. Irene Farrow and Mrs. Eileen Murphy of Clacton-On-Sea and others.

To lie upon the Table.

Entry Clearance

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

10.43 pm

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): For almost 1.5 million people every year, their first contact with Britain and the British Government is the experience of submitting to the entry clearance operation at a consulate or high commission overseas. Submitting to an interview about one's income and intentions can be an intimidating process at the best of times, and when an important visit abroad to meet family, perhaps for a wedding reception or to see grandchildren for the first time, depends on it, that process can prove extremely stressful.

It is important therefore that this first impression of Britain is a good one, and that entry clearance procedures are perceived to be transparent, fair and just. I want to detain the House this evening because I believe that in some cases our entry clearance operation falls short of that standard, and I am concerned by the proposals to introduce a visa bond pilot scheme, which will in my view further impair our entry clearance procedures.

First, let me say that entry clearance officers do an extremely professional job on the whole, often in the most difficult circumstances. Their duty is to be the first step in the control of illegal immigration into the United Kingdom. They must satisfy themselves principally of three things: first, that the applicant's trip can be properly financed; secondly, that there is suitable accommodation for the applicant in the UK; and thirdly, that the applicant will return home before, or at the end of, the visa period.

Ninety-four per cent. of non-settlement visas are granted through the good offices of entry clearance officers. I accept that, as Members of Parliament, we invariably see more of the 6 per cent. of cases that, from the applicant's and sponsor's point of view, go wrong rather than the 94 per cent. of satisfied customers. None the less, there is cause for concern.

I remind my good and hon. Friend the Minister of the words of the independent monitor for asylum and immigration, Dame Elizabeth Anson, in her report of July last year, when she writes of

> the concern I have expressed in my last three reports on the fairness of some refusals of late, middle aged and elderly parents seeking to visit families in the UK.

She goes on to say:

> it is felt that insufficient consideration is given to many real reasons that endorse their claims that they only intend a short visit and will return home.

In one case that I have been dealing with, a relative had been invited by grateful constituents of mine to visit them in the UK. They wanted to return the care and hospitality that the lady had given them when they had visited her in Sri Lanka—she had, in fact, nursed their two sick children during that visit—and sent her the flight to the UK as a gift.

The entry clearance officer in Sri Lanka based the decision to refuse the application on her answer to one specific question. The entry clearance officer had asked her, "And if it were possible, would you like to stay longer?" to which the lady had innocently replied, "Oh yes, of course." Such trick questions are on a par with the old Vaudeville gag of "Have you stopped beating your wife?"

Mr. Stephen Pound (Ealing, North): Is my hon. Friend surprised to hear that many relatives of my constituents who wish to visit this country are asked questions about the cities, towns and culture of the United Kingdom? When they cannot provide answers to those questions, they are told that they are clearly not bona fide visitors and the visa is refused, yet the whole purpose of applying for the visit is to see those very sites on which they are quizzed in Mumbai or Kalkata.

Mr. Gardiner: My hon. Friend makes a characteristically perceptive point. Which resident of the United Kingdom could speak with authority on Ahmedabad or Chandigarh as applicants at consulates overseas are sometimes requested to do for places in the UK?

The case that I mentioned was topped by a family from Goa—an area in which I know my hon. Friend the Minister has a particular interest. The mother and father are my constituents and they have been visited by their daughter, who is a nun, on many occasions without any immigration problems. Her brother has a good job in Dubai. It is not very highly paid, but it pays significantly above his previous earnings in India. He was refused a visa not because he did not earn enough to provide him with an incentive to return to Dubai, but on the ground that he was likely to overstay because he admitted that he missed his family. It might appear obvious that any family visa application could be turned down on that basis. People do not apply to visit their families unless they miss them and want to see them.

I accept that entry clearance officers must properly consider whether an applicant will return, but the House, I am sure, will be appalled to hear that applicants already accepted for student nurse training under the United Kingdom Central Council for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting scheme are regularly refused student visas on the ground that all good nurses are encouraged to stay in the UK because of the national shortage of nurses.

Slightly more than 12 months ago, the Department for Education and Employment agreed that a number of qualified nurses from Manila and Accra would be given work permits. Unfortunately, nobody informed the entry clearance officers in Manila and Accra of the decision to allow in those nurses outside the immigration rules, because of the national shortage of nurses. Those nurses were refused. That is hardly joined-up government.

I come to the specific question of family visits by elderly relatives. Often, parents have previously visited and returned without incident, but, especially if the mother is widowed, entry clearance officers often assume that an application to visit will be abused to enable the elderly mother to settle with the family in the United Kingdom. In my experience, refusals often ignore the existence of family in the country of origin, who provide an equally strong motive for the mother to return. Such cases are extremely distressing.

I am concerned that entry clearance officers sometimes demand documentation and detailed answers to complex financial questions about income, family support and relatives' business affairs, without taking adequate

account of the fact that some widows have never had to take any responsibility for financial dealings because tradition made them the preserve of their deceased husbands. That, added to the fact that many elderly people become genuinely muddled under sustained questioning about financial affairs, makes the case for a far more sympathetic approach to family visits by elderly people.

Dame Elizabeth, discussing family visits in her report, makes the point that

> Sponsors often offer to provide a bond to guarantee a relative will leave.

That is borne out by my experience: sponsors have on many occasions come to my surgery and made such an offer. Dame Elizabeth believes that

> these would be very suitable for elderly relatives.

On that point, I disagree with her.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas (Harrow, West): I support tight enforcement of our entry clearance rules, but does my hon. Friend share my view that Foreign and Commonwealth Office procedures used in considering such applications need to be applied with sympathy and sense? They should recognise the distress caused to citizens of this country when their elderly relatives are denied access.

Mr. Gardiner: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He is a doughty champion of his constituents and has made many representations on behalf of sponsoring families in his constituency.

I have deep reservations about the proposed visa bond pilot scheme, and I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will give those reservations serious consideration. He will know that I recently visited the deputy high commission in Mumbai, where I spoke at length with entry clearance officers about the proposed scheme. I believe that my reservations are shared by a number of the officers with whom I spoke.

The discussion took place on 20 February. The officers reported a dramatic drop in applications following the publicity that the pilot scheme received after what I can only describe as a mendacious piece of journalism published in *The Sunday Telegraph* on 30 January. That report caused extreme anxiety in the Asian community in this country and throughout India. My hon. Friend the Minister will be able to testify to that because he was on an official visit to the country at the time. During my visit, more than a week later, the repercussions of that article were still being felt in entry clearance operations throughout the country.

The perception reported by officers in Mumbai has now been confirmed by official Foreign and Commonwealth Office statistics, which show a drop of more than 10 per cent. in applications from Mumbai, month on month, from February 1999 to February 2000.

Let me say immediately that I understand that the pilot scheme proposal came out of a genuine desire by the Government to respond to the representations that they had received from sponsors in the UK. The scheme is supposed to operate on the basis that entry clearance officers will assess an application in the usual way and confirm whether an applicant can show the necessary financial resources and accommodation in the UK to make the visit.

Being satisfied on those points, the entry clearance officers must then consider whether, on balance, the applicant will return to the country of origin after the stay. If they consider that the applicant will do so, the visa should be granted. If they consider that, on balance, there is doubt that the applicant will return to the country of origin, under the provisions of the pilot scheme they are supposed to consider the application of a bond.

It is at this point that my reservations about the proposal come into play. There are fundamentally two reasons to doubt whether the desired effect of the pilot scheme will be borne out in practice. The first was made plain to me by the entry clearance officers at Mumbai. They pointed out that it would be an extremely complex and time-consuming procedure for them to go that extra stage.

If a bond were applied to an applicant who the entry clearance officers had not been satisfied would return to the country of origin, it would take considerable resources on their part to administer and put in place the bond scheme. That is time that they would not be spending administering the usual run-of-the-mill applications. Therefore, unless substantial extra resources were put into the entry clearance operation, one must assume that the time that the entry clearance officers spent processing the bond application, for an applicant who would otherwise have been rejected, would not be spent processing the greater number of applications that would have proceeded in the usual way.

My second concern is that pilot schemes are all very well; practice is another matter. It might be possible for a pilot scheme along the lines set out to operate and be seen to operate quite properly. However, once the constraints of the pilot scheme were lifted, when it was no longer a case of separating those who had not managed to persuade the entry clearance officer of their bona fides to return from those who had, and when that area of discretion was no longer the norm, it is likely that entry clearance officers would simply say, "Well, I am not sure whether this person will return or not, therefore I will apply the bond."

I believe that over time, even the best-intentioned scheme would become misapplied by the entry clearance officers, to the detriment of genuine applicants. When constituents come to us as Members of Parliament and make representations about their relatives who wish to come and visit them in this country, it is important that they can be advised clearly about the immigration regulations in the United Kingdom.

I have always been able to say to my constituents, whey they come to me and propose a bond, "In this country, whether or not you can come in is not a matter of money. It is simply a matter of whether you meet the regulations. If you can show that there is financial support and accommodation for you such as to make the trip possible, and if you can show that there is good reason why you will return to the country of origin afterwards, you are admitted. If you cannot show any of those things, the application is refused."

That seems eminently clear. It would be befuddled by giving the entry clearance officers discretion in a case where they have already reached the conclusion that, on the balance of probabilities, the applicant would not return to the country of origin. To say that if that applicant were to lodge a financial bond—the very applicant who has not managed to persuade the entry clearance officers of his

[Mr. Gardiner]

bona fides—and that he should then be allowed to come in, is in my view to mix finances with the clear immigration procedures of this country in a most unfortunate way.

11 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Keith Vaz): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, North (Mr. Gardiner) for the opportunity to debate our entry clearance services. I know that he takes a close interest in those matters and, as he said, he recently visited our operations in India. I, too, have always taken a close interest in visa and immigration matters, and I was delighted when my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary invited me to take on the responsibility for entry clearance as part of my portfolio at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

A clear priority for me in the job was to ascertain what I could do to improve the service that we provide, not only to visa applicants overseas, but to Members of Parliament and sponsors in this country. There is always room for improvement. My hon. Friend has made helpful points, which I shall consider carefully. Room for improvement exists because our operation is large and global. However, in most cases the visa operation works well to facilitate visits and travel to this country.

Overall we provide a good service. In 1999, we processed more than 1.5 million visa applications. Of those, fewer than 7 per cent. were refused. A very high percentage—more than 90 per cent.—of applicants for non-settlement visas were granted visas in 24 hours. That is a good service by any standard.

I do not suggest that entry clearance officers get it right every time—they do not. However, we should keep that in perspective. The number of cases that go wrong represent only a small percentage of the overall number of applications. We aim to correct any wrong decisions quickly, and to tackle the root cause or causes of any poor quality decisions. Our aim is for all entry clearance sections to operate to the standards of the very best.

Entry clearance officers have a duty to apply the immigration rules approved by Parliament. Some applicants—again, only a minority—seek to abuse the system. Our visa sections rightly watch out for that.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Home Office work together closely on all those matters. We are fortunate to have as Home Secretary my right hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw). He has worked tirelessly to ensure that we have an immigration system that is firm but fair. As the House knows, he is the Home Secretary who abolished the infamous primary purpose rule.

I mentioned the service that we provide to Members of Parliament and sponsors in this country. Since I took over, I have tried to improve those services. First, we have established regular visa surgeries for hon. Members to come to talk to me about difficult constituency cases. Hon. Members know that my door is always open and that my telephone number is readily available to those who believe that they have urgent or important cases.

Secondly, we have tried to improve communications between Members of Parliament and constituents by publishing a *Visa News* bulletin. It aims to highlight changes and advise hon. Members about how best to make representations. We arranged a meeting on 12 January between hon. Members with an interest in the subject and my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary. That was the first time a Foreign Secretary had ever attended such a meeting. His attendance demonstrates the commitment in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to providing high quality visa services.

Delay in responding to hon. Members' letters has been a problem for some time. I know that from my case load. By the end of last year, a backlog of almost 1,000 letters from hon. Members had built up in our visa correspondence unit. Some hon. Members will know that, on 24 January, we established an outstanding casework unit to tackle the backlog. I am pleased to inform the House that the backlog is now substantially reduced. My officials are considering ways of maintaining the improved standards of service on a long-term basis.

We are also in the process of restructuring the visa correspondence unit to make the overall operation of the system more effective. I want my office to respond to MPs quickly, especially on urgent and exceptional cases.

In considering ways to improve the service to visa applicants, my priority was to pay an early visit to the Indian subcontinent, where seven of our visa offices account for some 18 per cent. of all visa applications worldwide. I was therefore delighted to have been able, as my hon. Friend said, to visit India and Bangladesh earlier this month. I wanted to examine our operations there and see what we could do to improve our services. I was impressed by the dedication and commitment of our staff in those countries. I also had the opportunity to meet visa applicants, who seemed happy with the service that they were getting.

Let me describe the figures. Last year, our high commission in New Delhi handled 67,000 visa applications. Fewer than 17 per cent. were refused and more than 70 per cent. of non-settlement visas granted were available for collection within 24 hours of the application being lodged. The figures for Dhaka were 19,700 applications received and 25 per cent. refused. All non-settlement visas were processed within 24 hours.

I concentrated on considering ways in which we might improve the service to those living in rural areas, who have to travel long distances to the visa issuing centres. During my visit, I launched feasibility studies in three subcontinent cities—Chandigarh and Ahmedabad in India and Sylhet in Bangladesh—into how that might best be achieved. Those studies are now under way and we are examining a wide range of options, including the possibility of issuing visas in those centres. I shall look at the results very carefully before making any decisions.

My visit to the subcontinent also coincided with some rather inaccurate and misleading press reports of the Government's plans to pilot a financial bond scheme for certain visa applicants. I am glad that my hon. Friend identified *The Sunday Telegraph* as the newspaper that started those inaccurate reports. They fuelled misunderstandings about the proposed scheme that are still current, despite all our efforts to set the record straight. The subject is of course one for my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, but it may be helpful if I briefly explain the background.

The Government's commitment to exploring the possibility of introducing a bond scheme through a pilot study was set out in the immigration and asylum White

Paper published in 1998. The Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 provides the powers to run such a study. We followed that with a consultation paper on the design of the pilot study, offering interested parties—particularly the ethnic minority groups—the opportunity to comment. One of the specific issues addressed in the consultation paper was the location of the pilot study. We explained that, as the scheme is all about facilitating family visits to the UK, it would be desirable to choose posts that receive a large number of visit visa applications in countries whose people have already settled in the UK and make up well-established ethnic minority communities.

I want to make three points. First, the Government are committed to carrying out a pilot project to test the scheme—nothing more. The initiative is a response to requests from communities in this country with an interest in those matters and from many Members of Parliament. Secondly, the bond scheme would not apply to all applicants for family visits, but to only a small number of borderline cases in which the applicant's intention to leave the UK was in doubt. The scheme could therefore increase the number of visitors eligible to come here. Finally, the next step is to analyse the results of the consultation exercise and decide where the pilot should operate and at what level the bond should be set. No final decisions have been taken on those issues.

I should add that if the pilot scheme is successful and if the scheme is eventually introduced worldwide, it would apply to all visa nationals and is therefore not, as some have said, discriminatory. We shall take all views into account in the consultation process, particularly when deciding on the location of the pilot project. I must repeat that no final decisions have been taken. However, I am very pleased to announce to the House that the pilot will not be undertaken at any of our posts in the Indian subcontinent—not in India, Bangladesh or Pakistan. I am certain that hon. Members will be very pleased about that. The decision was taken by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and is fully supported by my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary. I am extremely grateful to the Indian high commissioner, Mr. Naresh Dayal; the Bangladeshi high commissioner, Mr. Mahmood Ali; and many organisations for their representations.

I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Brent, North, for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty), for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas), for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound), for Erith and Thamesmead (Mr. Austin) and for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), among others, for their helpful representations on this matter.

I also thank my hon. Friends the Members for Harrow, West and for Harrow, East for the points that they have made about elderly relatives. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, East is unable to speak for obvious reasons, but he and my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, West have led a successful campaign to highlight the plight of elderly relatives. That campaign has been echoed eloquently by my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, North. As a direct result of what they have said tonight, I have decided to have a special meeting to discuss elderly relatives with my hon. Friends and any other hon. Members who wish to come and see me. I and my officials believe that such a meeting would help us to consider this sensitive and important area.

The Government's White Paper on immigration and asylum and the resulting 1999 Act bring other challenges to the entry clearance service. For example, our manifesto commitment to restore appeal rights for those applying to visit family members in this country will be implemented in October 2000. I warmly welcome that, because it will mean that refusal decisions can be examined by an independent adjudicator. That is surely in the interests of all concerned. Introduction of this appeal system will be a big challenge for our posts and for the other Departments involved—the Home Office and the Lord Chancellor's Department. We are doing everything we can to ensure a smooth introduction.

Another significant step has been the establishment of a joint entry clearance unit. The unit has recently begun its work under its new head, Robert Brinkley. The establishment of that unit is the clearest example of joined-up Government in this area of work. We may soon have joint reference numbers to make it easier for cases to be tracked.

It is inevitable that an operation such as the entry clearance service, which processes more than 1.5 million applications each year, will make some mistakes. I pay tribute to the excellent work of entry clearance officers, often in difficult and trying circumstances. Where there are problems, we shall seek to address them quickly. We are working hard to reduce waiting times and have had some successes, particularly in Bombay and New Delhi.

I was not able to visit Islamabad during my recent trip to the Indian subcontinent. I plan to do so at the earliest opportunity. I know that our visa operation there is the source of much concern to hon. Members, and rightly so. I have made it clear to the managers in Islamabad, whom I called to London recently, and to my officials here, that the service in Islamabad must improve greatly. I have set them the target of reducing waiting times by half by June, and we have already made progress on that.

Our record is good: 1.24 million visas were issued in 1998 from 164 visa issuing posts. A record 1,025 person-years were spent on entry clearance work—15 per cent. of the Foreign Office staff—in the same year.

Working with my excellent officials in London and the hard-working ECOs abroad—

The motion having been made after Ten o'clock, and the debate having continued for half an hour, MADAM SPEAKER *adjourned the House without Question put, pursuant to the Standing Order.*

Adjourned at thirteen minutes past Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 21 March 2000

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

CITY OF NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE BILL *[LORDS]*

Order for Third Reading read.

To be read the Third time on Tuesday 28 March.

GREENHAM AND CROOKHAM COMMONS BILL *(BY ORDER)*

Order for Second Reading read.

To be read a Second time on Tuesday 28 March.

Oral Answers to Questions

SCOTLAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Scottish Economy

1. **Mr. Russell Brown** (Dumfries): By what mechanism he liaises with the Chancellor of the Exchequer in order to inform him about the state of the Scottish economy. [114008]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Dr. John Reid): I meet my right hon Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer regularly and discuss various matters. The last occasion on which I met him was in Cabinet this morning. We had a particularly fruitful discussion, and no doubt my right hon. Friend will share the details with the House later.

Mr. Brown: I thank my right hon. Friend for his reply, and was delighted to hear what he had to say.

When my right hon. Friend visits my constituency this weekend, will he tell the people of Dumfries that, as a direct result of the Chancellor's effective stewardship of the economy, thousands of families and individuals—including pensioners—have benefited from the working families tax credit, increases in child benefit, the national minimum wage and the pensioners minimum income guarantee? Will he ensure that the people of Dumfries understand that, if the Conservatives were ever returned to power, they would scrap each and every one of those measures?

Dr. Reid: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Labour's economic policies have not only established the best environment for business in Scotland for many decades, but given us an opportunity to start distributing some of the wealth created in order to create a fairer and better society in Scotland. A great many pensioners in my hon. Friend's constituency have benefited not only from the restoration of the free eye tests so disgracefully abolished by the Conservative party, but from the guaranteed minimum income that pensioners now receive, and from the cuts in value added tax on fuel that we promised and the winter fuel allowance. Pensioners, like others, are benefiting from this Government's commitment to social justice.

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): Obviously the Secretary of State cannot tell us what response he received from the Chancellor today, but he can tell us what advice he gave the Chancellor. Did he, as Secretary of State for Scotland, make clear how much damage is being done in Scotland by the cuts in public finance that his Government have imposed since the election? Did he convey the message from the Deputy First Minister in the Scottish Parliament that what the Scottish economy needs is not another tax cut in a pre-election period, but vital investment in education, so that we can give our children the skills that they need for their own and the country's economic benefit?

Dr. Reid: The last thing that the Chancellor needs from me, and especially from the Liberals, is advice on how to run the Scottish economy.

It will not have escaped the hon. Gentleman's notice that in Scotland we now have the highest employment that we have had for 33 years, the lowest unemployment for 24 years, the lowest inflation for decades, and the lowest mortgage and long-term interest rates, all because of the stewardship of the present Chancellor. I should have expected the hon. Gentleman to wait with bated breath in anticipation of the next step in the step-by-step reconstruction of the Scottish economy under the Chancellor: getting rid, once and for all, of the boom-and-bust policies of the Tories.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): Given that Scotland's position relative to many English regions improved considerably during the 18 years of the last Conservative Government, does the Secretary of State believe that the Barnett formula can be justified indefinitely, especially in regions such as the north-east which have suffered so severely, in relative terms, because of this Government?

Dr. Reid: The hon. Gentleman obviously thinks that the whole Scottish nation is suffering from collective amnesia. It is not: it remembers the 18 years of the Tory Government who decimated our industries and destroyed so many communities.

The hon. Gentleman is partly correct, in that since May 1997 there has been a marvellous recovery in Scotland, as well as throughout the United Kingdom. The Barnett formula ensures the fair and proportionate distribution of resources to Scotland in terms of need and sparsity of population, and there is no reason for us to consider us changing that distribution.

Mr. David Marshall (Glasgow, Shettleston): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the biggest boost to the Scottish economy since the last election has been the substantial reduction in unemployment? Has he seen the latest research paper produced by the House of Commons

Library on unemployment by constituency? Does he welcome, as I do, the fact that my constituency has at long last lost its position as the constituency with the highest unemployment in Scotland, and is now number nine? More significantly, it has gone from number 15 in the United Kingdom to number 55. Does that not show that the Government's economic policies are working for the greater good of the poorest areas in the country?

Dr. Reid: My hon. Friend has made a valid point not just about his constituency, but about the effects of the Government's policies in Scotland. Unemployment is not only an evil for those whom it affects, but a debilitating factor in any country's economy. We take some pride in the fact that, in the two and a half to three years during which the Government have overseen the stewardship of the Scottish economy, we have reduced youth unemployment by more than half—by up to 69 per cent. We have had massive reductions in long-term unemployment. We have the lowest unemployment for almost a quarter of a century and the highest number of jobs—2.3 million—for 33 years. Incidentally, all the old records were set under the previous Labour Government, just as the new records are being set by the present one.

Mr. John Swinney (North Tayside): In his discussions about the Scottish economy, has the Secretary of State told the Chancellor that, since Labour came to power, Scotland has lost 22,000 jobs in the manufacturing sector due to the Government's economic policy? Does he think that that factor contributed to the Labour party's tremendous achievement last Thursday of entering a two-horse race in Ayr and coming third?

Dr. Reid: I remind the hon. Gentleman that, in the global economy in which we work, there will be job losses as well as job gains, but he was slightly churlish not to point out that the job gains in Scotland under this Government far outweigh the job losses. Indeed, employment in Scotland is at a record high: 2.3 million people are in employment.

Ayr was a poor result for Labour, particularly as we are not used to losing, but I suppose that I should return the compliment to the hon. Gentleman and the Scottish National party. I congratulate them on having made it eight in a row: eight consecutive by-election defeats for the SNP under the present leadership. Any football manager in Scotland with that record would be swiftly dispatched.

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): In the light of the Secretary of State's last reply, I rather look forward to hearing him congratulate the Conservatives on their by-election success in Ayr—but I turn to the Scottish economy. Is it not true that Scotland has the lowest business start-up rate in the United Kingdom: 20 per cent. lower than elsewhere? Job prospects in Scotland for the coming year are the worst in the UK and it is likely that job losses will outweigh job gains. To what does the Secretary of State attribute that? Could it in part be the fact that £1,500 of taxation has been added to every job in Scotland since Labour came to power?

Dr. Reid: No. As a matter of fact, Scottish manufacturing industry is recovering at a quicker rate than in the rest of the UK, as are Scottish exports. In terms of gross domestic product, Scotland is now the third most prosperous region or nation in the UK. I repeat: employment in Scotland is at its highest level for 33 years.

The allowances that have been made, for example, on the roll-over tax for North sea oil and gas, the reductions in long-term capital gains tax, the reduction in national insurance and the reductions in income tax for working people in Scotland have had an enormous effect, so the hon. Gentleman is wrong on all those matters. He is right on one thing. I will congratulate the Scottish Conservative party. It has managed to achieve something that the British Conservative party has not achieved for many decades.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Yet.

Dr. Reid: The hon. Gentleman should not hold his breath. I congratulate the Conservative party without any churlishness on achieving its first by-election win and, indeed, its first win under the first-past-the-post system for the Scottish Parliament. It will be a lonely life for that Tory Member, but I am sure that he will have the character to sustain it to the next Scottish parliamentary elections. He will not need to sustain it after that.

Petrol Prices (Highlands and Islands)

2. **Mrs. Ray Michie** (Argyll and Bute): What recent representations he has made to the Chancellor of the Exchequer about the economic impact of petrol prices in the highlands and islands. [114009]

The Minister of State, Scotland Office (Mr. Brian Wilson): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I have regular contact with my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer and discuss various matters.

Mrs. Michie: Has the Minister made the Chancellor aware of the damage done to the highlands and islands by the high cost of fuel and the constant hike in petrol duty without the proper compensatory measures which the Liberal Democrats have long advocated? Can he explain the contradiction between the Government's policy to develop the area and to encourage tourism and social inclusion and the persistently high fuel costs which undermine and work against those laudable aims? It looks as though the right hand does not know what the left hand is doing. What happened to joined-up government?

Mr. Wilson: I recall very well from my time as a Back Bencher that there is a real problem in tabling questions two weeks before they are answered. I fully understand that when the hon. Lady tabled her question, she did not know that last Thursday the Liberal Democrats would announce that they did not think that fuel tax was too high, but that it was too low. Therefore, in their alternative Budget, they have proposed increasing tax on petrol by 5p a litre. I think that the hon. Lady has some sorting out to do between her left hand and her right hand.

Mr. Calum Macdonald (Western Isles): Does my hon. Friend agree that the real problem with fuel prices is the policy of the major oil companies in imposing higher prices in the highlands than in the rest of Scotland? When

does he expect the Office of Fair Trading to report on that policy, and will he undertake to implement in full the findings of that report when it is delivered?

Mr. Wilson: As my hon. Friend suggests, the structure of fuel prices in the highlands—and indeed everywhere else—is extremely complex and various elements within it produce the final total. He is quite right to say that the OFT is investigating the matter. I look forward to receiving the report in the very near future. In the meantime, I have been having discussions with the oil companies about tackling the problem of differentials in order to give an advantage in terms of the wholesale price to rural outlets which sell small volumes of petrol. If the oil companies gave them such an advantage, the problem of differentials would be largely eroded.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): As the Minister says, the price of petrol in the highlands is indeed a complicated matter. Will he therefore answer two simple factual questions? First, in pounds and pence per gallon, what is the price of petrol in the highlands; and secondly, how does it compare with the prices in England and the continent of Europe?

Mr. Wilson: There is no simple comparison because there is no uniform price in England, Scotland or the highlands and islands. I am trying to erode the differential so that no part of the country is discriminated against significantly in terms of petrol prices any more than they are discriminated against in terms of postage charges, for instance, which are within the public sector.

Parliament Building

3. **Mr. Nigel Evans** (Ribble Valley): What requests he has received for the provision of extra funds from the United Kingdom central Government in relation to the Scottish Parliament building; and if he will make a statement. [114010]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Dr. John Reid): I have received no requests for additional UK funds for the Scottish Parliament. The construction project for the new Scottish Parliament building is the responsibility of the all party corporate body of the Scottish Parliament.

Mr. Evans: It would appear that the Secretary of State has no control over the costs of the new Scottish Parliament building and that the Scottish Parliament appears to have lost control over those costs. Does the Secretary of State feel no embarrassment at all in his discussions with the Chancellor of the Exchequer over the block grant—at a time when the number of police officers in Scotland has fallen by 375, crime is on the increase and three prisons have closed under the present Administration—in asking for more money for those services when so much money is being flagrantly wasted on what has been called "Donald's Dome"?

Dr. Reid: I am inclined to ask who the author of that comment is. I know that the hon. Gentleman neither supports nor understands devolution, but it is actually quite a simple principle: when we transferred power to the Scottish Parliament, responsibility went with it. This is a matter for the Scottish Parliament, which must take the decisions and the responsibility, over this and other matters that have been devolved to it.

Sir Teddy Taylor (Rochford and Southend, East): As the Minister is aware, I tabled question 9, which will never be reached. Would he be willing to say, first, what is his latest estimate of the cost of the new building? Secondly, would he say precisely who will pay for it? The impression that some people south of the border have is that there is a major scandal here, and that it is time that the facts were told to Parliament.

Dr. Reid: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his ingenuity. However, the matter of the cost of the Scottish Parliament is squarely for the Scottish Parliament itself and for the corporate body. As for who will pay, the Scottish Parliament will pay for that. That is as clear as I can be to the hon. Gentleman. I do not see the arrangement as in any way a scandal. It is in the nature of devolution: we pass over power on a whole range of topics, including the cost of the Scottish Parliament, and the Scottish Parliament takes not only the power, but the responsibility for them. The Scottish Parliament will have to make that decision.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): Is it not clear from the breath of fresh air that we had last week that there are very many people in Scotland—a vast majority—who believe in the integrity of the United Kingdom? Does it not follow from that that it is entirely reasonable for all Members of the United Kingdom Parliament to take an interest in the location and cost of the Scottish Parliament? Cannot the right hon. Gentleman be a little more forthcoming and tell us precisely what the cost is now envisaged to be?

Dr. Reid: A great many issues arise in the Welsh Assembly and in the Scottish Parliament in which we might take an interest, just as they might take an interest in what we are doing in this place. That is an entirely different matter from intervening in an issue that is the responsibility of a devolved institution. As I told the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend, East (Sir T. Taylor) and repeat, the costs of the Scottish Parliament are a matter for the corporate body of that Parliament. That is an all-party corporate body on which—I think, although I stand to be corrected—the Scottish Conservatives sit. That is a constant item of explanation that we have to give to Conservative Members, who neither supported devolution, nor seem to understand its nature.

Winter Fuel Payments

4. **Miss Anne Begg** (Aberdeen, South): How many pensioners in Scotland will benefit from the United Kingdom Government's winter fuel payment scheme. [114011]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Dr. John Reid): About 900,000 eligible people in Scotland have benefited this winter from the winter fuel payment scheme. Payments are £100 per eligible household.

Miss Begg: I am very glad to see that the winter fuel payment has resulted in well over £1 million being paid to pensioners in my constituency of Aberdeen, South.

However, will my right hon. Friend confirm that those payments are only one of the things that the Government have done for pensioners?

Dr. Reid: First, I congratulate and welcome back my hon. Friend to Scottish Question Time. I confirm that almost 14,000 payments were made, totalling more than £1 million, to pensioners in her own constituency of Aberdeen, South to help them to meet fuel costs. It is part of the extra £4 billion that the Government have already pledged in this Parliament to assist pensioners. Of course we have cut VAT on fuel, as we promised. Of course we have restored free eye tests for pensioners, as we promised. Of course we have introduced the guaranteed income for the poorest and free television licences for those over 75. Under this Government, the average pensioner is more than £5 a week better off, and the oldest and the poorest are already more than £10 a week better off.

I do not claim that we have done everything, but—certainly when one considers that all those actions would be reversed by Conservative Members—pensioners are better off under a Labour Government than they were under almost 20 years of the previous, Conservative Government.

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (Roxburgh and Berwickshire): One of the principal and welcome advantages of the winter fuel payment scheme is that the payment is universal and automatic. However, will the Secretary of State confirm that, for some time now, the Government have been advertising the fact that they will introduce a take-up campaign for elderly people on pensions who are not claiming their entitlement, particularly under the minimum income guarantee? When will the Government clarify the exact terms of the take-up campaign, and when will that campaign start to take effect, providing much needed income to pensioner households in Scotland?

Dr. Reid: The hon. Gentleman is right that we do not regard these measures as hand-outs, but as entitlements on the part of our senior citizens. We will launch a campaign on 29 March to further explain the entitlements of our senior citizens to one of the many benefits that the Government are gradually introducing for them. In the same way, we have established a hotline for the 145,000 families in Scotland who might benefit from the working families tax credit. We are committed not only to introducing measures to increase social justice, but to making sure that potential recipients are aware of them and claim what is rightfully theirs.

ADVOCATE-GENERAL

The Advocate-General was asked—

Staff Increases

24. **Miss Anne McIntosh** (Vale of York): What representations she has received on her plans to increase her staff; and if she will make a statement. [114032]

The Advocate-General for Scotland (Dr. Lynda Clark): I have nothing to add to my written answer on 22 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 860W.

Miss McIntosh: I do not know whether or not I should be grateful for that answer. Will the Advocate-General share with the House what her responsibilities are for Scots law in the House of Commons, and why she needs any staff?

The Advocate-General: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her interest. I know that she is a distinguished—although no longer practising—member of the Scottish Bar. My responsibilities are many. I inherited the opinion work of the Lord Advocate and the Solicitor-General. I advise not only on Scots law in relation to devolved and reserved matters but, with the Attorney-General, I advise in relation to the European convention on human rights and European law. That is my main advisory work. It has taken one woman to do the work of two men.

In relation to my new statutory powers under the Scotland Act 1998, there are a number of different aspects to them. I have the power, but not the duty, to take matters to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council if I think that any Scottish Parliament legislation is outwith its legislative competence. I also have certain powers in relation to devolution issues. These matters can arise in any court in Scotland, in civil or criminal matters. I think that today's was the 500th devolution issue intimated to me. I have looked at all 500, and I have intervened in a number of them. Some will come to the Privy Council, and I hope—certainly initially—to do those cases myself. I also have—*[Interruption.]* Will the hon. Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh) be satisfied with that for now?

Miss McIntosh *indicated assent.*

Mr. Desmond Browne (Kilmarnock and Loudoun): Could my hon. and learned Friend share with the House what considerations she takes into account when she is deciding whether or not to enter an appearance in a case involving a devolution issue?

The Advocate-General: I thank my hon. Friend—another distinguished member of the Scottish Bar, which is having a good run today. I consider each case individually, and there are a range of criteria that I take into account. The first matter that I might consider is whether or not there is a UK interest. For example, in relation to the road traffic cases which came before me recently, the legislation is common to Scotland and to England and Wales, which raises certain issues. Many of the cases have been raised at sheriff court level throughout Scotland. Generally, I have not intervened in such cases. Each case is considered individually, and I consider a range of criteria in relation to them.

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): The Advocate-General has today answered a question which, a month ago, she refused to answer. I asked about her involvement in Starr *v.* the Procurator Fiscal, but she said that she would not answer because the matter was confidential between her and the Government. Will she confirm that it is nothing of the kind, and that it is part of her statutory duties under the Scotland Act? In future, can

we please have answers from her to Members of this House on the discharge of her responsibilities under the statute?

The Advocate–General: The hon. Gentleman is a member of the English Bar, which might explain the way in which he put his question. It had a certain lack of finesse. Earlier I made some general comments about the way in which I approach individual cases. It would not be my practice to give reasons for individual cases, especially if they are sub judice.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

The Parliamentary Secretary was asked—

Public Record Office

31. **Mr. Gareth R. Thomas** (Harrow, West): What steps the Lord Chancellor is taking to improve the performance of the Public Record Office. [114039]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. David Lock): The Public Record Office is already providing an excellent service to the public and to the Government. To improve matters further, I am establishing goals for it in three areas: first, extending access to the public records by electronic means; secondly, helping the Government to make the transition to electronic records management; and thirdly, developing the PRO's educational services for schools and lifelong learners.

Mr. Thomas: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that reply. Will he continue to ensure that his ministerial spotlight is kept firmly and squarely on the performance of the PRO in terms of its work with schools? Will he ensure, in particular, that a proper, proactive education policy is developed to bring schoolchildren, especially those from London, into contact with many of the great historical documents that the PRO has in its collection?

Mr. Lock: Schoolchildren are already making more than 200,000 visits a year to the PRO's online educational service, the learning curve, from their classrooms and homes. They will be able to visit the PRO's new education and visitor centre at Kew, which will be open on 11 April by the Lord Chancellor. Schoolchildren will be able to see there a wide range of historical documents, including the Domesday Book. If my hon. Friend's constituents look at folio 127, they will find out that 900 years before Harrow had the privilege of being represented by him, it had one archbishop, a total population of 120 and 2,000 pigs.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Despite the somewhat querulous tone in which the previous question was put, will the Minister join me in congratulating the staff of the PRO? I spent many years working there in the 1970s and early 1980s and I have recently started using it again. Will he accept that the service has tremendously improved, both online and in the actual services displayed on the premises? Will he also accept that the standard of courtesy shown to me and other researchers over 20 years has been outstanding?

Mr. Lock: It gives me pleasure to agree with everything that the hon. Gentleman says. The PRO is one of the Government's success stories. Its staff are unfailingly courteous and I am sure that it provides an excellent service to the public.

Judiciary

32. **Dr. Ian Gibson** (Norwich, North): What plans the Lord Chancellor has to review the entry procedures into, and career structures of, the judiciary. [114040]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. David Lock): The qualifications for professional judicial appointments are prescribed by statute; they are open to those with the relevant legal qualifications, whether solicitors or barristers. In general, the pool of candidates for judicial appointment reflects those entering the legal profession 20 years ago and those who have progressed within it. The Government have no plans to change that policy but are keen to ensure that opportunities exist for promotion within the judiciary.

Dr. Gibson: Could my hon. Friend confirm that the job description of the Lord Chancellor is under review and is somewhat onerous and contradictory in places? Could he also tell the House how the public perception of the higher echelons of the judiciary can be changed, because people think they are full of Oxford-educated, public school, genetic morons? While those are easy questions, will he also tell us what steps he is taking to inspect institutionalised racism in the judiciary?

Mr. Lock: First, I shall deal with the issue of the Lord Chancellor. The independence of the judiciary is a fundamental principle of our constitution. In this country, we do not have separation of powers, but rely on a series of checks and balances on the three branches of Government. The office of Lord Chancellor has evolved as one of those checks. The value of the Lord Chancellor is that he upholds judicial independence and can mediate between the Executive and the judiciary when needs be. His office is not under review.

I can tell my hon. Friend that recent research by Professor Hazel Genn has confirmed that while those who gain their impression of the judiciary from newspapers follow the somewhat jaundiced view that he has relayed, those who have experience of appearing before judges have a much better impression of them and are impressed by their professionalism and the public duties that they are undertaking.

As for racism in the appointment process, I am sure that my hon. Friend will know that a thorough review of the process was recently carried out under the former Commissioner for Public Appointments, Sir Len Peach, which was highly complimentary. However, it suggested a number of improvements, which my noble Friend the Lord Chancellor has accepted in principle and is carrying through.

Mr. David Trimble (Upper Bann): Can the hon. Gentleman tell the House whether the Lord Chancellor's Department has had any communication with the criminal justice review group that was established by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland? If so, what are its suggestions for judicial appointments? Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is crucial that precisely the same standards apply to judicial appointments throughout the United Kingdom?

Mr. Lock: I can confirm that copies of the draft report to which the right hon. Gentleman refers have been under discussion. The Government are not yet in a position to make any final conclusions on that draft. I entirely agree with him that it is important to ensure that the best people become judges. It is an important position and all appointments must be made on merit regardless of sex, race or the community from which the individual comes. Judges are a vital part of our constitution and the merit principle must be the only guiding factor that determines who should become judges.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): I am tempted to say to the Minister after the astonishing attack by the hon. Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson), who asked the main question about the role of the Lord Chancellor and that of the judiciary that, with friends like that, he does not need enemies. However, I ask him to reinforce the fact that we are proud of our judges. We have a proud tradition of judges who are completely independent of political influence. Will he confirm that the new judicial appointments commission set up under the recommendations of Sir Len Peach will not impose any ridiculous notions of political correctness? Will he endorse the calibre of our judiciary, of which we are proud?

Mr. Lock: I can certainly confirm that the Government's view is that the vast majority of our judges in the vast majority of courts perform a valuable public service day in and day out. They do so in a professional, efficient and sensitive manner. The proposals in Sir Len Peach's review that have been carried through will improve our ability to ensure that we select the best people to carry out the important role of judges.

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon): Does my hon. Friend agree that Sir Len Peach's recommendations will bring greater objectivity to the appointment of judges, which could in turn encourage people from less representative groups to come forward? Does he further agree that promotions, particularly from the district judge bench, could do much to improve the balance of the more senior levels of the judiciary, bearing in mind that the district judge bench is more representative?

Mr. Lock: I agree that in the past there may have been too great a tendency to promote the best advocates from Bar to bench without sufficient attention being paid to the need for other skills, which are just as present in the litigation solicitor as they are in the successful barrister. As for promotion from one level of the judiciary to another, I assure my hon. Friend that all appointments, whether internal or external, are made on merit. It will be open for district judges to apply for promotion to circuit judge, and they will have to compete on merit with others who are applying to come into the judiciary at that higher level.

Women Judges

33. **Jackie Ballard** (Taunton): If he will make a statement on the progress the Lord Chancellor is making on the appointment of women judges to the High Court and higher courts. [114041]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. David Lock): All appointments are made strictly on merit, but I am pleased to say that there are now more women judges, in more senior positions, than ever before. There are now 11 female judges in the High Court and above, including the president of the family division. Out of the 11 senior appointments made since last April, five are women.

Jackie Ballard: All the 12 judges in the House of Lords are men, as are 34 out of the 35 judges in the Court of Appeal, and 89 out of the 100 judges in the High Court. When will the Government take meaningful action to increase the representation of women in the higher levels of the judiciary? Do we have to wait for a judicial appointments commission to recognise that many able women are hitting their heads against a glass ceiling in the Crown court and in the legal profession?

Mr. Lock: I hear what the hon. Lady says, but I hope that she will give the Government some credit for ensuring that women make up nearly half of recent appointments to the High Court bench. That shows the Lord Chancellor's commitment to appointing the best people to the judiciary. Appointments are made on merit—they are not based on race or gender. Talented women and members of ethnic minorities will secure appointments.

However, she should compare the membership of the Liberal Democrat Benches with that of the Labour Benches. Given that there are so few women among her colleagues at the top in her party, when will the Liberal Democrats practise what they preach on equal opportunities?

Judges

34. **Angela Smith** (Basildon): What powers the Lord Chancellor has to remove a judge who does not display the skills and experience suitable for judicial office; and how often such powers have been used. [114042]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. David Lock): The constitutional principle of judicial independence requires judges to have security of tenure during good behaviour. Lords of appeal in ordinary, lords justices of appeal and High Court judges may only be removed by the sovereign on an address presented by both Houses of Parliament. For other full-time judges, the Lord Chancellor's powers of removal vary depending on the office but, in general, are exercisable only in relation to incapacity or behaviour.

The only judge removed from office in recent times by the Lord Chancellor was a circuit judge removed in 1983 for misbehaviour.

Angela Smith: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that answer, but is he satisfied that his powers to remove a judge, which apply only to cases of incapacity or misbehaviour, are adequate? Is not it strange that judges, unlike so many other professions, are not subject to review and evaluation? I am aware that judicial decisions are subject to review, but is not there a case for examining the efficiency of judges and their willingness to deal with cases effectively? Should not there be management scrutiny of decisions that are administrative rather than judicial? I appreciate that there has been some reluctance in this regard, but is not it time to introduce Ofjudge?

Mr. Lock: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, as always, for her novel and interesting suggestions, but the constitutional principle of judicial independence means that the Lord Chancellor cannot interfere with, or comment on, judicial decisions. I can assure her that my noble Friend the Lord Chancellor treats all complaints about judicial conduct very seriously. Since he took up his post, he has established a dedicated team of officials in his Department, who make thorough inquiries on his behalf into all complaints about judicial conduct. He considers every complaint to determine whether it is justified and, if so, what action should be taken. However, I emphasise that we are talking about a tiny proportion of judges, and that the vast majority serve extremely professionally and efficiently. We are very grateful for all their work.

Mr. John Butterfill (Bournemouth, West): A judge gave summary judgment in a case in which a constituent of mine was the plaintiff without allowing that constituent to put his case in court or be present for the decision. Does the Minister consider that that judge demonstrated the necessary skills and abilities?

Mr. Lock: It would be infringing the principle of the constitutional independence of judges, to which I have just referred, to comment on an individual case. Clearly, the appeal courts give any litigant with a good case that did not get a proper hearing first time around the opportunity to have it considered by a higher court.

Lichfield Magistrates Court

35. **Mr. Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield): If she will make a statement on the future of Lichfield magistrates court. [114043]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Jane Kennedy): I am currently considering the appeal against the proposed closure of Lichfield magistrates court. I expect to announce my decision shortly.

Mr. Fabricant: For more than 600 years—week in, week out and one way or another—there has been a magistrates court in Lichfield. At present, there is no such court, pending the announcement of the result of the appeal. I have spoken to the Minister, her predecessor and her predecessor's predecessor about this matter. Will she please make a statement soon, saying that the magistrates court in Lichfield will remain open?

Jane Kennedy: I have on previous occasions complimented the hon. Gentleman on his assiduous pursuit of his constituents' interests. However, I cannot confirm precisely when the decision will be made. I want to pay careful attention to all the representations made during the course of the appeal. I will make my decision known on both Lichfield county court and the Lichfield magistrates court at the same time.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

The President of the Council was asked—

Oral Questions

44. **Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown** (Cotswold): If she will propose to the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons that it examine the cut-off time for the tabling of oral questions. [114054]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): My right hon. Friend has no plans to do so, but is always happy to respond to Members' concerns. However, work on this subject was considered by the Procedure Committee in 1991 and 1993.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: Will the Minister consider referring the matter to the Modernisation Committee? It seems unnecessarily restrictive that hon. Members have to table their questions by 5 pm. Would not a cut-off time of 7 pm, when there is often a vote—particularly on a Monday—be more appropriate on Mondays and for the rest of the week?

Mr. Tipping: The Procedure Committee and the Speaker are always willing to consider such matters. With new technology, a later cut-off time could well be considered. I think that it would be important to have the same cut-off time for every day of the week. However, if the hon. Gentleman is anxious to pursue the matter, we ought to refer it to the Procedure Committee.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

The hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—

Nursery (Palace of Westminster)

45. **Mr. Jeremy Corbyn** (Islington, North): To ask the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, representing the House of Commons Commission, if the Commission will bring forward plans to establish an on-site nursery in the Palace of Westminster. [114056]

Mr. Archy Kirkwood *(on behalf of the House of Commons Commission):* I commend the hon. Gentleman for the tenacity with which he is pursuing this important

matter. The House of Commons Commission takes its responsibilities as an employer very seriously. However, given the constraints on space and cash, we remain of the view that the fairest way of dealing with staff child care needs is by means of the existing and highly popular staff voucher scheme. I regret that I have nothing further to add to my written answer of 14 December—that we have no plans to establish an on-site nursery.

Mr. Corbyn: Will the hon. Gentleman take back to his Committee the feeling of many people in the House and outside that we should at the very least set an example by providing on-site child care facilities in this building, and that the voucher system discriminates against parents with responsibility for young children because it comes out of the office cost allowance budget, which then militates against other staff? Of the 3,500 staff surveyed in 1998, more than 75 per cent. supported some kind of child care facility. If we can find space for bars, gyms and many other things, I am sure that we can find space for on-site child care facilities. Will he and his Committee kindly reconsider?

Mr. Kirkwood: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says. To establish an on-site creche would cost in the region of £600,000. The current voucher system costs £100,000. We think that that is a better balance in terms of protecting the taxpayers' interest. That £600,000 would have to come out of the taxpayers' money, which would be difficult to justify. Certainly, that was the recommendation of the Administration Committee when it conducted its latest research in 1998.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

The President of the Council was asked—

Legislation Timetables

46. **Mr. Nigel Griffiths** (Edinburgh, South): If she will make a statement on the use of timetables for legislation in the House this Session. [114057]

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): This Session there have been only two programme motions, one for the Northern Ireland Bill and one for the Financial Services and Markets Bill, both in February.

Mr. Griffiths: Can the Leader of the House confirm that on six occasions since January, the House has met to consider serious legislation after 2 am? After three years, the Modernisation Committee has, sadly, failed to bring about the changes that are needed. Will she now act quickly to give the House a free vote to ensure that important items of legislation are debated not in the middle of the night but during the sober light of day?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend is right to refer to the importance of the sober light of day. I cannot confirm his figures offhand, but the Modernisation Committee is reviewing progress on the timetabling of legislation, which was originally proposed by the Jopling Committee in previous Parliaments, but has been pursued in this one. It will report to the House.

Sir George Young (North–West Hampshire): Are not the Government's difficulties in getting their programme through the House entirely of their own making? Is not the House presented with too many ill-considered and ill-drafted Bills? Does the Leader of the House recognise that if she wants to salvage her legislative programme, she must abandon some Bills, beginning with the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No. 2) Bill?

Mrs. Beckett: The right hon. Gentleman is entirely wrong; there is no substance to his point. Our programme for this Session is more than paralleled by those of previous Sessions at the same stage of a Parliament. In the previous Parliament, at the equivalent stage, programme motions were used, and we have had more time for discussing legislation rather than discussing when it should be discussed. We have given that more time, not less.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): Is it not a fact that timetabling is good for Governments, good for Oppositions, and, more importantly, good for ensuring proper scrutiny of legislation? Is it not also a fact that it cannot be achieved by voluntary agreement, and must be put in Standing Orders if we are to ensure that timetabling is rigidly adhered to?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend is correct. If such a step were to be taken, it would have to be through some such means. He is also right that timetabling is in the interests of the whole House, which is why successive Governments have proposed it. It is in the interests of a competent Opposition who want to discuss the merits of legislation, but that may be one reason why it has not been popular lately.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): Is the Leader of the House aware of the widespread view across the House that the pace of modernisation is slackening and that the Modernisation Committee has a lot more work to do in the current Parliament, particularly on the handling of legislation? Will she confirm that the difference between an agreed programme motion and a timetable motion is critical? Will she insist that the Modernisation Committee and the House be given another opportunity to consider the precise procedure that would allow for more agreed programme motions and avoid the unfortunate antics in the middle of the night that we have suffered because of Conservative Members?

Mrs. Beckett: I do not accept that the Modernisation Committee's work has slowed. Several important experiments are under way, but I accept that it would be in the interests of the whole House, and of better, more effective management, if we spent our time on issues of importance rather than on discussing how we should discuss them. The Modernisation Committee will continue to give its attention to that point.

Modernisation

47. **Mr. Denis MacShane** (Rotherham): If she will make a statement on progress in the modernisation of the House. [114059]

48. **Dr George Turner** (North West Norfolk): What assessment she has made of the impact of recommendations of the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons on the operation of the House. [114060]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): The great majority of the Modernisation Committee's recommendations that were directed at Government have already been implemented. I hope that the House will agree that those changes have increased the House's ability to hold Government to account, increased opportunities for debate and enabled the working week to be better balanced between Westminster and constituency work.

Mr. MacShane: I thank my hon. Friend. Does he agree that now that "News at Ten" has been abolished, the 19th century habit of endless votes after 10 pm could also go? Hon. Members could have a night's sleep and debate matters during the day.

Will my hon. Friend also consider modernising the facilities for our friends, the gentlemen and ladies of the press? It may be an axiom of political journalism that the nicer we are to the journalists, the nastier they are to us. In the spirit, however, of kissing the hand that slaps us, and as their working conditions are worse than those of battery hens, might it not be that if we improved those conditions, the journalists would stop writing like battery hens about us?

Mr. Tipping: My hon. Friend can consider the matter from both sides of the fence in his professional life. I know that he is a specialist in nastiness, both in the press and, occasionally, in the House. However, he is right; we need to respond to the needs of people who work in the House. I am delighted that members of the Lobby are allowed to have tape recorders in the Press Gallery and that the Administration Committee has allowed filming in Members' offices as a result of representations.

Dr. Turner: Does my hon. Friend agree that the extra debating time available in Westminster Hall has meant that, for the first time in many years, there have been significant opportunities to debate Select Committee reports? Does he also agree that we need to enhance further the role of Select Committees, and that careful consideration should be given to the recommendations of the Select Committee on Liaison?

Mr. Tipping: My hon. Friend has used the facilities of Westminster Hall assiduously to advance the cause of his constituency. As he points out, 150 extra Back-Bench debates are possible because of Westminster Hall. It is now possible to discuss an extra 18 Select Committee reports. I am sure that he realises that the Liaison Committee report has only just been received, but the Government will consider it carefully and report according to normal practice.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): May I urge the Minister to encourage the Modernisation Committee to consider the timetabling of oral questions? Seven o'clock has been suggested, but in this day and age there is no reason why the time could not be extended until the end of the parliamentary day. Furthermore, we could shorten the cut-off time for the tabling of questions.

Mr. Tipping: I made it clear in my earlier answer that such matters are not set in stone. The Select Committee on Procedure examined that point in 1991 and in 1993. Given the advance of technology, it may be possible to change the cut-off time. If hon. Members make representations on the matter, they will be considered.

Mr. William Cash (Stone): In the context of the modernisation of the House, will the Minister examine the Whip system, as currently used by the Government, to consider whether it contributes to control freakery, to too much centralisation in No. 10 Downing street and to the emasculation of the British Parliament?

Mr. Tipping: I am sure that, given the hon. Gentleman's experience in the previous Parliament, he knows all that there is to know about the benefits and disbenefits of the Whip system.

Information Technology

49. **Ms Margaret Moran** (Luton, South): What plans she has to increase the use of information and communication technology in the pre–legislation scrutiny of Bills by the House. [114061]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): It is up to the Committee scrutinising draft legislation to decide how best to use information and communication technology in its work. However, I am sure that hon. Members would be interested in any suggestions from my hon. Friend.

Ms Moran: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. Will he seriously consider the opportunities offered by e-mail, such as allowing evidence to be taken from a wide range of interests during pre-legislative scrutiny? That would more fully inform our legislative process by obtaining advice from wider groups of people in the community. Would that not enhance pre-legislative scrutiny and inform our policy processes?

Mr. Tipping: I shall follow carefully the experiment on internet use being undertaken by the all-party group on domestic violence, chaired by my hon. Friend. Some Committees use video technology and video conferencing at present; and the internet is used fairly widely. Those are matters for the Committees. Given the advance of technology, she is right that such developments will continue and increase.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

The hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—

Staff Costs (Late Sittings)

50. **Fiona Mactaggart** (Slough): To ask the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, representing the House of Commons Commission, what has been the cost this Session of staff of the House remaining on duty as a result of sittings after midnight. [114063]

Mr. Archy Kirkwood *(on behalf of the House of Commons Commission):* This Session, the total cost of staff remaining on duty for sittings that continued after midnight has been approximately £35,000. Overtime costs for police and security staff, due to sittings after midnight, totalled £64,000.

Fiona Mactaggart: Has the House of Commons Commission made any assessment of the impact of those usually unannounced late-night sittings on the morale of the people who work in this institution? Such sittings make Members of the House do their job less well. I am confident that they make the people who work in the cafes, the Library and so on do their jobs less well. Will he consider their impact on the recruitment and retention of the staff who serve us so well?

Mr. Kirkwood: The House of Commons Commission is always considerate of the needs and demands of staff, especially as regards late-night sittings. However, I assure the hon. Lady that such sittings are well-established parts of contracts of employment. The people who work in the House know exactly the conditions that apply. I assure her that if Members have at heart the long-term interests of the staff who have to work late, they will not vote to sit after 10 pm.

ROYAL ASSENT

Madam Speaker: I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that the Queen has signified her Royal Assent to the following Act:

Consolidated Fund Act 2000.

Orders of the Day

WAYS AND MEANS

Budget Statement

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Before I call the Chancellor of the Exchequer, it may be for the convenience of hon. Members if I remind them that, at the end of the Chancellor's speech, copies of the Budget resolutions will be available to hon. Members in the Vote Office.

3.31 pm

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr. Gordon Brown): A year ago the Government forecast the British economy would grow at 1 to 1.5 per cent.

Today, I can report that in 1999, instead of the recession that many forecast, the British economy grew by 2 per cent.

And Britain has been growing steadily while meeting our inflation target.

Today inflation is 2.2 per cent.

For the third year running inflation is in line with our target. And the target of 2.5 per cent.—which I reaffirm today—will be met this year, next year and the year after that.

Because of the action we took in 1997 to stop inflation getting out of control, inflation in Britain has now been lower for longer than at any time since the 1960s.

For almost 30 years, Britain's long-term interest rates were, on average, 3 per cent. higher than those of Germany. Now British long-term rates are down to the levels of Germany and today they are lower than those of the USA.

Amid the risks of an unstable and often uncertain global economy, we are determined to maintain our disciplined approach: determined not to make the old British mistakes of paying ourselves too much today at the cost of higher interest rates and fewer jobs tomorrow, determined not to make the old mistakes of putting consumption before investment, the short term before the long term. Britain does not want a return to boom and bust.

That is why the Bank of England has been right to take pre-emptive action on interest rates and to be vigilant on wage inflation.

It is because the foundations on which we build are strong that the economy can both meet our inflation target and achieve steady growth.

Our forecast is that growth this year will rise to 2.75 to 3.25 per cent., and next year and the year after that it is forecast to be 2.25 to 2.75 per cent.—in line with our view of trend growth. Manufacturing is growing by 1.75 to 2.25 per cent. this year and next year.

And business investment grew by 7.7 per cent. last year to 14.5 per cent. of our national income, since 1998 Britain for the first time investing more of our national income than our major European competitors, even more invested as a proportion of national income than America.

[Mr. Gordon Brown]

This budget is built on the realities of the new economy—that we will meet and master a new tide of technological change by continuing to remove the old barriers to investment and enterprise and by continuing to expand employment opportunity for hard-working families.

I can report that unemployment today is at its lowest for 20 years, that there are 800,000 more people in work since 1997 and that there are 1 million vacancies on offer.

Take-home pay is rising—by next year, for the typical family, a real-terms rise in living standards of 10 per cent. since 1997.

Britain's economic success depends not only on monetary stability but on fiscal stability.

Today, I can report that because of tough decisions to cut the deficit in our first two years and lower long-term interest rates, debt interest payments will be £4 billion a year lower.

Because of the welfare-to-work reforms that have cut unemployment, social security spending on economic failure this year is a total of £3 billion less than the plans we inherited.

Today, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the state of the public finances is sound.

In 1997 we inherited a current deficit exceeding £20 billion.

A year ago I estimated that this year's current surplus would be £2.5 billion.

I can report today that we have not only balanced the current budget but our current surplus this year is forecast to be £17 billion.

We have met and we will continue to meet, even on the most cautious of cases, our first rule of fiscal prudence, the golden rule.

And we are also meeting our second rule, the sustainable investment rule.

This year debt as a share of national income will fall well below the 44 per cent. we inherited—to 37.1 per cent.

Last year we forecast that the overall budget would be in deficit for this financial year—that public sector net borrowing would be £3 billion.

I can now report that due to the performance of the economy and to prudent management, the budget is not in deficit by £3 billion but in surplus by £12 billion.

We inherited a deficit of £28 billion. This year we will make a debt repayment of £12 billion.

Too often in the past, at the first sign of a surplus, Governments have fallen back into imprudent ways.

It is because we have learned from the mistakes of the last 40 years that this Government will maintain their prudent and responsible approach. The figures I am announcing today show that we will meet our fiscal rules over the economic cycle. We will meet our fiscal rules even in the most cautious case, on the most cautious assumptions, including the most cautious view of trend growth at 2.25 per cent.

And Mr. Deputy Speaker, I can announce today that I have decided to lock in a greater fiscal tightening next year and the year after than we promised in last year's Budget and pre-Budget report.

After the measures I announce today, our projection is for a current surplus next year of £14 billion and for the years after that surpluses of plus 16, plus 13, plus 8 and plus 8.

Debt to GDP, which was 44 per cent. in 1997, will fall to 35 per cent. next year, then 34 per cent. and then 33 per cent. in each of the next three years.

Net borrowing will be minus £6.5 billion next year, that is, we will make a debt repayment next year of £6.5 billion.

Then net borrowing in 2001-02 will be minus 5, a debt repayment of £5 billion, with net borrowing for the years after 2002-03 of plus 3, plus 11, plus 13, well within our fiscal rules.

So from this stable platform of sound finances I am able to set out today our prudent and responsible approach for future years. Having met all of our fiscal rules, having paid off £18 billion of debt this year and next, and locked in a greater fiscal tightening, we are able both to set a new envelope for public spending and investment for the years from 2001 and to cut taxes for hard-working families.

I can report that our fiscal rules enable us to increase current public spending by 2.5 per cent. a year in real terms for the three years from 2001 and double net public investment as a share of national income from 0.9 per cent. next year to 1.8 per cent. in 2004.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have always said that our prudence is for a purpose.

And in this Budget, because of our continuing prudence, we can now take the next steps towards that purpose—a Britain of opportunity and security not just for a few but for all: with stability locked in and enterprise growing, we can meet our prosperity goal—to close the productivity gap; with 800,000 more people in jobs and the work ethic being restored in every community, our full employment goal—employment opportunity for all; with 50,000 more students already and standards rising, our education goal—50 per cent. of young people in higher education by 2010; with 800,000 children already lifted out of poverty and Britain's civic society renewing itself, we can meet our anti-poverty goal—to halve child poverty by 2010, on the way to ending it by 2020.

First, I announce major reforms today to reward enterprise and entrepreneurship, to open up competition in banking, to promote new and growing businesses and e-commerce, and to promote balanced growth across all the regions and nations of the United Kingdom.

To remove more of the old barriers to new investment, I have decided on radical reforms of capital gains tax, beyond the tax cuts that I set out in the pre-Budget report. When we came into government and cut the long-term rate of capital gains tax for business assets held for 10 years or more, capital gains tax had been fixed at 40 per cent. for nearly 10 years. I have now decided that, to promote enterprise, we should radically cut these rates.

I am announcing that from 6 April this year, the new capital gains tax rates for business assets will be cut from 40 per cent. to 35 per cent. after one year, to 30 per cent. after two years, to 20 per cent. after three years, and down to 10 per cent. after four years.

I will make further tax cuts to remove the barriers that hold small and growing businesses back. Today, business investors who own between 5 per cent. and 25 per cent.

of a new and growing business do not benefit from the 10p rate. I will now cut their rate to 10 per cent. for all investments above 5 per cent. held for four or more years.

I will make a further radical change, this time for Britain's unquoted companies. All investments held for four years in them will benefit from the 10 per cent. rate.

With both the lowest corporate tax rates for businesses ever and the lowest ever capital gains tax rates for long-term investors, Britain is now the place for companies to start, to invest, to grow and to expand.

I have a decision about one other tax on capital—inheritance tax. The threshold for inheritance tax is £231,000. I will raise it next year to £234,000—96 per cent. of people will be exempt from inheritance tax.

I have one further cut in capital gains tax to be introduced from 6 April. So that millions more hard-working people have a stake in the businesses whose wealth they create, we will remove the old barriers to a share-owning democracy. The all-employee shareholding scheme, with the best tax incentives on offer, which starts on 6 April this year, has one defining requirement: that shareholding should be open to all employees.

I can confirm that the 1.7 million people now in the save-as-you-earn scheme will continue to enjoy its benefits.

I have also decided that high-tech firms recruiting essential personnel will be able to offer share option incentives of £100,000 for up to 15 employees.

The Financial Secretary will now consult on a technical solution to the tax treatment of share options in unapproved schemes.

I can go further. In future, all employee shareholders will secure all the benefits of the 10 per cent. capital gains tax rate.

Taken together, these measures are the biggest boost for employee shareholding that our country has ever seen. It is the next step on our road to a wealth-owning democracy.

Yesterday, in response to the Cruickshank report, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and I referred small business banking to the Competition Commission. Mr. Cruickshank estimated that competition could reduce banking costs and charges by up to 10 per cent., or between £3 billion and £5 billion a year.

The money transmission system affects every cheque, every credit card and every debit transaction. It reaches from every local cash dispenser to every corporate inter-bank transfer. Today I am announcing that we will legislate to ensure that the UK payments system is open to new competition.

The international competitiveness of the bond market in the City of London depends upon a level playing field. That is why today I am announcing that from April 2001 we will abolish the withholding tax on the interest paid on international bonds. We will legislate so that we can proceed on the basis of exchange of information nationally and internationally. This change should be widely welcomed in all parts of the House. There is no clearer indication of our determination to stand up for what is right for Britain.

Since 1997, the number of small businesses in Britain has risen from 1.2 million to 1.3 million—a 100,000 increase.

Today I want to continue to remove the old barriers to small business growth.

Having already cut small business corporation tax from 23 per cent. to 20 per cent. and, for the first £10,000 of their profits, to just 10 per cent, I am today making a further tax reduction. For all small and medium-sized businesses the 40 per cent. capital allowances—which I introduced in the 1997 Budget—will be made permanent.

This will be of special help to manufacturing companies.

Half manufacturing employment is in small and medium-sized firms, so manufacturing will derive further benefit from the £150 million I am allocating to our new research and development tax credit, which will be introduced on 6 April, to finance 30 per cent. of the research and development costs of small firms.

I also want to make Britain the best environment for e-commerce and for us to catch up with America as swiftly as possible.

To encourage 1 million small businesses to go on line, we will introduce a special tax reduction. For the next three years, any small business buying computers, or investing in e-commerce and new information technologies, will be able immediately to write off against tax the full 100 per cent. of the cost in the year of purchase.

Side by side with this incentive, the Small Business Service will offer consultancy, advice and planning to help small businesses get on line and become e-companies—and with the additional resources that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment is providing for the university for industry, which starts this autumn, it will be able to offer small business employees training on the internet.

We are determined to lead in e-commerce and the internet. Today we are introducing new rules for work permits in areas of highly skilled information technology where there is a global shortage.

To promote the use of the internet we will legislate for other tax cuts—a £100 tax cut for electronic filing of tax and VAT returns, and a further £50 tax cut for electronic filing for those paying the working families tax credit.

Tax cuts since 1997 are now worth £1 billion a year for small businesses alone.

After today's measures, Britain now has the lowest small business corporation taxes we have ever had, the lowest in the industrialised world. Since 1997, for small companies there has been an average tax cut of almost 25 per cent.

To encourage the next generation of entrepreneurs, we are forming a partnership with the CBI, the Institute of Directors and the chambers of commerce to encourage enterprise in all communities. Two new enterprise funds will target business loans and management scholarships to high unemployment areas.

Stage by stage we are moving from the Britain where enterprise was a closed circle for the few, to a Britain where enterprise will be open to all.

We must also remove the old barriers of under-investment and neglect that for too long have held our regions back.

Working with the new regional development agencies and the Small Business Service, our aim is balanced economic development across all the regions and nations

[Mr. Gordon Brown]

of the United Kingdom, with a modern regional policy supporting local innovation, investment and improved infrastructure.

To finance a network of regional venture capital investment funds, we are today announcing a partnership with the European investment bank and the private sector—with a target of £1 billion for new economic development for our regions and nations.

The regional targets will be £85 million for the south-west, £120 million for the north-west, £130 million for the north-east and Yorkshire, £250 million for the midlands and the east, and £250 million for London and the south-east. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland will have their own funds.

To promote further a modern regional policy, the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry will be announcing a regional innovation fund to facilitate the formation of local clusters in high-tech industries.

For years, Britain has lagged behind America in business access to venture capital investment. It is only half as much per head here as in the United States.

I am grateful to Mr. Paul Myners, who has agreed to head a review of institutional investment, to report to me in time for the next Budget.

Our goal for the whole of the United Kingdom is to remove the old barriers to full employment.

We know that greater opportunity for all means greater prosperity for all.

Since 1997 the number of unemployed on benefits has fallen by 30 per cent.

Youth unemployment is down 70 per cent. and nearly 200,000 more young people have now found jobs.

Long-term youth unemployment, which in the mid-1980s was 500,000, and even in 1997 was as high as 200,000, is already down to 50,000.

The new deal demonstrates how false was the old choice between enterprise and fairness, between efficiency and equality. By delivering employment opportunity for all, we are making Britain more enterprising and more fair, to the benefit not just of the high unemployment areas, but the whole country.

And because we have succeeded in this Parliament in removing the old barriers to employing the young, I can announce that starting from April next year we will extend the opportunities and the obligations of the new deal to the long-term adult unemployed with four options: work, work-based training, work experience including in the voluntary sector, and self-employment—but no fifth option, no staying at home on benefit doing nothing.

The relationship we are forging between rights and responsibilities is firmly rooted in both economic opportunity and individual responsibility.

Instead of being left to draw benefit at a social security office, the unemployed who are able to work will sign on to seek work, with the long-term unemployed offered the help of a personal employment adviser.

To ease the transition back to work, the Government will introduce a new job grant for long-term unemployed starting at £100 and help with rent or mortgage.

Instead of benefits paying more than work, work will pay. And we will extend the principle of the working families tax credit.

From 1 April, as a first stage, all long-term unemployed over 50 who want to return to work will be guaranteed a minimum income for their first year back—for wages of up to £15,000 a year, an extra payment of £60 a week.

And building on the forthcoming rise in the national minimum wage, I am today also increasing the working families tax credit. It is already being paid to 1 million families in our country. And with today's family tax cut, the minimum family income will rise next April from £200 a week by 7 per cent. to £214 a week.

Full employment is not just about the right to work, but, where there are jobs, the responsibility and the requirement to do so.

We will implement the report of Lord Grabiner QC.

Starting in May, a confidential phone line will advise claimants on how to move from the hidden economy and end fraudulent benefit or tax claims, and how to get work, register as a business, or become self-employed. After six months, from 1 January, for those who fail to respond, tougher rules and penalties will be imposed.

From October, in the 20 highest unemployment areas of Britain covering 120,000 unemployed, local special action teams will be set up to help local unemployed people into nearby vacancies.

The number of lone parents on income support has fallen by almost 100,000 since 1997.

But the employment rate among lone parents in Britain is still only 45 per cent., far below the 70 per cent. to 80 per cent. rates of America, France and Scandinavia.

In this Budget we also remove old barriers to work and I can today announce an extension of the new deal in a new way to half a million lone parents.

Piloted from this autumn, and starting nationally from next April, lone parents with children over five will be invited to work-focused interviews and encouraged to take up new choices: the choice to train for work with a new cash payment of £15 a week on top of benefits for training; the choice of a few hours work a week, with the first £20 of earnings allowed with no reduction in benefit; the choice of part-time work with a guaranteed £155 for 16 hours of work, or the choice of full-time work on a guaranteed £214 a week; and on every rung of this ladder of opportunity there will be help with back-to-work costs and with child care.

Just as we remove old barriers to lone parents working when their children go to school, so we will help mothers who want to be at home in the first months of their child's life.

Today, too many children are born into poverty because the family income drops when the mother stops work. Yet this is the time when many mothers feel they need to be at home with their young child.

The Secretary for Trade is announcing today he will review what improvements can be made in maternity pay and parental leave to improve family friendly employment.

Today I can announce immediate decisions which recognise the extra costs families face when a child is born.

For all low-income mothers who meet the basic requirement of health check-ups for their young child, we will increase the maternity grant from £200 to £300—helping over 200,000 low-income mothers.

Mothers on paid maternity leave who would otherwise fall into income support will now stay on working families tax credit.

Families receiving the credit where the mother wants to stay at home will no longer have to wait as long as six months for additional support after the child is born and this support will be worth up to £30 pounds a week for a mother.

I have examined the alternative that has been put to me of a transferable tax allowance for husbands and wives when mothers stay at home.

Under this system, a family with two children on £15,000 a year would receive £965 a year. The working families tax credit is far better. With the improvements in it announced today the same couple would receive not £965 a year but £2,200 a year.

The Prime Minister has set a national goal for our country—to abolish child poverty in 20 years, and to halve it by 2010.

A sure start for all Britain's children is not only right but it is the best anti-crime, the best anti-drugs, the best anti-unemployment and the best anti-dependency policy for this country's future.

Our strategy starts from the foundation of universal child benefit for all 7 million families with children.

When we came to office, child benefit was just £11.05 for the first child.

Child benefit will now be £15.50 from April 2001, 40 per cent. more than in 1997.

For young children in the poorest families, weekly support in 1997 was just £28.

We have raised that in every Budget and today the Social Security Secretary is announcing a further increase for the poorest children of £4.35 a week.

So maximum support is up from the £28 of 1997 to up to £50 a week next year.

As a result of all our measures, the poorest two-child family on income support will be £1,500 a year better off. The low-paid family with two children on a wage of £10,000 will now be £2,700 a year better off.

This is what we mean by tackling child poverty and making work pay.

I can now report that the numbers of children lifted out of poverty this year will rise beyond 1 million, and next year reach 1.2 million children—it is the greatest reduction in child poverty in 50 years and our country is now at last fulfilling this generation's obligations to the next.

As we move forward to take the second million children out of poverty, I can confirm that the Social Security Secretary and I have agreed on the next major reform.

Over the next three years, building on the foundation of universal child benefit, we will create an integrated and seamless system of support for children paid to the mother.

The war against child poverty needs more than finance and it needs more than the efforts of government alone.

It can only be won by the combined efforts of private, voluntary, charitable and public sectors all working together.

After consultation with charities and voluntary organisations, we will proceed to set up, in every region of our country, and with cash allocated in our spending review, not just one children's fund but a network of local and regional children's funds to support work by the voluntary sector in meeting the needs of children.

A strong civic society is built not by rights alone but by rights and responsibilities and by the shared pursuit of the common good—which every year in this country enlists the energies and realises the idealism of more than 22 million citizens.

It is time for government to do more to extend and encourage this civic patriotism.

All voluntary organisations and charities will benefit from the tax reforms we are announcing to make it easier to give money and to give time.

From 6 April this year for every pound any taxpayer gives to charity, the Government will add an extra 28 pence.

To encourage payroll giving, for every pound contributed through the pay packet, the Government will add up to 50 pence worth of tax relief.

Tax relief will be available not just for cash donations, but for gifts of shares.

To encourage corporate giving, any company, from 1 April, can receive tax relief on the full amount of any donation.

Within prescribed limits, I will go further in exempting ticket sales for charitable fund-raising events from VAT, so that the contributions people make will go straight to the charities they support.

And each of these measures will also help those charities and non-governmental organisations which, with the Churches, have for decades led the crusade to combat third-world poverty and secure debt relief.

With these reforms, the Government match their commitment because the Government share their cause which is a virtuous circle of debt reduction, poverty relief and economic development for the poorest countries of the world.

A strong civic society takes seriously its obligations to our elderly: to the very poor pensioners whom we must help out of poverty; to those just above benefit levels whose lifetime savings should not—as in the past—be a barrier to securing a better retirement income; and to those who, while better off, are on fixed incomes.

The Secretary of State for Social Security is to launch a consultation on how, for the next Parliament, we can develop a new pensioners credit designed not only to lift the poorest out of poverty, but also to do more for those with modest occupational pensions and those with savings who should not be penalised for having worked hard all their lives and saved for their retirement.

Under the framework on which we will consult, an older pensioner with income, for example, of less than £100 a week, or a couple with less than £150 a week, would qualify for a credit to raise their income.

While we consult on this reform, we will also make immediate changes. The pensioners tax allowance will be set this year at £5,790, and for those over 75 at £6,050.

[Mr. Gordon Brown]

Nearly 6 million pensioners will not pay any income tax at all. With the new 10p rate on savings, one and a half million pensioners will, for the first time, pay tax at half the rate of the past—at 10p, not 20p.

And I have decided to do more today for elderly citizens with modest savings whose thrift has perversely and unfairly debarred them from receiving the income they need. For years any pensioner with savings over £3,000 has lost out on income support. The last Government froze the limit at £3,000 in 1988. I have decided from next April to double the limit, raising it from £3,000 to £6,000.

The cut-off point for income support was frozen at £8,000 of savings in 1990. We will raise that to £12,000. As a result, 500,000 elderly people—previously penalised for their thrift and savings—will be on average £250 a year better off. Many will be better off by £1,000 a year.

Fuel poverty has scarred our country for too long. That is why in our first Budget we cut VAT on fuel, and why in the second Budget the winter allowance was introduced at £20. Then in our third Budget it was raised to £100, available to all eight and a half million households with a resident over 60.

Under this Government, the winter allowance will be paid this year, and it will be paid every year. I have considered whether to raise the allowance in line with inflation, which would put it up by £3 to £103, or in line with earnings, which would raise it to £104.50. I have decided in this Budget not to raise it by £4 or even £5, but to raise it by £50 to £150. This winter allowance, at £150, will now cover up to four winter months of a hard-pressed pensioner's fuel bill.

I can also announce that 600,000 of our elderly will benefit from the new affordable warmth programme to install fuel-efficient central heating in a million homes throughout Britain.

Beginning on 1 November, all pensioners over 75 will receive the free TV licence, worth £104. And I can announce that any pensioner over 75 who has an unexpired licence which runs beyond 1 November will be eligible for a refund for every unexpired month.

These new measures will complement next year's rise in the retirement pension. Based on forecast rates of inflation, we can expect the pension rise in April 2001 to be more than £2 for single pensioners and over £3 for couples.

Of all the measures to lift our poorest pensioners out of poverty, the minimum income guarantee is the most essential. We will raise it in line with earnings next year. For a single pensioner it will be worth £82 a week, for those over 80 it will be £90 a week, for couples it will be £127, and for those over 80 it will be £137.

Taking these measures together—the winter allowance, the TV licence and the higher minimum guarantee—by April next year 1 million pensioners in our country, compared with 1997, will be £20 a week, or £1,000 a year, better off.

As we look to the future, I want all to be able to achieve the security of a wealth-owning democracy, with prosperity reaching the people and places the economy has too long forgotten.

We want to do more to help people start a bank account and start saving, more to help people invest in their pension, more to help people get on the first rung of the savings ladder and make provision for their future.

Today in Britain, unfortunately, up to 3.5 million adults have no bank account. The Cruickshank report has revealed that a basic affordable bank account would be profitable for the banks and that using banking facilities—and not the cash economy—just to pay gas and electricity bills alone could save families £50 a year, or £1 a week.

So I am now inviting the banks and the Post Office to work together to offer this basic banking service to all, and I want working families to be able to move seamlessly from starting an account to starting to save.

I have already announced measures to reward pensioner savings.

This year 6.5 million individual savings accounts have already been started. For the coming year, the ceiling was announced at £5,000 of savings. Instead, for one more year I will keep the ceiling at £7,000.

I said last November that I would, in future, make an annual Budget decision on one matter: real-terms rises in road fuel duties—the money to go to a new ring-fenced fund for roads and public transport.

Since the pre-Budget report, world oil prices have risen rapidly from $23 to $30 a barrel.

So, in this Budget I have decided that, beyond the automatic inflation rise of 2p a litre, there will be no real-terms rise in road fuel duties.

To encourage the use of ultra-low sulphur petrol, I will set that fuel duty at 1p per litre below other petrol from 1 October.

An extension to the new lower rate vehicle excise duty comes in on 1 March next year. Until that date and for the rest of this year, I have decided—for all cars—to freeze vehicle excise duty.

At present, the lower rate—at £55 below the standard rate—is available for 1.5 million cars.

From next year I will extend the reduced rate of vehicle excise duty to cars at 1200 cc or below.

This will cut vehicle excise duty to £105 for 2.2 million additional cars and the reduced rate will now cover almost 4 million cars.

I am also introducing from 1 March next year, for newly purchased cars, a four band vehicle excise duty rewarding the most environmentally friendly vehicles.

Under the rates I am publishing this afternoon, 95 per cent. of new cars will pay less than they would under the current vehicle excise duty system. Half of them will pay at least £30 less.

We will also cut the vehicle excise duty for 40,000 38-tonne and 41-tonne lorries by £500; the 40-tonne class lorries will have their rate cut by £1,800; for all other heavy lorries rates will be frozen.

The environmental impact of these tax cuts—taken together with the revenue neutral proposal for company cars—will be a reduction in carbon emissions of 1 million tonnes by 2010, helping to meet the Kyoto targets that were negotiated by my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister.

This is on top of the 5 million tonnes reduction in carbon emissions by 2010 as a result of the climate change levy, which is also revenue neutral and on which the Financial Secretary to the Treasury is publishing further details today.

To further cut pollution we will legislate the aggregates levy, which will again be made revenue neutral through a further 0.1 per cent. cut in employers' national insurance.

These two measures taken together cut employers' national insurance contributions by £1.35 billion.

There is also a strong environmental case for reducing stamp duty for development of brown-field sites, as recommended by the Rogers report. The Paymaster General will now consult in detail on that measure.

For the property market, in addition to the previously announced withdrawal of mortgage interest tax relief, stamp duty on property sales will be raised for sales above £250,000 to 3 per cent. and for sales above £500,000 to 4 per cent. For properties below £250,000 I propose no change and I also propose to freeze insurance tax.

Last year I froze duties on all spirits.

This year an inflation rise would push the price of whisky up by 22p a bottle.

Because of the competitive position of the industry, I will this year continue to freeze duty on all spirits.

Beer will rise only by inflation—by 1p a pint—and wine only by inflation—by 4p a bottle.

Now that the return-leg exemption for air fares has been found in breach of single market law, I am taking the opportunity to introduce a new, fairer and lower air passenger duty—at an overall cost to the Exchequer of £80 million a year. The tax on economy flights within the UK will be the same or lower. For economy flights outside Europe the rate will remain at £20 and there will be a new business-class rate of £40.

Thirty million economy passengers travelling to Europe will have air passenger duty cut in half—from £10 to £5—and on flights from the Scottish highlands and islands, I will abolish air passenger duty altogether.

On tobacco, my hon. Friend the Paymaster General will tomorrow announce tough new measures to tackle smuggling.

Cigarette taxes will rise by 5 per cent. above inflation from tonight by 25p a packet—with every penny of the extra revenue going, as I promised, to funding our hospitals and the national health service.

I am also commissioning a long-term assessment of technological, demographic and medical trends over the next two decades that will affect the health service, to report to the Treasury in time for the start of the next spending review in 2002.

I have a number of other fiscal decisions to make. Debt interest payments are down by £4 billion a year and because we have not spent and we will not spend more at the expense of being prudent, we have also made the tough decisions to tackle benefit fraud, to move people from welfare to work, and to control the social security budget.

Social security spending, which grew by nearly 4 per cent. a year in the last Parliament, will grow by less than 1 per cent. a year in this Parliament.

In fact, compared with last year's Budget forecast, social security spending is lower this year by £2 billion and will be another £2 billion lower next year, a saving of £4 billion in all.

Because we have cut borrowing and reformed the welfare state, cutting the costs of social and economic failure, and because we have been financially disciplined, extra resources are now available for our priorities. A Budget is about priorities.

In my pre-Budget consultations I have read carefully detailed Budget representations and examined proposals from both sides of the House, including one from the current shadow Chancellor, who said on 6 March

> he can either reduce taxes or increase public spending. What I would recommend is that he use that money to reduce . . . taxes.

I have examined proposals for transferable tax allowances costing £4.25 billion, for private health insurance tax reliefs at £$\frac{1}{2}$ billion, for abolishing capital gains tax at £3.9 billion and top rate tax cuts at £690 million for every 1p and I have established that, for these last two alone, 75 per cent. of such tax cuts would go to the wealthiest 5 per cent. of the population, leaving us nothing extra for public services like the national health service. Because the proposals are made irrespective of economic circumstances, they would risk a return to boom and bust.

I have decided instead on a prudent and responsible approach that allows us to repay debt and lock in an even greater fiscal tightening, and that allows us, even after meeting our fiscal rules, to target tax cuts on hard-working families and to release for our public services in the coming year alone additional resources of £4 billion. These extra resources are not at the expense of our prudence; they arise because of our prudence.

I can announce an immediate new investment of £280 million in transport, £250 million of it to a ring-fenced fund for improving roads and public transport, including transport in rural areas. My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister will be making a statement on individual allocations for the coming year later this week.

I am able to announce an additional £285 million to be spent from April on fighting crime. Later this week my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will announce further details.

I am also announcing additional investment in UK education starting on 1 April of an additional £1 billion.

Under the leadership of the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, class sizes for 5-7 year olds in primary schools are being cut and significant improvements in reading, writing and maths achieved. Last year, he made a payment to every primary school for books of £2,000. Now this year, cash also will go directly into the classroom. To support his drive for literacy and numeracy, every one of the country's 18,000 primary schools will, from 1 April, receive a new payment for books, equipment and staffing of £3,000 for the smallest school, rising to £9,000 for schools with more than 200 pupils. This money will go straight to the head teacher. Schools offering special tuition to help the weakest pupils catch up will be able to draw on an extra £20 million to boost pupil results.

The Secretary of State is also proposing to back up reforms in secondary schools with new measures to boost the performance of those falling behind and to raise the performance of all pupils by the age of 14. To support these reforms in our secondary schools, he will now make a payment to every head teacher for books, equipment and staffing.

Last year, we were able to make an extra payment for books and equipment of £2,000. This April, every one of these 3,500 secondary schools will receive a minimum payment of £30,000, and £50,000 for schools with over 1,000 pupils.

Those measures alone amount to £300 million in new investment—money paid direct to the school for use in the classroom.

[Mr. Gordon Brown]

To advance our goal of 50 per cent. of young people in higher education, the Secretary of State for Education and Employment will announce that three times as many 16-year-olds will, from this autumn, benefit from the new educational maintenance allowances, which are worth up to £30 a week, to persuade people to stay on at school. Next month, he will launch a national campaign to raise school staying-on rates.

Further announcements on the full allocation of additional moneys for education will be made by the Secretary of State, on Thursday, and by the Scottish and Welsh Administrations and the Northern Ireland Secretary. However, I can announce that, for the year from 1 April, the real-terms rise in the UK's educational expenditure will next year be 8 per cent.

After these new spending decisions, I have a decision to make on income tax. Our prudent approach allows us to repay debt, invest in public services, and cut taxes for hard-working families. So I will proceed from 6 April with our 1p cut in the basic rate of income tax, from 23p to 22p—the lowest basic tax rate for 70 years. I am also combining this cut in income tax with a further direct tax cut—a family tax cut.

Next April, for 5 million families with children, the new children's tax credit will be increased from £416 to £442. For those families, this credit will now be worth twice as much as the old married couples allowance it replaces. It reduces the family tax bill, from next April, by a total of £8.50 a week, on top of rises in child benefit. Taken with the 10p income tax rate, the 22p basic rate and the normal indexation of tax allowances and thresholds, next year's tax burden for the working family will be the lowest since 1972—a fall from the 21.5 per cent. we inherited, to 18.8 per cent.

As I said, a Budget is about priorities. A choice has been posed in these last few months between investing in a national health service financed by public expenditure with access based on need, and privatised health care dependent on private insurance. This Government are committed to a publicly funded national health service true to the original principles of its founders. Securing the long-term future of the NHS is one of the great challenges this country must and will meet.

Tomorrow, the Prime Minister will make a statement to the House on the work he and the Health Secretary will lead over the next four months on reforms and modernisation of the health service. The Government's plan, to be published in July alongside the detailed public spending allocations, will address long-standing variations in efficiency performance and health outcomes, and the right balance between preventative, primary and hospital care.

Now that the overall public spending total is set for the years until 2004, I have decided that we can back long-term reform with long-term resources for the health service by today announcing the NHS allocations not just for one year, but for the next four years.

Since its creation, national health service spending has risen by an average 3.3 per cent. a year above inflation. Under the last Government, it rose by 2.9 per cent.

We have decided that in the years from now until 2004 the NHS will grow by twice as much—by 6.1 per cent. a year over and above inflation; by far the largest sustained increase in NHS funding of any period in its 50-year history.

Last year, the equivalent of just over £1,850 per household was spent on the NHS. By 2004, more than £2,800 per household will be spent—half as much again for health care for every family in the country.

In the last year alone, there has been an increase of 4,500 in the nurses working in the health service. This is just a start. With today's extra resources, and the reforms still to come, we can plan next year and the year after to recruit at least 10,000 more nurses, and with new money announced today, we will train and recruit even more in the years to come.

Let me emphasise that more resources must mean more reform and modernisation. The Prime Minister, in his statement to the House tomorrow, will set out how, with the guarantee of sustained investment, the Government, the professions and the whole of the NHS can come together to rise to the challenge of delivering better health care for all.

I can make one further announcement. In 10 days' time—at the beginning of the new financial year—the NHS was scheduled to have a £2.9 billion addition on last year.

I have decided that we should raise that figure with immediate effect by allocating not only the £300 million in tobacco revenues I promised last autumn, but by adding to that to achieve in total an extra £2 billion, making a rise next year of £4.9 billion—extra money the NHS can start using from 1 April.

So health service spending will rise from last year's £45.1 billion, and this year's £49.3 billion to: next year, £54.2 billion; the year after, £58.6 billion; then £63.5 billion; and then from April 2003, £68.7 billion—over these five years, a cash increase of 50 per cent., a real-terms increase of 35 per cent.

This is new money we can provide because we have made our choice. It is a Budget that unites the whole country, a Budget for all the people.

We have been prudent for a purpose: a stronger, fairer Britain. I commend this Budget to the House.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Under Standing Order No. 51, the first motion, entitled "Provisional Collection of Taxes", must be decided without debate. The version that I will put to the House is on a single sheet, headed "Revised", and not the one in the main booklet of resolutions.

PROVISIONAL COLLECTION OF TAXES

Motion made, and Question,

That, pursuant to section 5 of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968, provisional statutory effect shall be given to the following motions:—

(a) Hydrocarbon oils (rates of duty and rebate) (motion No. 5):

(b) Tobacco products (rates of duty) (motion No. 10):

(c) Vehicle excise duty (rates for goods vehicles etc.) (motion No. 17):

(d) Disposal of assets for which a VAT repayment is claimed (motion No. 19)—[*Mr. Gordon Brown.*]

put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 51 (Ways and means motions), and agreed to.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I now call on the Chancellor of the Exchequer to move the motion entitled "Amendment of the law". It is on that motion that the debate will take place today and on the succeeding days. The remaining motions will not be put until the end of the Budget debate next week, and they will then be decided without debate.

Budget Resolutions and Economic Situation

AMENDMENT OF THE LAW

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That it is expedient to amend the law with respect to the national Debt and the public revenue and to make further provision in connection with finance; but this Resolution does not extend to the making of any amendment with respect to value added tax so as to provide—

(a) for zero-rating or exempting a supply, acquisition or importation;

(b) for refunding an amount of tax;

(c) for varying any rate at which that tax is at any time chargeable; or

(d) for any relief, other than a relief which—

(i) so far as it is applicable to goods, applies to goods of every description, and

(ii) so far as it is applicable to services, applies to services of every description.—[*Mr. Gordon Brown.*]

4.25 pm

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): As ever, I congratulate the Chancellor on his delivery of his speech. Last year I seem to remember that I compared him to meeting a man in a pub who says, "Lend me a fiver and I will buy you a drink." This year, the Chancellor actually did borrow a fiver to buy his breakfast this morning in the Treasury, and that makes a serious point—much of the money that people pay in taxes disappears into the Chancellor's pockets without being used for any practical benefit for anyone else. I have no doubt that we will see more of that happening after today's Budget.

The Chancellor's Budgets have tended to follow something of a pattern, in which he gives his account of the Budget which—to put it charitably—is often incomplete, as we have discovered on previous occasions. All his hon. Friends behind him then play the role of the useful idiot, cheering in the naive belief that they have got the full picture. Then it turns out, a few hours or days later, that the full picture is rather different.

This year, we have seen elements of the Red Book in the past few minutes, and they show many things to which the Chancellor did not allude in his speech. For instance, he did not give many figures on the tax burden in the speech that he just delivered. *[Interruption.]* Well, he said it was falling last time and that turned out not to be the case, as the Prime Minister's press secretary has now revealed. There is no point the Chancellor now claiming that the tax burden is falling.

From the figures in the Red Book, it turns out that the savings ratio has been revised downwards again, and that after being 5.75 per cent. this year, it will be 5.5 per cent. in the next year. That is much less than forecast in the pre-Budget report. Of course, that is one of the reasons why interest rates are higher than they would otherwise be, why the pound is higher than it would otherwise be and why the balance of payments deficit is higher than it would otherwise be. The Red Book shows, but the Chancellor failed to inform the House, that that deficit is set to grow from £15.5 billion to £28.25 billion over the next three years. There was a time when such figures would have featured in the Chancellor's speech when he

[Mr. William Hague]

gave the Budget to the House, but they do not feature in the speeches of this Chancellor, who gives a selective account of the Budget to the House and to the nation.

It was interesting, too, that when the Chancellor gave the forecast figures for growth over the next two years and referred to business investment growing by 7.75 per cent. this year, he then did not read out the figures for next year. That is because the growth falls from 7.75 per cent. to 2.5 per cent. next year. Why was he curiously unable to read out that figure, having read out the comparable figure for the next year on every other parameter on which he chose to comment? That shows productivity growth slowing down and business investment flattening out and declining as a share of gross domestic product, after six years of growth. One thing we know for sure is that the account of the totality of the measures that we have heard is incomplete, and the most cursory, momentary analysis of the booklets that are produced with the Budget show that to be the case.

The Chancellor stood up to address the House as a tax-raising Chancellor, and he sat down as a tax-raising Chancellor. He sat down as the stealth Chancellor who taxes more and delivers less. Nothing he said in his speech will stop the £4.5 billion of new taxes set to hit people next month, which have already been announced in previous Budgets—or at least in the documents that accompanied them. That is a £4.5 billion total of new stealth taxes heading people's way in a few weeks' time. Of course, those come on top of a lot of previous tax announcements. Any reductions announced today pale into insignificance beside the huge increases that are already in place or in the pipeline. The Chancellor is like a mugger who grabs someone's money and then wants that person to thank him for providing the bus fare to get him home. At the same time as he has done that, hospital waiting lists have risen, police numbers have fallen, class sizes have increased, asylum controls have collapsed and the transport system is at a standstill.

As usual, the Budget included one or two reannouncements, such as the 1p reduction in the rate of income tax. The Chancellor enjoyed reannouncing that. But what about reannouncing the abolition of the married couples allowance, which will cost people £200 a year from next month? What about reannouncing the abolition of tax relief on mortgages, which will cost families £225 a year from next month? What about reannouncing that millions of single-earner married couples with a mortgage will be paying more income tax next year even with the cut in the basic rate? What about reannouncing the imposition of national insurance on benefits in kind such as health insurance? What about reannouncing all the other new taxes that people are now paying as a result of the right hon. Gentleman's activities—for example, the pensions tax, increased savings tax, fuel duty increases, taxes on charities, rises in stamp duty, the abolition of tax relief on health insurance for pensioners, higher taxes on smokers and drinkers, increases in gaming duty and increased taxes of many other sorts? Where were they? Why did not they feature in the right hon. Gentleman's speech?

The Chancellor talks, seemingly with great authority, about e-commerce, the internet, promoting enterprise and competing in the internet age. However, his new stealth tax on self-employed contractors is destroying all that. That tax did not appear in this Budget or in the previous one. It is known as IR35 because it appeared only as Inland Revenue press release No. 35. It is a £475 million tax on our future that is driving many high-tech businesses abroad.

I received a letter the other day from a person with such a business, who wrote—*[Interruption.]* I will send the Chancellor the letter. He wrote that he was in the process of closing down the company because IR35 had damaged his business to the extent that it was not worth continuing any more. It is—*[Interruption.]* The right hon. Gentleman is not listening because he does not like to listen to the truth about what his policies do to people. He should listen to people who are in business because he has not worked in a business for one day in his life.

The business man who wrote to me said:

> My financial adviser told me that something like 70 of his existing . . . clients are either leaving the UK or seeking other ways of making a living.

The right hon. Gentleman is the first person since Lord Healey to create a brain drain in this country. He talks about e-commerce and the internet but he taxes businesses in those areas and drives them out of Britain. He talks also about charities, and of course I welcome his decision to increase tax breaks for charities. As ever with the right hon. Gentleman, we shall need carefully to examine the detail.

It speaks volumes about the Chancellor and the Government that even charities have found that while he gives with one hand he has taken more away with the other. In the light of the tax increases on charities, dividend tax credit changes and other tax rises, the chief executive of Barnardos has said:

> We applaud Mr. Brown's commitment to a "new age of giving", but feel that many corporate and individual donors would be surprised to learn just how much of their contributions are being clawed back by the Government.

For everyone else it is a new age of giving, but for the Chancellor—taking together his Budget and its impact on charities—it is an age of taking, and taking again.

Last year, the Chancellor announced the abolition of the married couples allowance. He announced that it would be replaced by the children's tax credit, and he made further announcements about that today. Yet the replacement arrives a year after what it is replacing has gone. The Chancellor has done nothing to address that problem. We now have a new definition of the gap year: it is a gap year for parents and children. Even the Deputy Prime Minister would not be very happy with a train operating company that phased out the 9.15 to Waterloo a year before it phased in the replacement bus service. However, that is now the Chancellor's method.

The Chancellor is taxing more and delivering less. That is why taxes are increasing, and no amount of weasel words, Government spin and stealth taxes can disguise the truth that the tax burden is rising and will continue to rise. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development now describes it as the fastest-rising tax burden in the industrial world. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has stated that

> there is no question but that UK taxes are rising . . . there is no way Labour can get the tax burden back down to the level it was at the beginning of this Parliament.

Even the Fabian Society has said that the

Government may like to emphasise its headline tax cuts, but in fact the overall burden of taxation has risen since it came to power.

The Chancellor said, just after I started my speech, that the tax burden is falling. However, he has been saying that for the past three years, and we know that it is not true. No amount of fiddling the official figures can hide the fact that the overall tax burden is much higher than when the Government came to power.

The Chancellor claimed today to be cutting taxes and increasing spending on public services. That will come as news to the Prime Minister, who said for months that it was impossible to do both at the same time. He has therefore torpedoed the argument that the Prime Minister often uses in the Chamber—but perhaps he was only getting revenge for what the Prime Minister and his press secretary did to him a few days ago.

Whenever the Chancellor was in trouble previously, he claimed—as he did a few moments ago—to be cutting taxes. However, the Prime Minister's press secretary last week blurted out the truth. Thanks to the decision to hold Lobby briefings on the record, I have a transcript from last Tuesday. The press secretary began by saying,

> Please don't ask me complicated questions about tax.

In that, he takes a lead from his boss, the Prime Minister. When figures were put to him showing that the tax burden was rising, he came clean, and his actual words are worth listening to. He said:

> Yeah . . . those are the figures as set out in their last the PBR—either Budget or, whatever, red book, the projections, Tory projections had they been—yeah—I dunno—whatever.

That is how the Prime Minister's press secretary conceded that the tax burden was rising. It is no consolation that the real Deputy Prime Minister is no more eloquent than the official one. That is what he actually came out with.

Let us examine some of the other proposals in the Budget. The Chancellor made a lot of announcements about public spending on health and education. To prevent the Government distorting the Opposition's position in the future, I state that the Opposition unambiguously welcome the new money for hospitals and schools—new money that the Conservative Government were always able to find.

Mr. Giles Radice (North Durham) *rose—*

Mr. Hague: Is the right hon. Gentleman asking me to give way?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I shall deal with this. There is no need for the right hon. Gentleman to persist on his feet, as it is quite clear that the Leader of the Opposition is not giving way. Indeed, it is not customary to do so at this stage of the debate.

Mr. Hague: I should be happy to change the custom, if the Chancellor would give way during his Budget statement in future. We could then correct him as he goes along, instead of having to correct him afterwards, as happens now. That would be the basis on which I would give way in return.

However, we have all learned from bitter experience not to take the Chancellor's Budget soundbites at face value. We shall examine very carefully all the announcements about public services that he has made today. We know all about the Chancellor's triple accounting, according to which two plus two equals 12 for three years. When one looks at the figures, the £21 billion extra health spending promised in previous announcements turns out to be £3 billion a year for three years.

The Chancellor's announcements occasionally grab the headlines on Budget night, but they often leave a sour taste in the mouths of doctors, nurses and patients, whose expectations are raised and then dashed and who see waiting lists getting longer and longer. Last week, the chief executive of the respected King's Fund said on the "Panorama" programme:

> I think it's very misleading . . . it is the wrong way of actually presenting these figures. I've never seen it done before, and I have to say it is not just the NHS, it's in education and other spending areas where they've done the same thing.

The Chancellor's other favourite trick is the constant reannouncement of Government spending. We shall have to look carefully for that in the speech that he just made. We remember the new money for IT in schools, and the Chancellor spoke about that again today. However, money for IT in schools was originally announced by the Chancellor in 1997. It was reannounced by the Secretary of State for Education and Employment in October 1997, by the Prime Minister in November 1998, and again by the Secretary of State for Education and Employment in April 1999. There were 16 announcements of the same money, with the same gullible people falling for it every time. *[Interruption.]* There is no point in Labour Members making a din when being informed that they were taken for a ride on 15 separate occasions. That is how the Government tend to do these things.

After all that, the Government have not delivered on their promises. 1999 was meant to be the year of delivery. Then a Blair aide was reported in *The Independent on Sunday* as saying:

> Did we say 1999 was the year of delivery? It was always going to be next year when things really started to happen.

What does the Prime Minister do when faced with that reality? He orders up a round of speeches to show that the Government are delivering. But no amount of talking will achieve that when police numbers have fallen, the waiting lists to get on the waiting lists are longer and class sizes have actually increased.

The Chancellor said that he would meet some of those problems with his increase in tobacco duty, ring-fencing it for use in the health service. *[Interruption.]* I have some questions to ask—occasionally we have questions that the Chancellor ought to answer. Can he confirm that despite increasing tax rates, tobacco duty revenue actually fell between 1998-99 and 1999-00? That is due, at least in part, to the increase in the amount of tobacco smuggled into the country, avoiding the payment of tax at all. The right hon. Gentleman does not seem to have read the report of the Government's smuggling tsar—they now have a smuggling tsar because so much smuggling takes place—which concluded that increased duty was a major contributory factor to increased smuggling.

The Chancellor's hypothecated money for the health service may be another announcement of extra money that does not arrive. If it is additional to planned health service spending, we are entitled to ask what happens when it varies or when the amount is lower than expected. If it is not additional, what is he going on about? It is a sad comment on his failure to deliver that he has to rely on

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the hypothecation of taxes to try to persuade people that the money is going somewhere useful, which he has failed to persuade them of in the past.

The right hon. Gentleman had more to say about his tax credit programme—a programme so complicated that I think he hopes nobody else will understand it. His repeated announcements always impress Labour Members of Parliament, but as we have seen in recent elections, they have not impressed Labour voters very much, who, it turns out, are not as stupid as their Members of Parliament. Labour voters have listened to all this stuff about reviewing the proposed integration of his integrated proposals, seen through it and cut to the bottom line. The bottom line, very frequently, is that his complexity and confusion costs them and it costs business. The right hon. Gentleman will not explain it to the House, so let me.

By replacing family credit with the working families tax credit, the Chancellor has ensured that a quarter of a million families face marginal rates of tax and benefit withdrawal of more than 60 per cent.—more than 60p in the pound. By extending the means testing of the working families tax credit, he has produced a benefit so poorly targeted that it can be claimed by upper rate taxpayers. By replacing married couples allowance with children's tax credit, he has made sure that no families pay tax at his much-trumpeted 10p lower tax rate. His entire system not only refuses to recognise marriage but is systematically biased against one-earner couples who are not entitled to child care credit.

The Chancellor's claims about tax credits, just like his claims about the new deal, ring very hollow. His own figures show that fewer lone parents found work through the pilot new deal for lone parents than in the comparison areas where the new deal was not put into practice. No wonder the heartlands are rather unimpressed by this. It is only some people in here who live in a fantasy world in which anything that the Chancellor announces happens.

Some Labour Members believe that all the things that the Chancellor talks about on Budget day get delivered to the voters, but the voters know best. It is left to Ministers to live in this fantasy world in which everything is delivered, the dome is a great success, everyone wants to join the euro, everyone wants to get rid of section 28, and no doubt they saw Elvis in the supermarket last night. If the Chancellor said that he had seen Elvis in the supermarket, no doubt some of his right hon. and hon. Friends would run out and issue a press release saying that they had seen him too. That is how gullible Labour Back-Bench Members are about his Budgets. [HON. MEMBERS: "One of them is leaving."] She is one of the less gullible; we should never taunt the hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott).

The Chancellor talked about the eurobond market. He has been told many times that forcing it to exchange information with foreign tax authorities would be extremely damaging to that huge market in the City of London. He has rightly rejected that option previously; why has he agreed to it now?

The Chancellor announced new schemes for businesses, and claimed to be delivering a Budget for enterprise. Few claims deserve to be heard with more scepticism: every time he delivers a so-called Budget for enterprise, he increases the burdens on business, as he has done hugely in past Budgets. Last year, he said that he was providing tax cuts for businesses in his Budget. But the Association of British Chambers of Commerce estimates that that Budget contained £3.2 billion in tax increases for the remainder of this Parliament. Last year, the Prime Minister had the brass neck to say that business taxes had come down under Labour. The Confederation of British Industry president responded:

> The Government has introduced a series of well camouflaged taxes which have put the tax burden firmly onto business. Changes by the Chancellor will push up business taxation by almost £5 billion a year for the first five years of the Labour Government.

When people hear what the Chancellor says about business, they will remember the £30 billion in extra taxes already imposed, the 3,000 new regulations imposed in 1,000 days and previous Budget day distortions and broken promises. They will probably not be inclined to believe a word about Budgets for enterprise.

The Chancellor has announced—at least, he has referred to; he did not think that the House merited having the detail described—his reforms of his energy tax, the climate change levy. It is ironic that the Chancellor's great reform is directed at a tax he himself announced only a year ago. He has had to reform his own tax because it contained what he was pleased to call, in his pre-Budget statement, "practical constraints". In plain English, it does not work. There was never any chance of its working.

The tax as originally conceived attacked many parts of manufacturing industry, exported jobs and probably exported pollution. I pointed that out to the Chancellor—this is why he should listen to my responses—only a few minutes after he had delivered last year's Budget. Within a few weeks, Labour Members of Parliament had pointed it out to him after they had begun to hear from their constituents. Eventually, the news reached the Treasury, and now we have the great reform in 2000 of something announced in 1999.

The great reform package fails to address the essential problems, and in many respects it makes them worse. Introducing a tax that requires exemptions for renewable sources of energy and discounts for energy-intensive industries has made that aspect of our tax system yet another example of common sense utterly defeated by Brownian complexity. What makes all that I am saying so sad is that the Chancellor has fallen into complexity. He is trying to retain a stealth tax that is fundamentally unsound. That is the story of the delivery of so much of what he has put before the House today.

The Chancellor talked about pensioners, but he forgot to remind us of some points. People retiring after 6 April 2000 will lose married couples allowance and age-related allowance, which were worth a total of £500 off their tax bills. He may say that the Government are keeping those allowances for those over 65, but anyone who reaches 65 after April will not receive it.

Retired couples are being attacked by the right hon. Gentleman's changes, but they are supposed to be grateful to him for offering them a variety of additional payments worth a fraction of what they will lose. They are supposed to be grateful for being offered a study of how things will be improved in future. The Chancellor has had months to think about all that. He has had months to try to deal with the problem of the increased taxes that he imposed on pension funds: Tesco employees are finding out all about that because they are having to pay an extra 1.5 per cent. in pension contributions now that his greatest tax increase of 1997 is catching up with people.

The Chancellor boasts of tax cuts, but although he has given with one hand, he has taken away much more with the other over the past four years. The Chancellor's speech contained plenty of figures; he gave out figures, but he did not want us to figure out their meaning. One figure was conspicuous by its absence: how much more tax people will be paying next year under a Labour Government.

If the Chancellor will not tell people the truth about that, I shall. The increase in the tax burden under the Labour Government, shown in his own Red Book, is the equivalent of an 8p rise in the basic rate of income tax—that is after taking account of everything that he has announced today. For every extra pound that he is letting people keep in their pay packets, he is stealing nine times as much from their back pockets. That is what it means in practice.

The Chancellor has done what all Labour Chancellors do: he has increased taxes. The only difference is that he is much stealthier about it. Under him, taxes are up 9p in the pound and down 1p. After three Labour Budgets that is the bottom line; that is the figure that matters. It means that the overall tax burden will have gone up by £20 billion during his Chancellorship thus far.

This is the Budget of a Government who tax more and deliver less. The Chancellor gave a rosy account of the economy, but he forgot about the difficulties currently faced by many manufacturing businesses and about the present crisis in agriculture. He has done nothing about that.

After four Budgets, it is clear from all that he has done and all that he has failed to do that the stealth Chancellor is failing to meet the needs of the country. We needed Budgets that stimulated enterprises, rather than taking more money away from them; that made this country a low-tax magnet for investment, rather than driving out high-tech entrepreneurs; that reduced regulation, rather than adding massively to it. We needed Budgets that reformed welfare, but they have not done so. Instead, welfare costs have soared, the benefits system has been reduced to a tangled mess, and there has been a complete failure to deliver better public services.

We needed Budgets that prepared us for an internet age; instead, they promote a brain drain. We needed Budgets that helped communities and kept families together; instead, there have been increased taxes on charities and the abolition of the last recognition of marriage in the tax and benefit system. We needed Budgets that tax less and deliver more; we need a Chancellor and a Government who do that. Instead, once again, the Government are taxing more and delivering less.

4.53 pm

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): *[Interruption.]* I thank Conservative Members for the warmth of their welcome—it is much appreciated. Although I offer the Chancellor the customary congratulations, it is clear that his prudence has a purpose—spending for a second term.

The whole country will welcome the additional investment in the national health service. We have certainly been calling for that, although the other Opposition party has not. However, in putting those additional resources into the NHS, the Chancellor has given way on two of the arguments that he and the Prime Minister used consistently against the Liberal Democrats.

First, we argued that such sums could and should be put into the NHS. That was described as financially irresponsible but it is now the mantra. Secondly, in the controversy over objective 1 match funding that affects Cornwall, Yorkshire and Merseyside, the Chancellor constantly argued that one cannot pre-empt the comprehensive spending review to give a commitment on such funding—until this afternoon, in relation to the NHS. Therefore, it is worth pointing out that the Government make great play in so many ways of their rectitude but, when political expediency and public pressure are brought into play, they are willing to bend. None the less, we are glad that they have responded to public and political pressure on the NHS. We only regret that they did not do it after the general election but sought to constrain its finances in the first half of this Parliament. It would not then have been so necessary for the Government to produce the package that has been announced this afternoon, after too many operations have been cancelled and too many patients have died in the intervening period.

Another point about the balance of the Budget and the headline figures is that about four times the amount of resources are being spent on tax cuts of one kind or another as are being invested in education generally. That tells us a lot about the Government's priorities. Indeed, the Chancellor drew appreciative gasps from Labour Members when he detailed what the headline figures for education expenditure would mean when broken down for schools. However, he is devoting only about £1 billion extra to education spending and if he had forgone the tax cut worth nearly £3 billion, the figures that were cited—and that Labour Members calculated in terms of their effect on their own constituencies—would have been trebled. That is the fact of the matter for educational spending.

There will be genuine anger in the country about the Budget's greatest defect. It adds insult to injury for pensioners. What did the Chancellor actually say? He recycled a number of minor points—minor in terms of the totality of pensioner income—because many of them are already in the public domain. For example, he referred to television licences. There have been one or two welcome moves on income support capability and the winter allowance will go up to £150. That is marvellous; the measure will mean just one quid a week extra for pensioners. However, let us be fair to the Government, because £1 a week is significantly more generous than the 75p that pensioners were previously given.

That is the great missing morality at the centre of the Budget, because what detailed announcements were there for pensioners in what the Chancellor said today? He said that he would have a consultation. Will that be a consultation like the royal commission on care of the elderly, which considered, reported and was effectively shelved? By the time this consultation reports—never mind whether the Government choose to move on its recommendations—how many more pensioners will have died as a result of not getting access to the hospital care, the operations or heating that they need? The brutal truth is that simply to announce consultation for pensioners rather than direct income support action now means that, for many, action will be literally too late.

The environment is another issue that has not received great attention from the Chancellor. He promised us another consultation on brownfield taxes, but surely the time has come for the country to bite the bullet on

[Mr. Charles Kennedy]

environmental protection. When he referred to vehicle excise duty, he slipped through, in passing, remarks about the acceptability of trucks of more than 40 tonnes, and that goes against what the Labour party said some time ago before the last general election. On environmental priorities, the Government are failing badly and the Budget proves that that is so.

One must not be too churlish. Employee share ownership has long been advocated by the Liberal party and by the Liberal Democrats. We shall certainly welcome anything that extends its scope, although we shall of course want to consider the detail. When in his statement the Chancellor announced that he was freezing spirit duty and getting rid of the air taxes that affect the islands and highlands, I began to think that we were making progress in our joint Cabinet committee and that it was beginning to deliver results at last, even if not as yet on proportional representation.

In a week that has seen the massive problems with Rover, the country will be amazed that the Budget did not touch on the priorities of the wider economic context: the strength of the pound and the failure to give a lead on British entry to the euro. That is hitting manufacturing—Longbridge, obviously, in particular—and surely the Government must accept their share of the responsibility, however the management of BMW may have acted recently.

The uncertainty created by the fence-sitting on the euro is deterring inward investment and pushing up the value of the pound. That, coupled with high interest rates, which are twice those of our European competitors, constitutes a double whammy. It is worth recording that since last November, the trade deficit has doubled, rising from £10 billion to £20 billion. It is a remarkable Budget that makes no reference to any of those facts.

The other area that was not touched on, which has suffered so significantly as a result of that combination of circumstances, is agriculture. I am beginning to think that the Chancellor must have believed the Prime Minister when he went to the south-west a few weeks ago and told an incredulous local population that life in rural Britain was really going rather well. That is not the case. The farming industry is in deep recession, and it is an absolute disgrace that the Chancellor, with vast sums at his disposal, is unable to announce today that he will access the agri-compensatory funds available from Europe; and Liberal Democrat Members will continue to campaign on that issue.

This is in many ways an ingenious Budget, set against a benign economic scenario, but for pensioners, farmers, those who care about the environment and educationists it will be a deep disappointment. This Budget is delivered with more than an eye on a general election and on the Chancellor's own political future beyond that, but however long that time scale of political calculation is, for too many, particularly the elderly and the most vulnerable in our community, this Budget will have come just too late.

5.2 pm

Mr. Barry Jones (Alyn and Deeside): I am glad to support the Budget, which is clever, cautious and compassionate. I am glad to follow the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West (Mr. Kennedy), the leader of the Liberal Democrats, and the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague), the Leader of Her Majesty's Opposition, who both made a good fist of their speeches following a tour de force by the Chancellor.

I liked the fact that the Chancellor referred to the work ethic, that he declared that he wants to see the renewal of British civic society, that he wants to reward enterprise, that he has obtained the lowest corporate tax rates and that he wants to boost employee shareholding. I welcome also the maternity grant, the big boost in child benefit and all the measures to attack and end child poverty.

The Chancellor's talk of a shared pursuit of the common good was more than inspiring, and a Budget that aims for that has to be more than good. I appreciated the measures for pensioners and the £4 billion injection for public services. The Chancellor ended by saying that this is a Budget to unite the nation. Surely that must be true.

I welcome the tax cut and the aim to get more people than ever off benefit and into work. I welcome the reinforcing of the schools service and of the national health service. That will build on the success of the minimum wage and the working families tax credit.

I shall try to summarise by saying that this is a popular Budget and a genuine Labour Budget. It will help those in genuine need. I know that it cares for children and invests in the fabric of the welfare state, chiefly our schools and hospitals. It surely reaches out to help the underprivileged.

I have a question to put to Ministers: will the sign-posted new moneys for the schools service mean more teachers at the chalk face? I know that the millions of parents at the school gate want, above all, more teachers in the school. They want the money itemised by the Chancellor translated urgently into extra teachers. I understand that one part of the money will be paid directly to head teachers, and that it will avoid the dead hand—the aldermanic grip—that can sometimes prevent moneys going into schools.

Will the new moneys for the health service cut waiting lists? How soon should they do so? We are endowing the health service with national treasure in the form of billions of pounds. I wonder whether the dragon in the path to progress is the existence of too much bureaucracy in the service. Why is progress in slashing the waiting lists so maddeningly slow? I support the Chancellor's proposal that if he is to pump billions into the service, there must be reform in the organisation of the service.

Mr. David Maclean (Penrith and The Border): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Jones: No, I will not at this stage. The Leader of the Opposition did not give way, and I want to make a brief speech.

For certain, our children require more teachers. We need more teachers to guarantee the right of every child to achieve his or her potential.

None of our constituents should be sick with worry while waiting and waiting for the consultation and examination that will tell them the significance of their symptoms, which in themselves create fear and anxiety in patients.

If we are to put people into productive work, we need to secure our manufacturing industries. I remain anxious about an industry that I know well—the British steel industry. I am anxious after the merger of British Steel and the Dutch company, which overnight formed the new company, Corus. I do not want the closure of any steel plant in our nation. I do not want a programme of redundancies, whether voluntary or compulsory. I do not want dumping—which has taken place—by ruthless, cheating competitor companies from abroad.

In my own country, Wales, we have magnificent steel plants such as Port Talbot, Llanwern and the Shotton works in my constituency. I do not want them to lose jobs. I do not want any steelworks in Britain to be mothballed or closed.

A complicating factor in the continuing struggle of the United Kingdom's steel industry is the strength of the pound. Those are the matters about which the union leaders and their managers on the Shotton steelworks committee tell me. They tell me that the situation is worrying.

I know that a strong United Kingdom manufacturing base requires a powerful, stable seedcorn industry such as steel. There is no wealth in our nation without powerful seedcorn foundation manufacturing industries. I shall look closely at the Budget in the weeks and months ahead to see how it might further assist our manufacturing, as the Chancellor has done before.

I thank the Government, specifically my right hon. Friends the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and the Secretary of State for Wales. They have delivered for my constituency some £530 million of repayable loan investments for the A3XX airbus project. My constituency will be the project's principal beneficiary, to the tune, at the very least, of 1,400 new jobs, and that is in addition to the existing 4,200-strong Broughton works in my constituency.

The good news is that, thanks to the action of the Treasury, the Department of Trade and Industry and the Welsh Office, that factory now faces a generation of prosperity. Already, ahead of the £530 million, it has had a £123 million repayable launch investment for the A340 aircraft, which is now flying, and has also recently seen an on-site investment of some £230 million. That is a massive injection of about £883 million.

I can only thank Her Majesty's Government for that input, and tell this honourable House that my constituents are more than pleased. Here is a world-beating, world-class, high-tech success story in my constituency on Deeside. The Government have backed us all the way. The Treasury has been the fulcrum, but I cannot praise too highly the work of the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and the Secretary of State for Wales in the Cabinet Committee system.

I am proud of the campaign for that £530 million, led by the convenor at the Airbus works, John Hamilton, and his senior stewards. They collaborated successfully with, first, the now ex-works director, Mr. Bill Travis, and then with the current works director, Mr. Brian Fleet. That collaboration has been superb. Again, I put on record my thanks to my right hon. Friends.

I now ask the Welsh Assembly to contribute to the A3XX project by giving that mighty aerospace project a £25 million regional grant. I have given the First Secretary a petition of more than 1,000 names which was prepared by the works convenor, John Hamilton, at the Airbus factory. Deeside, and all of north Wales, refused to vote for an Assembly at the time of the ballot. The electorate was questioning and sceptical. This is the first big decision for the Welsh Assembly in its short life, and that big decision just happens to reflect life, industry, the hopes and the future in Alyn and Deeside in north-east Wales.

I cannot overestimate the negative reaction that there would be to a refusal to give the £25 million grant following the £530 million signalled by the Government. Not to have that regional grant from Cardiff would give rise to the belief that the fledgling Assembly was indifferent to the hopes of those in the north of Wales, particularly on Deeside. However, I thank the First Secretary for his courteous and positive response to the petition that I gave him, and the helpful and positive letter that he sent me this very week. I know that in all this the Secretary of State for Wales has been a powerful advocate of my constituents' interests.

Does the Budget contain measures to enable a county authority such as Flintshire—my authority—to tackle the problems of modernising and maintaining our large and ageing post-war council estates?

My councillors, who are Labour and of whom there are many, work hard. They want only the best for their tenants. They want to install central heating, new doors and windows in hundreds of decaying streets. They want to improve and modernise pensioners' accommodation and they want the urgent and generous release of council house sale receipts. I support their objective. I hope that Ministers will be able to say at the end of the debate that the objective will be achieved.

Accepting the specific requests on housing that I have made on behalf of my county authority members is a means of helping the poor, the unhealthy, one-parent families, the unemployed and those without hope. I should like to believe that we can renew the fabric of decaying social housing, and that that has the potential to increase the sum of human happiness. I hope that the detail of the Budget will provide a positive answer. At this stage, I do not know, but it is my duty to speak up for those of my constituents who are trapped on ageing, decaying, post-war council estates.

No. 10 Downing street is tenanted by arguably the most powerful premier in the history of the office. He established the social exclusion unit because he means to change society. For example, he made more than £800 million available to enhance the toughest council estates. I want social justice; it is my priority. The Budget points to social justice, and I believe that the Prime Minister is committed to it.

No. 11 Downing street is tenanted by arguably the most successful Chancellor in the history of Labour Governments; possibly the best Chancellor of modern times. That impression was given this afternoon, when a man, a Chancellor, a Minister in his prime delivered a Budget that he said would unite the nation.

I support full employment. The Chancellor seeks high and stable employment levels. That Attlee-esque phrase encapsulates my hopes for a society where there is work for all and health and security for the retired. For as long as the Prime Minister and the Chancellor collaborate positively, the Government are impregnable and re-electable. The signs for that are more than good.

[Mr. Jones]

I renew the call for a stronger manufacturing base. Without strong steel and aerospace industries, Britain will not generate sufficient wealth. If Britain allows the so-called underclass—the underprivileged and the dispossessed—to continue to grow, our nation will not be united and cohesive. Our social problems will increase, and we will need many more positive Budgets such as today's. Social justice and high and stable employment remain my priorities. Today, the Government have decided that those objectives are their priorities.

The Budget delivers. Her Majesty's Government have invested well and generously in my constituency of Alyn and Deeside. For the sake of the nation and my community, there is no room for complacency while the dispossessed are measured in many millions. The Budget is a fine one; it is a Budget for social justice, and I commend it.

5.20 pm

Sir Michael Spicer (West Worcestershire): I can agree with one remark made by the right hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mr. Jones): this is a Labour Budget. Like all socialist Budgets, it will—despite the rhetoric and the propaganda—ultimately undermine the strong economy which the Government inherited from their predecessors.

On the surface and for the moment, these seem like good times for the economy. On the surface, the Budget seems to reflect those good times. But as the Leader of the Opposition, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague), said in a brilliant speech—in 27 years as a Member of the House, I have rarely heard a riposte to the Budget that was so coherent, so on the ball and so to the point—if we delve a little below the surface and into the Red Book all is not quite what it seems. The productivity, investment and balance of payments figures all show serious deterioration.

The economy is not as soundly based as the Chancellor would have us believe. Let us take the fiscal position—the point on which he would seem to be strongest, but one on which Labour Members were silent. They do not like hearing about his fiscal soundness and his prudence, of which he keeps reminding us. That also is not quite what it seems when he flashes his mirrors. The immediate Budget surplus is clearly present because at this stage in the economic cycle the tax take is exceptionally high, and—they cannot have this one both ways—as we now know, the Government have consistently put up total tax rates since coming to office. They cannot say that there is a surplus and at the same time not accept that there has been a massive increase not only in the rates, but in the tax take.

The Lombard Street research group has recently shown that a disturbing picture emerges when that rate of growth in taxation is compared with the trend growth rate in public expenditure. Since 1998, there has been a relentless rise in the growth of public spending—a trend that accelerated when the Government broke loose from the expenditure programmes that they inherited from the Conservatives. That is confirmed today in annexe A, paragraph A20, of the Red Book, where it is unashamedly stated that even current public expenditure will rise considerably faster than the projected rate of growth in gross national product. The Government say that they will achieve that without breaking their fiscal rules, which they set themselves and which apply effectively to capital expenditure.

Under the new laxer rules for public borrowing undertaken with the private sector—the public-private partnership—the official public expenditure figures probably understate the explosion in public expenditure which is currently under way. No doubt that pleases Labour Members, but they cannot have it both ways: they cannot claim to be prudent and at the same time accept that enormous increase. That is what the right hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside was really saying when he said that this is a Labour Budget. He approves of the enormous growth in public expenditure, which is one of the things that the Government are disguising.

The trend growth rate in public spending is accelerating even faster than the trend rate growth in taxation. All independent observers are reaching that conclusion. It means, first, that the fiscal position is much less secure than the Chancellor made it out to be this afternoon. Secondly, it is undoubtedly one reason why interest rates are high—and why the value of the pound is high, as well. Thirdly, from a business point of view, it means not only that interest rates and the value of the pound are high, but that the burden of the public sector is growing in all its facets. That must be one of the reasons why there is a new deterrent to investment, why trends in productivity are now down, and why a potentially serious balance of payments problem is emerging.

One feature of the growing public sector that was not mentioned in the Budget statement is the vast and expensive growth in regulation and in regulatory bodies, for which there is no economic justification. Authorities such as Ofgem, Ofwat, Oftel, the Financial Services Authority, the Rail Regulator and the Post Office regulator—some of which were established in embryo form by the last Administration to put competitive pressure on the otherwise uncompetitive utilities—have now become the unaccountable means by which the Government impose costly political objectives on industry.

Rather than dealing primarily with competition issues, which would have made sense in terms of some of the objectives mentioned by the Chancellor—he referred to the banking system, for instance—the Post Office regulator now decides the level of privatisation, the Rail Regulator decides transport strategies, Ofwat decides the level of environmental investment, Oftel decides the distribution of telephones and the FSA decides matters relating to social banking. The implication of what was said today was that, in some respects, that would mean something verging on compulsory banking. Ofgem, meanwhile, is concerned with income distribution in the context of fuel poverty, which was also mentioned today.

No wonder, in a recent paper from the Institute of Economic Affairs, Professor Stephen Littlechild, the former electricity regulator, bemoaned the fact that the duty on regulators to promote competition was no longer unqualified. He warned that, among other things, the move could open the floodgates to a wave of appeals against the regulators to the Competition Commission. He also issued a heavy warning that the regulators were setting themselves up as a sort of shadow Cabinet, and were beginning—no doubt guided by the Government—

to develop strategies that had nothing to do with the country's economic performance, and everything to do with the increasing burdens on industry.

Those burdens are both direct—industry has been asked to pay the costs of the regulators, which amount to hundreds of millions of pounds—and indirect. Imposed on industry are a range of objectives and costs that have nothing to do with providing business, and everything to do with politics—and with taxation in many cases, and income distribution in others.

Far from this being a pro-business or even a pro-consumer Budget, as the Government proclaim, the Government are now systematically undermining business. They are doing that through higher taxation and with it higher public expenditure, and consequently through higher interest rates which in turn lead to a high value of the pound.

Above all, through their ham-fisted intervention, the Government are undermining the strong economy that was left behind by the Conservative Administration. Sometimes, it is directly ham-fisted, as with Rover last week, but it is also covertly ham-fisted: a vast regulatory regime is arising. They have introduced nationalisation by the back door in many cases, equipping the new regulators, incidentally, with draconian enforcement powers—in the case of the FSA, powers effectively to imprison people should they not comply with rules that it is in many instances allowed to set up subjectively.

Therefore, the Budget must be seen in the context of what is going on with the management of the economy. The spin, the flashing mirrors and the distorted propaganda will in the end be no match for the reality, which, as with all socialist Governments, is anti-business and, ultimately, destructive of the economy.

5.30 pm

Mr. Michael Clapham (Barnsley, West and Penistone): The previous speech was rather uncharitable. I shall not be attracted down that path—but, for my locality, the economy has been managed with great effect. I will deal with the point that was implicit in the speech of the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Sir M. Spicer), namely, that low taxes tend to be a moral imperative.

The Budget builds on previous ones and continues the principle of redistribution, as well as providing stimulation for industrial growth. My locality has been assisted in the past two years. The Budget will be extremely helpful for localities such as Barnsley that are rebuilding their economic and social structure after considerable neglect during the Tory years.

I want to point out the benefits that have accrued to my community. For example, 2,785 households will benefit from the working families tax credit. A total of 15,366 pensioners will benefit from the pension increases and 6,146 pensioners aged over 75 will benefit from free television licences. Youth unemployment in my constituency has fallen by some 67 per cent. in the past year or so. About 11,200 recipients of child benefit will benefit from the increases that have been announced by the Chancellor. In my constituency, 1,307 businesses will benefit from his announcement today on corporation tax.

The Budget contrasts with the ideas of the Conservative party and the ideas that were implicit in the speech of the hon. Member for West Worcestershire. For example, the Conservatives believe that leaving private finance to provide public services would benefit Britain. They do not see that it would create a two-tier Britain. Their view is that British society would be better if sectors such as health were privately financed. That view is totally out of keeping with the majority view among the British public.

Mr. Maclean: If that is the way, why is it that every new hospital that is built is a result of the private finance initiative, and the Government boast about and take the credit for private finance in the health service?

Mr. Clapham: If the right hon. Gentleman can hold his fire for a moment, I shall come to the moral imperative of private finance. To answer his question directly, the private finance initiative is part of the Government's overall approach to hospital building, which was so neglected by the previous Government that a radical approach was required, pulling in all partners to the hospital building programme.

The Leader of the Opposition implied that low taxes were a moral imperative for any Government. That approach is nonsense. It is totally out of touch with the majority of the public, as the global picture demonstrates. For example, low-tax Russia is a disaster, while high-tax Holland and Denmark are the fastest growing economies in the European Union.

In any society, a progressive tax system is the best way of stimulating the economy and reinforcing the social structure. The British public have shown clearly that they want high-quality public services. They also want fairness in the workplace and that is why they support the minimum wage, the social chapter and parental leave. Eventually, we should press for parental leave to be paid, so that we can match the paid parental leave provided by our European partners.

The public support the tax credit system and the largest ever increase in child benefit that will help to lift families out of poverty. They know full well that that cannot be achieved merely by financing private sources. Services are not free—schools, hospitals and roads have to be paid for out of taxation. Taxation makes it possible for those services to be available to all free of charge.

In my view, progressive taxation—and here I shall answer the point raised by the hon. Member for West Worcestershire—is a contract between citizens who contribute according to their ability and the democratic undertaking by the Government to build a better society for all. The previous Administration, in which the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) was a Minister, did not provide a better society for all; they concentrated on the few rather than the many. The present Government are doing the opposite.

The Budget makes further substantial resources available for health and education, and that will be most welcome in Barnsley. Health service reforms are already well under way in the area, but the town has a high rate of heart disease, strokes and cancer. Although the health authority received an increase in its budget of more than 7 per cent. this year, because it started at a very low level, it is still £2 million short. The extra help announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor for the health service will be very welcome in Barnsley.

There is already a health action zone in South Yorkshire covering Doncaster and Rotherham. It is pulling together across the region and helping to focus resources on the

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problems identified in the health improvement plan for the region. The extra help that my right hon. Friend has announced will help the health action zone to focus resources where they are badly needed.

The United Kingdom has more people in employment now than at any time in the past and today's Budget will help to continue the economic dynamism that has created an extra 800,000 jobs since 1997. Referring to the point that the hon. Member for West Worcestershire made about whether the Budget assisted industry, I can tell him that in Barnsley and South Yorkshire the endeavour to regenerate the local economy is going apace. In the Dearne valley area, for example, 6,000 jobs have been created over the past two or three years. It is probable that by 2005 another 4,000 jobs will be created in the area. They will replace jobs lost in the mining industry, which was so cruelly shut down by the Conservative Administration, when very little help was given to the locality. The measures to assist business will therefore be very welcome. They will assist in the work currently being done in the locality by the local authority, and help the locality to recover from the structural blows inflicted in the 1980s and 1990s, when very little assistance was provided.

Britain is now competing in a global economy. If we are to compete successfully, we have to have a well-educated and well-trained labour force. The Chancellor's boost for education today will help regions such as South Yorkshire and particularly localities such as Barnsley.

The educational achievement of pupils in South Yorkshire, for historical reasons, has been lower than the national average. Prior to the previous general election, only 29 per cent. of pupils in Barnsley, compared with the national average of 44 per cent., were achieving five or more A-levels at grades A to C. There was little that the local education authority could do about that as it had been starved of resources. Some of our schools even had bucket monitors.

Since May 1997, the situation has gradually been reversed, assisted by the commitment of the local education authority and the Barnsley education action zone. The education action zone has played a very important part in increasing achievement in the past year or so. Achievement levels have started to increase.

Last Friday, with my two Barnsley colleagues—my hon. Friends the Members for Barnsley, Central (Mr. Illsley) and for Barnsley, East and Mexborough (Mr. Ennis)—I met the director of the Barnsley education action zone to discuss some of the improvements that have been made and generally to see what was being done at the chalk face. We had to remind ourselves that the education action zone had been created only in September 1998. Although the project was established initially to operate for only three years—funded by a £750,000 grant from the Department for Education and Employment—it has already started to make quite important improvements. It has, for example, produced increased achievement levels in standard assessment tests and in GCSEs.

At the school that I visited on Friday, it was clear that the provision of information technology instruction is having an enormous impact in increasing pupils' commitment to getting stuck in at school and to working hard. That achievement has been made possible by the way in which the education action zone has been able to focus resources on information technology equipment.

The Budget is good for industry and it will certainly be good for Barnsley's regeneration. It is also good for local health and education. The Budget is good for pensioners, and it is good for the British public's quality of life. The Budget will help to make Britain a better place to live.

5.43 pm

Mr. David Maclean (Penrith and The Border): I am glad that the hon. Member for Barnsley, West and Penistone (Mr. Clapham) can find something to welcome in the Chancellor's Budget, and that he thinks that it will benefit his constituents.

I am afraid that, in my large rural constituency—the largest rural constituency in England, covering almost 1,500 square miles—in Cumbria, not many people will be cheering in the valleys tonight, as Bill McLaren might have said. They will not be cheering because the Chancellor has done nothing to reduce the crippling roads costs that he has created in the past few Budgets; nothing to save the rural economy, which is dying under this Government; and nothing to redress the burden that he has imposed in the tax system on married couples.

The first thing to say about taxation under this Government is that, today, we were presented with only about one quarter, or perhaps one tenth, of the picture. If today's Budget were the first delivered by this Chancellor, we would probably all leave the Chamber saying, "Not a bad bloke—very good on delivery. It sounded quite a good Budget; not too bad after all." However, we have bitter experience of this Chancellor's Budget statements. We know that what we hear from the Dispatch Box is not the full story—it is nothing like half of it. In his last Budget, the Chancellor did not mention IR35, and then £400 million of extra taxes were imposed on business and small entrepreneurs. We heard not a cheep from the Dispatch Box. That came out a few days later, in an Inland Revenue press release called IR35.

The Chancellor did not have the courage to spell out by how much he raised petrol duty in his last Budget. He said that it was a few pence above the normal rate of inflation. I remember when Chancellors used to say that that meant that duty would go up by 20p a gallon—or by 17p a gallon, as it did following the last Budget. In this Budget, the duty has gone up by 8p a gallon. The Chancellor did not spell that out.

The Chancellor did not spell out the full effects of his Budget, which will dribble out in the next few days. That is why there will be a muted reception for the Budget in the City tonight, and in households across the country. There will be a muted response in Longbridge and at Rover, as well as in manufacturing industry. People are waiting to hear what the real Budget is, when the truth will come out.

On taxation, the truth began to come out last week, when Alastair Campbell admitted, for the first time, what the figures were on taxes. Despite headline tax cuts—such as the reduction in the basic rate of income tax to 22p from April—overall taxes have gone up under this Government.

The Treasury's own figures show a rising tax burden—that is, net taxes and social security contributions as a percentage of gross domestic product. When we count in

the working families tax credit, which it is legitimate to do, we see that, in 1996-97, the Treasury was taking from the British public 35.3 per cent. In the current year, it will be 37.3 per cent., rising to 37.7 per cent. The overall tax take from the pockets of our people is rising under the Government. Despite all the flim-flam, dross and bluff from the Chancellor, the overall tax take is increasing.

Until last week, Ministers refused to admit that taxes were rising. We have heard claims that, next year, the tax burden on the typical family will be at its lowest level since 1972, and that the figures show that the tax burden is falling. Last November, the Prime Minister said that the Chancellor did not say that the tax burden was increasing, because it was not—it was going down. That is typical of the assertions that we have had from the Government time and time again—until last week, when the Government finally admitted that the burden of taxation had risen. On Monday 13 March, the Prime Minister's official spokesman, Alastair Campbell, admitted that the tax burden had gone up.

On Wednesday of last week, the Prime Minister was put on the spot by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition, whose response today was the finest that I have heard in the House in 19 years. My right hon. Friend quoted back to the Prime Minister what the Prime Minister had said before the election. For the avoidance of doubt, let us briefly refresh our memories. Before the election, the Prime Minister said that Labour had no plans to increase tax at all. He said that Labour's proposals did not involve raising taxes. He said that the programme of the Labour party did not imply any tax increases. That seems pretty clear to me, although I am a layman in these matters.

When the Prime Minister was challenged last week by my right hon. Friend, he said that Labour had promised not to raise the basic, standard or higher rates of income tax and that it had kept that promise. We have a new form of weasel words. The Prime Minister, apparently, did not make those pledges before the election—he did not say that his policies involved no increase in taxes at all. The Prime Minister is now trying to claim that what he said, meant to say or should have said was that the Government would not raise the basic, standard or higher rates of income tax.

We were conned. The British people were conned by this Government before the election, which is why my right hon. Friend was right to accuse the Government of telling barefaced lies.

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North): I have a simple question for the right hon. Gentleman. During the election campaign, what did he see on the hundreds of large billboards around the country on the subject of the Labour party's position on tax? Did he see what my hon. Friends and I saw—a specific commitment not to raise the standard or the higher rate of income tax? Did he and his colleagues not see that message spelled out clearly on billboards? And it has been delivered.

Mr. Maclean: Of course one saw Labour propaganda posters, but I am not talking about them. I am talking about the words of a man who is a Privy Councillor, who was the Leader of the Opposition and who is now the British Prime Minister. Surely we are entitled to pay more attention to the words of the British Prime Minister when he makes three solemn declarations in various interviews. Is the hon. Gentleman saying that we should have ignored what the British Prime Minister said and read the propaganda posters, because the fine print on them had a different story to tell?

Mr. Alan W. Williams (East Carmarthen and Dinefwr): Does the right hon. Gentleman remember the last year of the Conservative Government? How large was the public sector borrowing requirement? It was some £28 billion, or about 3.5 per cent. of GDP. If the Conservatives had been returned and if they had had a policy to balance the books at any stage, that 35.3 per cent. tax burden would have implied an increase of 3.5 per cent.

Mr. Maclean: I remember that. I also remember that the PSBR was declining, following the recession that the country had gone through. I remember how many extra police officers we had under the previous Government, and the fact that waiting lists were shorter and class sizes smaller. I can remember some other promises made by the Labour Government before they got into power, and we will come to some of those in a moment.

Mr. Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West): Is not the simple point that Labour Members who wish to intervene in my right hon. Friend's speech should either say that the Prime Minister did not say what has been quoted, or that he did not mean it?

Mr. Maclean: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who, in his usual erudite way, has made an important point. The Opposition have a problem—*[Interruption.]* I mean the Government, although they are my opposition and my constituents' opposition. The Government have a problem. The Prime Minister made solemn promises about income tax, which have clearly been broken. He has been informing the House for three years about a situation that, it turns out, is no longer correct—I choose my words carefully. The Government either have to say that the Prime Minister got it wrong or did not mean what he said, or they have to admit properly that taxation has risen and that the Prime Minister got it wrong and, for three years, every week, inadvertently misled the House.

The Government had better realise that those promises by the Prime Minister will come back to haunt them. They do not have to take my word for it; they can look at the growing number of independent surveys that show that the tax burden is rising. Figures published in late 1999 by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development show that Britain has the fastest rising tax burden in Europe and now pays more tax than Germany, for the first time in a generation. The increase in this country is also greater than in any other developed country. While the international trend is towards lower taxes, the first full year of a Labour Government saw the biggest annual rise in taxation for 16 years.

In addition to the OECD report, the Office for National Statistics published figures on 18 November that showed that the tax burden had increased since the 1997 general election. In the second quarter of 1997, the tax burden in the UK was 35.6 per cent. of GDP and in the second quarter of 1999, it was 37.7 per cent. The OECD and the ONS both used longstanding and internationally accepted

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methods of measuring the tax burden and their figures are irrefutable. They are not Conservative propaganda dreamed up out of thin air.

A March 2000 analysis by the accountancy firm PricewaterhouseCoopers has predicted that the cumulative increase of discretionary taxes imposed since Labour took power will be £10.8 billion by the end of the Parliament. Although net changes in personal taxation will be negligible, the report said that the extra revenues had been generated through a mixture of higher taxes on companies and institutions, and increased levels of expenditure. It beggars belief that the Chancellor could stand at the Dispatch Box today and start boasting about the Government's tax record. Taxes are rising under this Government. They have gone up by 9p in the pound and have come down by 1p in the pound, as my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition said earlier.

The Chancellor made a big play about pensioners. Ministers like to boast that they have given £1.6 billion to pensioners, but they have failed to say how much they have taken away from them, such as the £5 billion a year tax on pension funds. Future pensioners will be worse off because the Chancellor has loaded £5 billion a year of tax on to pension funds. To make matters worse, the most popular savings vehicles of all time—TESSAs and PEPs—have been abolished and the amount of money that people can save tax free each year for their future has been halved.

The Chancellor did not mention the abolition of dividend tax credits, which means that 300,000 pensioners whose income is so low that they do not even pay income tax will have to pay, on average, an extra £75 a year in tax. He did not mention today the scrapping of the married couples allowance in the 1999 Budget. He gave the impression that pensioners would retain the MCA, but the small print revealed—as we always discover with this Chancellor, after all his rhetoric at the Dispatch Box—that those turning 65 after next April will not be able to claim the allowance, which will cost them an extra £500 a year in tax. Those people had neither expected nor planned for that increase, and constituents have come to see me and have written to me on that point. A £500 extra tax bill is a tremendous blow to people who have budgeted carefully for their old age.

Neither did the Chancellor mention the scrapping of the widows bereavement allowance. Labour has abolished the allowance granted to widows aged 60 to 65 following the husband's death and replaced it with a payment that will be available only to widows under pension age. That was worth £285 a year to people. It may be small beer to the champagne socialist party opposite, but it is a lot of money to those people who counted on it. Labour's first Budget in 1997 also abolished tax relief on private medical insurance for the over-65s, so we do not need to hear more rhetoric from the Chancellor on how well he is looking after pensioners. The record of what the Government have taken away from pensioners speaks for itself.

Today, the Chancellor tried to make the most of the fact that he was not putting up fuel duty by more than the rate of inflation. That simply means 8p a gallon extra on fuel and diesel duty tonight. We should be grateful, because it was 17p a gallon last year. However, that still means that our fuel and diesel costs are a third more than the highest priced diesel of any of our competitors on the continent. Refuelling a lorry with a 1,000-litre tank would cost £443 in Italy, £417 in France and £401 in Denmark—and they are the most expensive countries in Europe. In the cheapest countries, it would cost much less—£293 in Portugal, for example. If we take the most expensive countries, it would cost about £420 on average to fill that tank with diesel. In this country, it costs £663 to fill that lorry with diesel, and after the Budget it will cost another £20, bringing the cost to £683. That is almost £700 to fill the tank in the UK compared with £400 in France and Germany, which are competitor countries. Is it any wonder that our road haulage industry is being crucified?

Let us take vehicle excise duty and the nearest countries to us, which are Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany and Ireland. In Ireland, it is £1,278 for a 40-tonne vehicle; in Belgium, it is £860; in Denmark it is £462; and in France and Germany it is £450 and £1,700 respectively. It is £1,800 in Sweden. Germany is a good example, because it is one of the most expensive VED countries in Europe. That is, until we come to the charge in Britain, which is £5,750.

If my constituency in the Lake district in north Cumbria does not have good transport links, it will die. The way in which the Government are clobbering transport through vehicle excise duty and fuel duty is crucifying the road haulage industry in my area and increasing the costs of every other industry that requires goods and commodities moved round the country.

I remind the House briefly of some of the other points in the Budget. Of course, the Chancellor made much of national health service expenditure. I wonder how many times that money has been triple counted already, and how many times it will be triple counted in the next few days. The extra £21 billion is now being claimed to be another £50 billion. By the general election, it will no doubt be an extra £150 billion.

Did we not see in last week's "Panorama", a programme that is not usually critical of a Labour Government, doctors, leaders, nurses and other experts in the NHS complaining that, in their view, the Government had lied about the figures? They talked about the Government having taken credit for the extra doctors coming out of training school when those doctors were in the system in any event and due to leave training school. They talked about how the Government have triple counted the money going into the NHS.

When listening to the Chancellor this afternoon, we could only think, "Good, there will be extra expenditure on the health service." No doubt when we read the small print we shall find that it is nothing like the expenditure that the Chancellor has claimed, and that the Government will still have failed to tackle the real problems of the health service.

We heard nothing from the Chancellor about the Home Secretary making a statement in a couple of days about more funding for law-and-order issues. If the Government are allocating less than £300 million for such issues, that will not deal with the huge cuts in police numbers that we have seen under the Government and will see in future. They have boasted about an extra 5,000 officers, but they will not be extra officers. They will be the officers who will be recruited in any event to try to fill the gaps that will be left by the 10,000 officers leaving the police service or retiring from it.

We have had a great deal of spin from the Chancellor, but we have had nothing from him that gives me any satisfaction that the real problems of rural deprivation in the far north of England will be dealt with. A dying agricultural economy and severe transport problems have an effect on all rural areas. We cannot have social inclusion, which the right hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mr. Jones) was talking about and of which the Government were boasting, if thousands of pensioners in rural areas cannot afford to drive to towns and villages. They cannot afford to go out because the cost of motoring has increased under the Government. They have never had bus services in sparsely populated rural areas, and they never will have. It is not social inclusion to exclude those people, and there is nothing in the Budget to help them.

I suspect from what I have heard today that there is nothing to cheer for in the Budget. I am certain that, as more of the fine print dribbles and leaks out from Inland Revenue and Customs and Excise press releases over the next few weeks, as details are winkled out in Committee as the Finance Bill is considered, and as the Chancellor is forced to make clarifications, we shall have nothing to cheer about. We shall find that the stealth taxes are continuing and that the 1p that the Chancellor is giving us back in the rate of income tax is in reality 10p more in the pound, and not the 9p in the pound that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition talked about.

6.5 pm

Mr. James Plaskitt (Warwick and Leamington): The right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) said that he would give the Budget a muted reception. I can tell him that it will receive a much more positive reception in schools in Warwick and Leamington, given the extra funding that will come through to them shortly. It will receive a warm welcome from the national health service in my constituency, and by all those who are concerned about the proper funding of the NHS.

The Budget will be welcomed also by working families and low-income families, who have much to gain from the measures that have been announced today. The Budget will be welcomed by all those in my constituency who have found work in the past two and a half years. Unemployment has fallen by 40 per cent. as a result of the Government's measures. The Budget will certainly receive a warm welcome from pensioners in my constituency, who will have several reasons to cheer the measures that have been announced today.

I certainly welcome the Budget because it represents further progress in delivering some of the Government's vital objectives, which brought me into the House. These include tackling child poverty and eventually eradicating it, helping pensioners on low incomes and helping working families to get the best return from the work that they do. We want to boost the vital services of education and health and ultimately deliver full employment. These are the Government's vital social objectives. We have already made dramatic progress towards achieving them, and the Budget takes us much further down that road. That has been possible because we have created a sound base for the economy. That makes possible the mix of tax cuts that are targeted at certain areas and the public investment increases that are similarly targeted at important areas. For the long term, it is essential to maintain all the sound fundamentals that have made such progress possible.

The Budgets and measures that the Government have introduced since taking office have helped the country start to overcome three traditional weaknesses in the UK economy. First, there has been a tendency to move towards inflation as soon as there is a period of growth. Secondly, there has been a tendency to under-invest. Thirdly, there have been problems as a result of low productivity. These three structural and fundamental problems have plagued the economy for decades, and the Government are making more progress in tackling them than any of their predecessors.

Inflation has been held at a low and stable rate for three years. On average throughout this Parliament it has been precisely on the 2.5 per cent. target. There is no precedent for delivering that sort of inflation in modern times.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): I do not detract from what the hon. Gentleman has said about inflation, but in that context will he say something about the savings ratio and the impact that it has on the strength of the pound?

Mr. Plaskitt: If the hon. Gentleman has studied recent economic history, he will know that generally the savings ratio declines as inflation falls. That being so, there is nothing unusual in the present economic cycle. I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman acknowledges that the Government are doing well on inflation. We are meeting the declared 2.5 per cent. target that the Bank is steering towards, and if we take the standardised or harmonised index of inflation that is used across Europe, we have the lowest inflation rate in the European Union.

That is no accident. It is happened because of the measures that the Government have taken. Granting the Bank of England operational independence on the management of monetary policy made a direct contribution towards the success with inflation, as has the principle of using inflation targeting. The sound fiscal stance that the Government have taken has also contributed directly to our impressive inflation record.

The interesting question is whether through the medium and longer term we can hold our excellent track record on inflation. The chances of doing so are good.

We are at a point in the economic cycle when traditionally the Bank of England has started to have inflation worries. We have had several years of steady growth in the economy, and we can look forward to more ahead, as my right hon. Friend the Chancellor promised today. Historically, at this point in the cycle, there has been much anxiety about inflation prospects. By contrast, inflation pressures at present are pretty subdued, and there are many fewer such pressures in the economy than at this stage in earlier economic cycles.

There are plenty of promising signs for the economy. The money markets believe that we are on track to maintain, and to deliver, continued low inflation rates. Our long-term interest rates are lower than in the United States. Inflation expectations are well down across the board. We are seeing the fruits of better and stronger competition in the economy. That is another structural change that is helping to keep inflation down. There is also improved price transparency. That is important, given that 50 per cent. of our gross domestic product is traded.

Wage growth at this point in the economic cycle is also quite moderate. The Monetary Policy Committee and the Governor of the Bank of England have expressed some

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concern at wage settlements, and in recent months the total earnings figures have been edging up. They have gone above 5 per cent., and I know that the Governor of the Bank of England has sounded some alarm signals.

However, beneath the top figure that I have quoted is the settlement figure, which tells a more interesting story. The settlement figure has held pretty steady at around 3.5 per cent.—precisely the sum that one obtains when one adds inflation to productivity growth. That suggests that the underlying rate of wage growth in the economy is perfectly consistent with keeping to the inflation target. Again, that is unusual for this point in the economic cycle and it represents something of a breakthrough in terms of controlling inflation.

There is evidence to show that many of the fundamental relationships in the economy are changing. The Bank of England and the Monetary Policy Committee need to study the changes carefully, as it is likely that the monetary policy rule book is in the process of being rewritten.

The Government have a part to play in underpinning the progress that has been made. That would all be lost if we were ever to return to management of the economy based on boom and bust, or if we were about to embark on a tax-cutting spree—as happened in the late 1980s, when the Conservative Treasury had reasonably full coffers. It is essential to hold fast to the golden rule introduced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor. I was pleased that today's Budget statement makes it clear that he is doing just that. He is locking in the fiscal surpluses, and he is forecasting Budget surpluses for each of the next four years.

It is also important that we hold to our achievement in reducing the ratio of public debt to GDP. The Government inherited a ratio of 44 per cent. on assuming office, and my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced today that that will fall to 33 per cent. in the medium term. The combination of the golden rule and delivery on the ratio between public debt and GDP represent a substantial breakthrough and show that the Government's prudence has contributed to the strong record on inflation.

In the run-up to the Budget, many commentators and analysts urged fiscal tightening, as they were worried that the Budget would cause interest rates to rise. In fact, fiscal policy has been tight for some time—rightly, given the strength of the economy. Over the past four years—so before any of the measures announced today—fiscal tightening was equivalent to 5 per cent. of GDP. It was 0.9 per cent. in the past financial year alone. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor has ensured that that is all locked in, and he is right to have done so, as it will help us to continue to deliver comparatively low interest rates.

It is worth underlining the benefits that have accrued from granting the Bank of England operational independence. Since that independence was granted, to control the cycle of the economy, interest rates have had to move in a band of 225 basis points—between a low of 5 per cent. and a high of 7.25 per cent. That compares with an interest rate band of 1,025 basis points in the previous Parliament, under the different system. We are therefore able to control cycles in the economy with a far narrower movement in interests rates than previously. That is what we mean by economic stability, and it is good for business. It is much easier for businesses to operate when the movements of interest rates are so much smaller.

The Budget holds to the prudent fiscal line, while providing targeted tax cuts and increases in public spending. The hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Sir M. Spicer), who unfortunately is no longer in the Chamber, was wrong when he spoke of an explosion in public expenditure that was out of control. His speech told us more about his personal view of public spending, which is not one that I share. The truth is that public spending is projected to grow at 2.5 per cent. in real terms per annum.

That is exactly in line with the trend of growth in the economy. It is one of the results of the economic stability that the Government have brought about, and it enables us to lock in the growth in real-terms public spending as well as the fiscal surpluses without any risk to inflation. I therefore urge the Monetary Policy Committee to intensify its study of monetary mechanisms. I suspect that we can run the economy on low interest rates without any risk to inflation. However, I agree that no risks should be taken with inflation.

The progress that I have described helps us to tackle the other two structural problems in the economy that I mentioned earlier—under-investment and low productivity.

Under-investment has plagued the British economy for far too long. We have had a relatively low rate of capital formation, and there has been far too much short-termism in the economy. The boom/bust management of previous Governments has infected the whole of industry, so a stable macro-economic framework is essential for driving investment up and for overcoming our historical problems.

The Government have already done much to help. They have lowered corporation tax rates, and their support for research and development has been supplemented by £150 million in the Budget today. There have been changes to capital allowances, and capital gains tax on five-year investments has been cut to just 10 per cent. Corporate venturing has been supported in previous Budgets as well as in today's, as has the extension of share ownership schemes. In addition, my right hon. Friend the C ncellor today announced the lowest rates of capital gains tax and lower corporation tax.

The Chancellor also announced 100 per cent. capital allowances for IT investment. That very important measure will be widely welcomed by small businesses, of which Britain now has 100,000 more than in 1997. That reflects the fact that taxes for small businesses have been cut by 25 per cent. since then.

The measures that we take are designed to deliver increased levels of investment, and the evidence is that we are making progress. Business investment is up 16.5 per cent. in real terms since 1997. Investment now represents 14 per cent. of gross domestic product, compared with an historical average of just 10 per cent. Inward investment to the United Kingdom has risen by 45 per cent. since the election. It now totals £220 billion a year, and Britain is the leading location in the European Union for preferred inward investment.

The strength of sterling is an important issue for manufacturing companies and farmers in my constituency. However, it is important to understand that the problem

is not one of sterling strength so much as one of euro weakness. After all, sterling's value against the dollar and the Asian currencies is fairly level. All the strong inward investment in the past three years has taken place in the context of a weak euro and a relatively high pound. The fact is that manufacturing output is rising—it is up by 5 per cent. on the previous year—and manufacturing exports are rising also.

Mr. Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham): I am glad that the hon. Gentleman has come round, in terms of what is happening to the euro. Will he therefore condemn the Chancellor for today's fifth round of sales of our gold stocks at a time when the gold price is falling further and the largest chunk of that money is being reinvested in the euro, which the hon. Gentleman has just admitted is weakening?

Mr. Plaskitt: No, I will not. The hon. Gentleman, who serves with me on the Select Committee on the Treasury—

Mr. Loughton *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Plaskitt: I beg his pardon—he does not. He should nevertheless know that the Treasury Select Committee has had detailed breakdown figures from the Treasury on the gold sales, and the reinvestment in not just in the euro but in a basket of currencies. So far, the Treasury's move in switching the nature of our deposits has produced a net gain for the Exchequer. So the hon. Gentleman does not need to worry about the gold sales.

There is no getting away from the fact that it is hard going for manufacturing companies which predominantly export to the euro zone. I believe that the Government and the Bank of England are right not to attempt to lower sterling against the euro artificially—it would not work. Sterling's strength against the euro does, after all, help to hold down inflation. Far bigger risks of inflation would result from a sterling devaluation than from holding the current position.

The best bet, and the best way in which to help hard-pressed manufacturing companies in the west midlands and in my constituency, is to deliver the measures in this and previous Government Budgets to give direct assistance with investment. That is why, despite the export struggle that many in the manufacturing sector face, we see growing investment, growing output and—certainly in my constituency—growing employment. The combination makes it possible to live with the weak euro until the rate improves, as the European economies grow.

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): Is there not a more fundamental reason why the euro is weaker against sterling? The European labour markets are far more inflexible than ours. That is why the euro is weaker—it is a fundamental difference. In the past few years, the Government have gone in the same direction and made our labour markets less flexible, with the danger that our currency may also weaken in the future.

Mr. Plaskitt: I am interested in the line that I often hear from Conservative Members, who have spent years extolling the virtues of the free market. The euro is doing what I think an international currency is supposed to do in free currency markets. It has depreciated to enable the European economies to recover. The likelihood is that, as the European economies grow, which they are beginning to do, the euro will strengthen.

I turn to the third problem, which I cited at the outset and which has plagued our economy for so long. I refer to the productivity gap and skills shortages. There is a significant productivity gap between us and our competitors. It is part of the under-investment by both industry and Governments. Indeed, Governments have been responsible for historical under-investment in education and training. There is no more important investment than in the skills of the work force. The economy needs a strong skills base. Hence it is vital to raise education investment, across the board, as we are doing. It is vital to help reskilling across the board, as we are doing. The labour market needs to grow not only in quantity but in quality. It is therefore impressive that 800,000 more people are working than in 1997. It is also impressive that the quality of the work force is improving through greater opportunities to train and reskill.

Government measures across the board are helping us deliver on these objectives. The minimum wage, the working families tax credit, child support, the new deal—now extended—all help to make work pay and raise productivity. The lower marginal rates of tax and national insurance for those moving into work are also extremely important. We inherited from the previous Government a situation in which more than a million people moving off benefit into work faced an effective marginal tax rate of 70 per cent. That marginal tax rate is now virtually eradicated, and the further measures announced by my right hon. Friend today in extending the new deal to those over 50 are very welcome.

Finally, the headlines in tomorrow's newspapers will undoubtedly be grabbed by a few key features. They are, of course, excellent features. However, the real story of the Budget is that it makes it possible to have targeted tax cuts and increased public investment in vital areas without any short or long-term risk to the economy. It is possible to do those things only because of the platform of stability that we have created.

The real test of this Budget, as with any Budget, is whether it adds to the fundamental strengths of the economy and to that platform of stability. In my view it does, and that is why it should be commended to the House.

6.26 pm

Mr. William Thompson (West Tyrone): As someone from one of the minority parties, I perhaps feel able to look at the Budget more sympathetically and impartially than members of the two main Opposition parties.

What we have heard today is certainly very interesting. When the Chancellor of the Exchequer comes to the Dispatch Box, he paints a glorious picture of the economy. He tells us that we have never had it so good, and that it is going to get better. Then Conservative Members say that that is not true—it is all a con trick. I can perhaps be more impartial and see where the truth really lies.

From experience, I have discovered that many people believe that they are saving on tax when their income tax comes down. When many people hear today's news that the basic rate of income tax is to drop from 23 per cent.

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to 22 per cent, they will think, "My wage packet will be bigger in the months ahead." What they fail to recognise is that, when the Government reduce income tax, they generally take the money back through indirect taxation. That has been the pattern of all Governments, as well as the pattern of this Government. It has been acknowledged that the overall percentage of tax has been rising. Income tax may have gone down, but the total amount of taxation has gone up.

With the increases announced in today's Budget, many people will indeed be worse off. For example, someone who smokes will find that a packet of cigarettes is going up by 25p. I am not in favour of smoking. However, because of the continual increase in cigarette prices, the Exchequer is getting less money from taxing cigarettes than before. There is also the problem of smuggling. As the price of cigarettes goes up, more and more smuggling takes place. It is difficult to control or stop, with the result that the tax benefit will probably continue to go down.

We are told that 1 million pensioners will be 20p a week better off. What a paltry sum! A pensioner who buys one packet of cigarettes a week will lose that 20p immediately. If he drives a car, he will be much worse off, because every gallon of petrol will cost 8p more. When the reduction in income tax is seen against what will be taken back in indirect taxes, the country at large will probably be worse off.

Vehicle excise duty and road fuel duty cause tremendous problems in Northern Ireland. Diesel prices will increase, and, as the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) said, excise duties differ greatly between European Union countries. That is a particular problem for Northern Ireland, because the excise duty for a 40-tonne lorry is £1,278 in the Republic of Ireland and £5,750 in Northern Ireland. Many road hauliers cross the border to buy diesel, and many register in the Republic of Ireland to save considerably on excise duty. My constituency is adjacent to the border, and nearly every petrol pump for 20 miles on the United Kingdom side has been closed down because people cannot keep them going. Drivers cross the border to fill up. Inevitably, a tremendous amount of money—estimated at around £200 million—is being lost to the Exchequer. The Chancellor must consider whether any remedial action can be taken.

Northern Ireland's proportion of the consumption of petrol in the whole of Ireland is falling. It was 35.9 per cent. in 1994, and has dropped to 24.2 per cent. In the Republic of Ireland, it was 64.1 per cent. and is now 75.8 per cent. In 1995, diesel sold in Northern Ireland represented 27.7 per cent. of the whole of Ireland's consumption, but that fell in 1998 to 16.1 per cent., and has probably fallen further since. A lot of money is being lost to the Exchequer and remedial action is necessary.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): It might be argued that the same form of taxation should apply to the whole of the United Kingdom, yet the highlands and islands have been excused aviation taxes even though the same problems of transport to and from the mainland affect Northern Ireland.

Mr. Thompson: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point, which emphasises mine. I hope that those on the Government Front Bench will not just listen but do something.

Mr. Maclean: I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for West Tyrone (Mr. Thompson) will communicate his message to the BBC newsroom. Last week, a BBC programme waxed lyrical about the wonderful benefits of joining the single currency, giving the example of how much cheaper fuel was in the Republic of Ireland. The BBC newsroom put that down purely to the benefits of the single currency, but my hon. Friend could point out that fuel is cheaper in the Republic because the Irish Government levy less tax on it than the British Government do.

Mr. Thompson: I thank the right hon. Gentleman and concur with all that he says. Fuel is not taxed to the same extent in the Republic of Ireland as it is in the United Kingdom.

I welcome what the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border said about the strong pound. We have become accustomed to talking about the strong pound as if it were a crime or a sin. In fact, we should talk about the low euro: the pound has tracked the United States dollar over the year because of the nature of our economy and exports, and it would be disastrous for us to join the euro as that would endanger our exports to countries outside the eurozone.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer must know of the difficulties of the farming industry because of representations by the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on the need for money for farmers in desperate need. The Government could match, up to 50 per cent., agrimonetary compensation available under EU rules, both this year and next. The Chancellor has missed the opportunity to do that today. Our milk and beef farmers are suffering greatly and need compensation.

Although pig farmers have suffered more than anyone else, they are not covered by the European regime and would not be eligible for the compensation. The Chancellor may have been generous to other sections of the community, but he should have been as generous to pig farmers, who are desperate as they face bankruptcy. We sympathise with those who lose their jobs in the motor industry and others, but the Government should show the same sympathy for those who, through no fault of their own, are made desperate by the state of the pig industry. I regret that the Exchequer did not take its chance to help them today.

There are points to welcome in the Budget, particularly the additional money for education and books for primary and secondary schools. The education budget will rise by 8 per cent., and we welcome that. The trouble with increasing it, of course, is that we will have to keep increasing it. I hope that today's announcement will not be a one-off, but will continue.

We welcome increased health service spending. The NHS does a wonderful job, but it is facing a tremendous crisis. How best to organise and pay for it, given that the

demand is inexhaustible? There are more procedures and they cost more. There are more elderly people who need the health service. Furthermore, restrictions on the royal colleges add to the pressures on the NHS. We welcome the fact that there will be more money for the NHS, but we are also glad that there will be a review so that we can institute better procedures to run the service more efficiently and effectively for our people.

The Labour Government claim that they are doing well. Perhaps, with a little humility, they might realise that the previous Government left them a reasonably firm foundation on which to build. We have been through enough pain over the past few years; we should now be reaping the benefit that we paid for then.

6.41 pm

Ms Sally Keeble (Northampton, North): I appreciate the chance to speak in the debate.

The hon. Member for West Tyrone (Mr. Thompson) welcomed the improvements that are being made in health service spending. However, many of his other remarks—and many of the remarks of other Opposition speakers—made me wonder whether they had been listening to the same speech from the Chancellor as I had. And have they considered the same economic factors over the years as my colleagues and me?

There has been much discussion of the overall tax burden and of the fact that we made no commitments to increase taxes. However, I distinctly remember—as will my Labour colleagues—that one of the earliest pieces of legislation passed by the Government was that introducing the windfall tax. We campaigned openly on that tax; it was a key part of our election strategy. It was used exactly as we said it would be: to increase jobs, and for spending on schools and the health service. That was an open part of our commitment; it was probably the largest single tax take of this Parliament.

I listened with some astonishment as the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean), who is not in the Chamber at present, said that we were doing nothing about rural transport. I distinctly heard my right hon. Friend the Chancellor say that the Deputy Prime Minister would make a statement about a package of about £285 million for transport, which would include measures for rural buses. I did not have to look that up in my right hon. Friend's statement; I remember hearing it and thinking that it was a good thing. It will be welcomed by many Labour Members who represent rural constituencies.

Mr. Hayes: I know that the hon. Lady has a great interest in rural affairs, partly because of the time that she spent as a member of the Agriculture Committee. I hope that she will acknowledge that there was nothing specific in the Budget about an aid package for the countryside, and also nothing about agriculture. Furthermore, no earmarked figure for rural transport was given anywhere in the Red Book or in any of the accompanying documents. That £285 million is a global figure—all that rural transport received was a mention from the Chancellor.

Ms Keeble: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's comments. However, I was referring to comments made by his colleague the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border, who said that there was nothing for rural buses. There was: it was distinctly mentioned by the Chancellor.

I take the point that the hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes) made about agricultural measures; I shall deal with that matter later in my speech. If we are to repeat what the Chancellor said, however, we might at least do him the credit of doing so accurately, which the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border did not do.

Several hon. Members referred to attacks on family life through the abolition of the married couples allowance. However, the Conservatives seemed to have realised that the continuance of that allowance was an anomaly—I think that is how the shadow Chancellor described it. It is wrong to talk about supporting family life without providing support when it is needed—when people have children.

The Budget shows a real commitment to creating a dynamic economy and to maintaining high-quality public services. That is certainly what my constituents and the public want. We always thought that the Tories were committed to one side of that equation—the creation of a dynamic economy. However, the legacy that we were left suggested the opposite. Furthermore, when they were in government, the Tories failed to address one of the key factors—the need to deal with supply-side problems, especially the skills gap. That matter still needs to be tackled, and I am extremely pleased that the Budget begins to tackle it. The Conservatives learned nothing from their defeat in 1997 about the value that people attach to high-quality public services.

The Budget deals with the consequences of economic success. In my constituency, the challenge is no longer to bring the economy back from the brink of crisis—as it was to a certain extent in 1997—but to ensure that the economy can expand as it should over the coming decade. It is a measure of the Government's achievement that people in my constituency and elsewhere in Northamptonshire can look forward to a secure future.

During the general election campaign of 1997, unemployment was not an issue in Northampton, North, so I wondered whether the new deal would have an impact on my constituents. However, even during our short term in office, we have improved the situation. Through the new deal, we have been able to help some important sections of the community. Not only did the increased number of young people employed through the new deal produce a fall of 68 per cent. in youth unemployment, but women, who were for the first time given the opportunity to go out to work through the new deal for lone parents and through the child care tax credit, are £60 to £65 a week better off thanks to the Labour Government.

I draw the attention of the House to a small measure that helps women, although I am not surprised that neither the Chancellor nor other speakers have referred to it. As I read through the Red Book, thinking about what the Conservatives might come up with, my eyes lit on paragraph 5.112, which states:

> To make the tax system fairer for women, VAT on women's sanitary products will be cut from the standard rate of 17.5 per cent to a reduced rate of 5 per cent.

The right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border said that he was sure that various tax changes would be revealed over the coming weeks. That change is small—

[Ms Keeble]

it might seem trivial to the Opposition, and I understand why—but it is something for which women's groups and women's magazines have campaigned for years.

Mr. Ken Purchase (Wolverhampton, North–East): So did the Co-op.

Ms Keeble: Indeed. When I organised an event in my constituency so that girls from all the secondary schools could talk about what they thought the Government should do, that was the only point they mentioned—much to my surprise. They placed a high importance on it. I hope that the Chancellor is given credit for that farsighted support for women.

We have also ensured that work pays by taking steps to help families who, historically, have suffered from low wages. In my constituency and the surrounding area, about 2,700 families will be helped by the working families tax credit.

However, many large challenges continue to face the local economy. The Budget will help to address them. Last week, the east midlands agent for the Bank of England visited Northampton and met members of the local business community. It belied most people's impression of the Monetary Policy Committee to see one of the agents who provide the regular information on which interest rate decisions are made out and about, meeting all sectors of the business community. He met people from small and large manufacturing firms, as well as people from services industries and—for the benefit of the hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings—the farming community.

There was a sense of a dual economy; the service sector was buoyant, while some parts of the manufacturing sector were held in check by the strong pound, depending on where their exports went. The farming industry faced difficulties, but it was recognised that they would not be resolved by short-term fixes of financial aid. Its problems are very much deeper and more structural.

I am sure that many of the people who met the agent from the Bank of England will welcome the measures that are in the Budget. Those measures will encourage long-term investment and provide stable patterns for existing investment plans. They will encourage innovation, which is important if we are to develop businesses in the new sectors and encourage sound investment in new technology. Everyone in the meeting that I organised agreed on the fact that one of the biggest problems facing the local economy was the difficulty of recruiting skilled employees.

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): The hon. Lady said that agrimonetary compensation would be seen as a short-term fix and that bigger structural problems faced the industry. The common agricultural policy contains a mechanism for agrimonetary compensation which other countries use to help their agriculture. Does she not accept that, if the Government do not want to use that mechanism, they should not unilaterally opt out, but should reform the common agricultural policy across the European Union rather than penalising British farmers?

Ms Keeble: Substantial amounts of compensation have been provided under this Government, but we have to top that up ourselves—it is not free money that comes from Europe—as a result of agreements into which this Government and the previous Government entered. The package of measures available helps at the edges, but it does not deal with the deep structural problems of agriculture. I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman about the need to reform the common agricultural policy, and the Government have led the way in getting agreements through Europe. Had it not been for this Government, I suspect that we would have achieved an even worse deal on CAP reform. I was about to discuss the skills gap. Agriculture, even in rural areas such as South Holland and The Deepings and parts of Northamptonshire, is a small sector of the economy, and the skills gap is particularly important for new and growing sectors. That gap puts pressure on what should be an expanding and thriving national economy.

Mr. Hayes: The hon. Lady is right in terms of the percentage of the population employed in agriculture, although I would point out to her that the number employed in that sector in South Holland and The Deepings is well above the national average. She is wrong, however, in the sense that agriculture is pivotal to many other related industries. In my constituency, as in many others, the food and food-related industries are based on our having a strong agricultural economy.

Ms Keeble: Agriculture is important in many ways other than in employment and financial terms. It is important to the food industry, to the environment and to leisure and recreational activities. The Government have shown their support for those aspects of agriculture, not least in terms of the importance attached to access to the countryside and the need for proper land management. However, the Conservative party opposed the Bill on those issues when it came before the House yesterday.

The skills gap is a problem nationally. In Northamptonshire, the A-level pass rate in schools is below that for comparable counties and, at almost all other stages, achievements in schools in Northampton are the lowest in the county. That is a source of great concern to me. That means that the extra money in the Budget that is earmarked for schools will not just meet some public service pressures, but will deal with pressing economic pressures.

The extra money for the health service will relieve some of the biggest pressure points in that service. Conservative Members have scoffed at what that money will mean but, in practical terms, it will mean that my health authority will be able to makes plans for winter fuel with some certainty. On the scale announced, the money could also provide extra intensive therapy unit and high dependency beds that will make it possible for heart surgery to be carried out in a more planned way.

Most important of all, that money means that it will be possible to provide the extra services that are needed to keep old people out of hospital. It is a disgrace that many old people in my constituency and elsewhere see their own homes for the last time from the back of an ambulance as they are taken to hospital. From there, they go to nursing homes. If we are serious about providing high-quality health care for old people, we must consider developing the new services that can support them in their own homes and give them much more dignified care if they suffer from illness.

The Budget and in particular the Tories' response to it show up weaknesses in Tory thinking and policies. That point will be strongly echoed by people outside the House. Sometimes, Tories say that they welcome extra health spending, but sometimes—and we have heard this today—they describe it as taxation by stealth. They must come clean about what they want. Do they want improvements to the health service, and are they, therefore, prepared to support the tax and spending programmes that are needed to achieve that?

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): I do not know whether the hon. Lady heard the speech given by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition, but he made it perfectly clear that we welcome the increased spending on health. That does not imply accepting tax increases, because we are talking about a heap of other spending that she has not mentioned.

Ms Keeble: The hon. Gentleman proves my point. When one talks about increased spending on the national health service, one must explain to the public how that increase will be achieved. I heard most of the speech of the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague). It was extremely amusing, but it did not deal with any of the issues that face my constituents and are of major concern to them.

The Conservatives have now welcomed the minimum wage, but they have not accepted the other side of the equation—the working families tax credit, which will ensure that families have not just the minimum wage but a decent living wage. Conservatives have rejected virtually all our measures to combat child poverty, but they talk to us about the moral duty of Government to cut taxes.

Conservative Members have not shown any understanding of the measures that this Government have taken to help women. I understand from today's announcement that women on maternity pay will be able to receive the working families tax credit, and that is a substantial benefit to women who wonder what they will do when their maternity pay tapers off and fear that they will have to return to work because they cannot afford to live on statutory maternity pay. I am pleased about that provision, but the Opposition do not seem to understand such measures.

Conservative Members do not seem to be prepared to admit that they still believe in a minimalist role for Government and that the Government's purpose is to create the right conditions for some sections of the economy, such as the south-east service sector, but not for all. Everything else will be left to trickle down. After 18 years of Conservative Government, the public know that trickle-down does not work: they want the much more responsible approach that this Government are showing. They want a dynamic economy and public services. That is why the sense of social justice shown by the Government and, in particular, by the Budget will be so important and will resonate so well with the public.

The public will enthusiastically support policies that progressively lift out of poverty the 4.4 million children whom the Tories left in poverty when they left office. The public will support the short-term measures for pensioners—and see them for the real gains that they are—and long-term restructuring.

The Tories have shown no understanding whatever of what it means to bring up a family in middle England when one earns only £12,000 or £13,000 a year. The public will fully support the Government's strength of commitment, as shown in the Budget, to provide a stable economy so that families can plan securely for the future; to provide low interest rates so that people can pay their mortgage; and to provide incentives for small business men to enable them to build up their business and plan for the future so that they can be part of a growing, dynamic economy.

The public will respond extremely well to the Government's commitment, which is particularly evident in this Budget, to high-quality public services, which support people at every stage of their family life, in school, in hospital and, through their pension, in retirement. In the Budget, the Government have demonstrated their commitment to building a strong, dynamic economy and to supporting the highest-quality public services, and it will be welcomed by the country at large.

7.1 pm

Mr. Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West): I congratulate the hon. Member for Northampton, North (Ms Keeble) on being the first hon. Member to mention measure 5.112, which is the £35 million a year tax relief on sanitary products. Sanitary towels and tampons are significant. I have calculated that people will save about £3.30 a year because there will be a 10 per cent. drop in price as a consequence of the much greater drop in VAT.

That measure is the result of a successful campaign over many years, and it is right that the Chancellor has acknowledged that campaign. It would have been slightly more impressive if he had not tucked away the press notice on that measure right at the back of the bundle, because many people will have spent some time trying to find it.

It is curious that in No. 19 of the notes for editors in press notice HMT/DETR 1 we hear about 44-tonne lorries being approved for use in this country. That proves my old rule: "Read the notes for editors and you will find the interesting points that the Minister doesn't want to say in public." I shall [illegible]are the House the greatest excitement, which is in example 3 in the annexe to Inland Revenue press notice BN2A; it is probably indescribable, and I am not surprised that the Chancellor did not mention it in his speech.

Page 176 of what is commonly referred to as the Red Book—not that it has been red for some years—details the forecast issues and risks. There is an interesting overall question about what has happened and what will happen to household disposable incomes, household spending and the savings ratio. What I am about to say is qualified by the fact that we do not know what will be the impact of stakeholder pensions. The forecasts suggest that the cost of stakeholder pensions to the public revenues will be about £650 million a year, and that implies a fair amount of extra saving for retirement, which will be welcome.

The Treasury, looking back at the last year and forward at the next two or three years, has rightly said that household incomes grew more slowly than expected, but household spending rose faster than expected, and that is the explanation for the savings ratio dropping from about 10 per cent. to about 5 per cent. Projections show that the

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savings ratio may increase to 6 per cent., but that is a vulnerable figure. If we had continued to have a savings ratio of about 10 per cent., that would have had a greater impact on people's retirement incomes. We need to watch those figures.

We need to be aware also that the way in which the Chancellor dealt with the alterations to self-assessment taxpaying led to a significant increase in the amount of tax paid by many people during the transition period, and that increase is now slowing down. Such hiccups tend to be ignored by the commentators, because they require a reading of the Budget 2000 book, rather than simply reading the press notices, the Chancellor's speech or these debates.

When we are discussing health we always praise the people who work in the health service—in hospitals, in the community and in GPs' surgeries—and in praising the Chancellor's delivery of his speech, let alone the content, we ought to acknowledge the efforts of people not only in the Treasury and the Revenue, but throughout Whitehall. It is quite an achievement to get the product out on the day that the Chancellor makes his speech, so I pay tribute to those people.

I move on to measures that I wish had been in the Budget. I have not yet noticed the Government facing up to the problem of annuities. If there is to be a transformation in the Government's repayment of debt and we will still require people to turn their personal pension pot into an annuity, the reduction in the amount of available Government debt that will match the annuity payments will mean that the returns on annuities will drop. Unless there has been a consultation exercise or taskforce that I have not noticed, the Government should be far more open and consult about how to deal with that. There has been independent sector work on the matter.

I have many constituents who are above retirement age. Many of them have private pension pots and have put off turning them into annuities on the assumption—which I hope is correct—that the Government will take action. It is wrong to require people to wipe out capital, even though it has been built up tax free, on a rate of return that is lower than they get from many other forms of investment that do not wipe out their capital. That is not only anomalous but unacceptable. Will Ministers find a way to discuss that problem out into the open and find a solution within the next 18 months to two years? The solution may be a transitional set of changes, but one is required.

I move on to another issue that affects retired people. In my constituency, 45 per cent. of people are above retirement age, and these issues matter to them. Married couples in which neither partner will be over 65 by the end of the tax year will lose an estimated £500 a year because their birthdays are in the wrong month. On the type of calculation used by the Government, that will mean a loss of £5,000 over 10 years—because of a birthday. Frankly, that is a bad decision by the Government, and it is wrong that it was endorsed by Parliament in previous Budgets.

I hope that the Government will hear my plea and reverse that decision. If, for some reason, they have to eliminate the married pensioners tax allowance, they should do so by reducing it by 10 per cent. a year over several years, so that it is not a cliff-edge change. There is no justification for that sudden change. It may require a reversal of policy by the Government and may look to outsiders as though they are admitting that they have made a mistake, but I am asking for fairness.

I hope that if the Conservatives table an amendment on that, the Government will take it seriously, and I hope that it can be debated on the Floor of the House, rather in the Committee upstairs, because the issue affects people in every constituency. That is the only example that I have come across of a cliff-edge change, and I have gone back through Budget changes in most of the 24 years that I have served in the House.

Many other issues are of interest to my constituents, but it would not be right to deal with too many of them. One that matters to Worthing, West, which is a seaside constituency, is the change in Customs and Excise press notice 1, which abolishes betting duty on amusement machines with prizes, where the stake is 10p or less. That saving of £645 a year, or £450 a year in non-profit clubs, will be welcome. It is not desperately important to overall finances, but it will be a significant advantage to people who provide low-cost, low-return entertainment in Worthing and elsewhere. I say that although I have not had a major contribution from Connaught Leisure in my constituency. However, its owner worked with me in Battersea funfair, back when I was in my teens and trying to fund my education, or at least my debts.

I move on to energy saving and home security, on which VAT is coming down to 5 per cent. There is an ambiguity in Customs and Excise press notice 6. The VAT reduction is not applicable to DIY installation. It is not clear whether that applies only to home security devices or to energy saving materials as well. I do not expect that to be clarified today, but perhaps we could have an answer later. The notes to editors do not make the position clear, but it would be of interest to the trade press and those who do DIY work.

Inland Revenue press notice 8 deals with the installation of new boilers and radiators in social housing owned by councils or registered social landowners, where there is provision for leased boilers and radiators. To many people, this may sound trivial, but if tenants buy homes from their registered social landlord or council that contain radiators and boilers leased from other companies, will that lead to a conveyancing nightmare?

The fact that the boilers and radiators are leased presumably does not require them to be taken out if the house changes ownership. This could be a matter of great importance to people who want to buy the home in which they have been living, rather than being forced to move elsewhere because they cannot afford the lawyers to work out the complications involved.

On charities, I do not remember in which year I first suggested that the Treasury, or rather the Inland Revenue, ought to recognise that if money is given to charities other than through the Charities Aid Foundation, Gift Aid or Give As You Earn, it comes in the main from people who have taxable income or from people below the taxable threshold. Rather like the old system of MIRAS—mortgage interest relief at source—which eventually imputed to all payments of mortgage interest the notion that it came from taxed income or from income below the tax threshold, so that the tax relief could come back to

everyone, it would be far simpler if donations to charities were presumed to come from taxed income or from income below the tax threshold.

The only accounting for such donations should relate to those paying the higher rates of tax. That is roughly the case with earnings from dividends and savings, where the tax credit applies to the ordinary rate of tax, and only the higher rate requires a complicated paper transaction. Getting rid of paper matters.

My last point, as I do not want to prevent others from speaking, concerns small employers and small employees—not necessarily in size, but in terms of work. I do not think that the situation has changed from the time 13 or 14 years ago when I was on a ministerial group looking into the reduction of bureaucracy. Suppose I employed someone on relatively low earnings—say, a part-timer for household assistance of one kind or another—and I wanted to pay that person a certain amount of money after tax. If I wanted the person to have £120 a week, there ought to be a simple system whereby I could sign a single sheet of paper, instead of dealing with two offices. Obviously, amalgamating tax and national insurance helps, but the last time that I raised the issue, there were at least two offices involved and the guides were extremely complicated.

Up to a certain amount of money, and for one or two employees, if people want to be straight and want their employee to be straight, it would be a good idea to work out a rough and ready system that produces justice and brings people into the white economy, rather than having them not provide employment or go off the books because the alternative is too complicated. Being open and simple worked if one had a single lodger in one's home up to a certain limit, and the same ought to apply to such simple employment.

7.14 pm

Mr. Ken Purchase (Wolverhampton, North–East): The Budget will be widely welcomed throughout Britain. It has many good features, which will improve the standard and quality of life for thousands, if not millions, of people throughout the coming years as the improvements announced by the Chancellor are introduced.

In the context of my constituency, I welcome the extension of the new deal to older workers. It has been a tremendous success in the case of younger workers, halving the rate of youth unemployment and halving long-term unemployment, so three cheers, or perhaps even four, for the extension of the new deal to older workers today.

There is much else that is good for Wolverhampton, but I should begin by saying that I am sponsored by the Co-operative party, which paid almost a quarter of my election expenses at the last general election. I am proud to be a member of the Co-operative party, but as I intend to speak on the business measures, it is right that I remind the House again of my background in the Co-operative movement.

The Budget recognises that prudence is a good thing, but that in the present financial situation, there is room for improvements in life in Britain, in the public services, in business and for individuals. That must be welcomed, and I am sure that it will be welcomed by people who understand such matters and by ordinary men and women. When the press releases are fully analysed, no doubt wrinkles will be ironed out and parts will unravel, but we will have a better understanding of the impact of the Budget.

On the business measures, I especially welcome the capital expenditure reliefs. Let me illustrate that. It is an important fact of British economic life, particularly in manufacturing, that although we show good returns on capital employed, we show poor returns on the use of our people. Why is that? It is not hard to find out. First, there has been massive underinvestment over decades, so that a great deal of machinery and other kit in our companies is very old indeed. I have worked in companies where some of the machinery must have been dragged up off the North sea bed following not the second, but the first world war.

That is how rusty, out of date and hopeless in competitive terms some of the plant and machinery is, and it is still being used in Britain today. No wonder we can say that the return on capital employed shows a good ratio, compared with many of our continental competitors. However, the return on labour is poor. Our unit costs are high and productivity gains have usually been made at the expense of jobs, so that there are fewer people doing more work. We have not got to grips with the idea of constant improvement to our methods and way of working, and the investments needed.

I welcome any encouragement, particularly to smaller companies, that will allow them to invest, knowing that remission has been granted on capital investment sums.

The corporation tax measures mean that conditions in Britain are now the best in Europe, if not among the best in the world. It can no longer be argued that Government overtax and overburden the corporate sector. Far from that, a case could be made in other circumstances for an increase in corporate rates of tax. At this stage, however, the Chancellor is right to stay on course and ensure that investment opportunities are at the top of the agenda. One way of doing that is to keep corporate taxes relatively low.

However, I hope that the Chancellor will rethink the rate at which he taxes co-operative enterprises. At the moment, the co-operative sector pays the standard rate of corporation tax but, given the structure and nature of co-operative enterprises, it would be fairer and more equitable if they were to pay the small firms rate. I remind those who want to be reminded that, before the 1997 general election, we considered the restoration of the lower rate of corporation tax for co-operative ventures. I am not talking simply about the big co-ops; the UK has a growing co-operative sector which needs, among others, tax incentives. Community facilities, which had been lost over many years, are now being offered by many co-ops which are helping to revitalise the communities in which they operate.

The banking reforms proposed by the Chancellor are most welcome. Today's Cruickshank report shows that the banks take in tariffs £4 billion to £6 billion more than is necessary to run their businesses effectively. I am reminded of the Woody Guthrie story that, when being questioned by the House Committee on Un-American Activities about capitalism and banking generally, he replied, immortally, that he had been robbed many more times by a man with a fountain pen than he ever had by a man with a six-gun. That is exactly how I feel. I have dealt with banks for many years, both in business and

[Mr. Ken Purchase]

personally, and there is no question but that bank charges need reforming. The Chancellor has opened the curtains on that and we should put much effort into it.

Hats will be thrown in the air at the amount of money that is to be given to schools, which is well deserved and necessary. However, I sound a cautionary note. Education committees, which were formerly responsible for the distribution of education grant and other moneys, now have little control over what is happening in schools. Many authorities now hold less than 5 per cent. for central purposes, and that is a step too far. Inequalities between schools can be redressed, not by a simple formula, but only by an education committee taking an overview and determining where money would be best spent to obtain the best return on that scarce resource.

As I say, at schools throughout Britain hats will be thrown in the air at the generous and welcome amount of money that they are to be given, but we should be cautious and recognise that education committees—there will always be poor ones, but for 150 years they have done an excellent job overall—have local knowledge that is often far superior to anything that exists in Whitehall. The money is welcome, and on this occasion the distribution is fine, but let us not overlook the fact that local knowledge, through our education committees, is extremely important.

The employment measures aimed at getting workers into jobs are also welcome, and that is especially true in the west midlands where, in the past few weeks, we have been "Rovered", which is not a pleasant sensation. We face in the region of 50,000 job losses. The Secretary for State of Trade and Industry has already announced that between £120 million and £130 million, which would otherwise have gone into the black hole of BMW, will now be rescued and used for regeneration in the west midlands, but that is not enough. Despite the apologies that we have been given for having been told less than the truth about Rover, we still do not know the full story, but we fear that, in the weeks, months and years to come there will be more unemployment and more to think and worry about. Those employment measures need to be built upon. They are an insignificant start when set against the task that faces us.

Before the collapse of Rover, workers at the European headquarters of Goodyear in my constituency were on 21 days' notice of short-time working, which, it is rumoured, may be as little as half-time working. That will affect another 4,000 workers, and the knock-on effect of that, not just in Wolverhampton but throughout the region, will mean the loss of many more thousands of jobs.

Therefore, in welcoming the employment measures, I have to tell the Chancellor that much more is needed. The £500 million in loans to BAe in the north-west and elsewhere is exceedingly welcome, and will help the west midlands, through its aerospace industries, but the blow to our automobile industry is most serious and cannot be exaggerated. The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry is working exceedingly hard on these issues, but I hope that he will seek a solution not only within our own nation, but Europe-wide. This may be the trigger for a Europe-wide auto industry, developing a world-beating science and technology.

The west midlands has a conglomeration of universities, all with extensive contacts with the auto industry. If we diminish much further in the west midlands an already impoverished skills base by taking away the work in the universities that filters out into our communities and educates and informs the rest of the skills base in the region, we shall be heading for serious and deep trouble, which, if left unattended, will be irreparable, at least in the medium term. That is a major problem. We welcome today's employment measures, but much more is required.

Workers in the west midlands are often thought to be highly skilled and able to move around between jobs. During the past 15 years or so, far from being inflexible, workers in places such as Goodyear and Rover have developed flexible working arrangements. But in process work, such as that at Rover and Goodyear, skills are specific and non-transferable, and we do not have the skills base that we had 40 years ago when I was an engineering apprentice. I worked with skilled people who could pass on skills that are now long forgotten but which are still relevant and cannot be replaced by machinery, equipment and kit, however high-tech it might be. People working in the west midlands require certain skills and mathematical knowledge that are being lost, and retraining will be particularly important.

Mr. David Taylor (North–West Leicestershire): Does my hon. Friend agree that, even in the so-called bleak years of the midlands manufacturing industry, when industrial relations were certainly a contributory factor to its demise, there was at least an equivalent contribution from poor management and low levels of investment, and at least the Government and this Budget are starting to tackle the latter?

Mr. Purchase: My hon. Friend makes a good point. I worked for the truck and bus division of British Leyland, and the management there did not exactly cover itself with glory. My abiding memory is of building the chassis of trucks and buses. Management were confident that people all over the world would buy them and that no one would make them except us. It was a miracle; we survived for about 20 years believing that, before everybody overtook us.

It is hard to describe the track we worked on as a track because when the lads had got so far with a bus or a truck, they would say, "We'll have a tea break now, but somebody had better move the track along." It was not a moving track; someone had to wind the damn thing. We worked with that sort of kit in the mid-1970s. Management were amazed when suddenly we could not sell buses and trucks. Why were the buses in Latin America, the sub-continent of India and the far east suddenly gleaming and new when we no longer had the technology or the investment? We had genuinely lost the plot. As my hon. Friend said, much of that was due to lack of management drive, perception and vision.

Matters have improved, but we have deskilled massively. Part of the answer is education, education, education. However, a new co-operation and a new vision is also required to replace current activities at Rover and elsewhere.

My next point is not frivolous. Announcements were made about maternity pay and services today. They are most welcome. We should do as much as we can for

women who have babies and return to work. However, the Chancellor made no mention of provision for paternity pay. I am worried that he might expect companies to make such payments for time off. The bad news is that, in my constituency, across the west midlands and no doubt in other constituencies, there are innumerable companies that have perhaps six or 20 workers, half of whom are young men with the engine running. They are bound to have more and more babies.

Imagine a press shop where a skilled fitter, a press setter and four or five operators work. Two of the lads announce, "Well, the missus is pregnant and I'm off for this month." That means that the other five will be idle. Small companies cannot sustain the loss of one or two young men for three, four and five weeks at a time. Neither is it possible for the state to pay. When we consider proper provisions for maternity pay, we should also consider the effects on small companies whose workers are predominantly male, where key workers such as tool setters may be off for a month. That will hurt, and we must be careful.

The Budget will be welcomed in the west midlands. We have considerable difficulties and I hope that the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry will be able to tackle them in the coming days. Nevertheless, the Budget will be widely welcomed.

7.34 pm

Mr. Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham): The Budget was heralded in many of the leaks to which we have become accustomed as a Budget that had something for everyone. Taken with the many announcements that were made before today, there was something for everyone.

I represent the part of Worthing that my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing, West (Mr. Bottomley) does not. We do not have young men with their engines running, as the hon. Member for Wolverhampton, North-East (Mr. Purchase) put it, so much as older pensioners who are having their engines overhauled. As my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing, West said, those people, especially those whose birthdays happened to fall from 5 April 1945 onwards, stand to lose £500 a year through the abolition of the married couples allowance. I strongly endorse my hon. Friend's suggestion that if the married couples allowance has to be abolished, the changes should be phased. That would be preferable to the current cliff-edge arrangement.

The abolition of mortgage interest tax relief at source constituted another aspect of the something-for-everyone Budget that was trailed. There is something for 10.5 million mortgage payers in this country—the loss of tax relief on their mortgages.

The Budget contains something for everyone who happens to work in or own a business: the energy tax. They will face additional burdens that will make manufacturing businesses in particular uncompetitive, especially when compared with other businesses overseas. There is much more in the Budget for those who have a pension fund—the continuing raid on pensions that the Government started a couple of years ago.

The Budget was also described as a Budget for hard-working families. However, hard-working families will be £600 worse off through additional taxes. They will have to work harder and longer to stand still because of this and previous Budgets.

The Chancellor took a dismal rearguard action to defend the mantra, which we hear so often from the Dispatch Box, that the tax burden is falling. We all know that that is not true. At last, the Prime Minister's press secretary has admitted that the tax burden has been rising and will continue to increase during this Parliament.

Ms Keeble: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the figures that he cites appeared in last year's Red Book and that they refer to tax take as a percentage of gross domestic product? When people talk about tax, they usually mean the amount of money that they pay in tax and the benefits that they gain.

Mr. Loughton: There is no point in trying to fudge the issue again; the cat is out of the bag. The Prime Minister's press secretary has admitted that the amount of tax taken as a percentage of GDP has been increasing and will continue to do so. It was 35.3 per cent. when the previous Government left office, it is currently more than 37.5 per cent. and it will be more than 37 per cent. at the end of the Government's five-year term of office if they stay for the whole term. Yet the Prime Minister said, "We are cutting taxes" and also that the Government had no plans to increase tax. The hon. Member for Northampton, North (Ms Keeble) should throw in the towel, because the tax burden is increasing. Even after the Budget, it will continue to increase.

It is difficult to get to the bottom of any Government figures. The chief economist of the Confederation of British Industry recently said:

> It has become extremely difficult to analyse the Red Book . . . The document is now far too political and this can conceal what the numbers are really saying . . . The book's become unreadable. The thing might as well be published by Millbank Tower.

Mr. Andrew Love (Edmonton): Opposition Members have a theme. I have also read the Red Book, and chart C3 on page 204 shows that in the early 1980s, at the height of Thatcherism, the tax to GDP ratio was 2 per cent. or 3 per cent. higher than it is now. If it was right for the previous Government to raise taxes in a recession, why are we tarred with the brush of doing something unusual?

Mr. Loughton: The hon. Gentleman is being even more selective than the Chancellor. He knows that the tax take fell in all but one Parliament under the Conservative Government. Every year under this Government, the tax take has increased. It is predicted that that will continue. Labour Members should stop trying to re-fudge the figures on which the Front Bench has at last come clean.

I want to move on to some of the announcements that the Chancellor made today, because there was a lot of recycling. It is favoured by the Environmental Audit Committee, of which I am a member and a great fan. The Government are exceedingly good at recycling—not waste, but spending announcements that they have made before and continue to make time and again. We welcome the announcements on increased spending on health and schools—my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition made that absolutely clear—but nobody in my constituency and nobody out there in the real world believes that public services are getting better.

Nobody believes that the health service is delivering a better service, and we are waking up to the fact that the number of people who have to wait to get on waiting

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lists has doubled. My constituency has the longest waiting times in the country for the oldest population in the country and nobody believes that waiting times are coming down, because they are not.

Nobody believes that class sizes in most schools are coming down, because they are not. In most cases in my constituency, successful schools are bursting at the seams and people are trying to get their children in. Class sizes are going up. Nobody believes that the service offered by the police force, in very difficult circumstances, is getting better when police numbers are coming down and, for the first time in the past six years, the crime rate, particularly for serious crime, is going up.

Nobody believes that the Chancellor is improving services. People are saying, "Look, we've paid all this extra tax and we're waking up to the fact that the Government are masters of stealth taxes." Over this Parliament, about £40 billion in extra tax will be taken by the Government. What have they done with it? We are told time and again that we need to raise taxes to plough them back into public services, but we are not seeing the successful effect of that money going into them. This is a traditional Labour Budget—a "9p up, 1p down" Budget that taxes yet more and delivers less.

I want to deal with two main themes: capital taxes and the environment. Stamp duty has not been mentioned by Labour Members and received only a glancing mention from the Chancellor, but stamp duty on property has gone up for the third time. It will be 3 per cent. for properties costing more than £250,000 and 4 per cent. for properties costing more than £500,000.

Ms Keeble: Stamp duty on properties costing under £250,000 will stay the same and, since becoming a Member of Parliament, I have seen only one property in my constituency advertised at more than £250,000. The measure will not hurt everybody.

Mr. Loughton: I did not suggest that it will hurt everybody, but many properties in the south-east and London cost more than £250,000 and the picture there is very different. Beyond that, there is growing evidence that stamp duty acts as a serious disincentive to moving house, particularly for those who move into smaller houses in later years or in retirement. The housing shortage logjam in the south-east is being exacerbated and, although the tax is easy to collect and brings in more than £2 billion, it is hurting the housing situation in my part of the country in particular.

Mr. Hayes: Is not the hon. Member for Northampton, North (Ms Keeble) also ignoring the fact that the change will have an impact on commercial properties? The knock-on effect in that sector will be devastating. She may argue that she has seen no houses in her constituency worth more than £250,000, but I am sure that businesses there will understand that knock-on effect and be as disappointed as we are.

Mr. Loughton: That is absolutely right. My hon. Friend's point is also pertinent because more than 75 per cent. of the properties attracting increased stamp duty are business properties.

Mr. Love: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Loughton: In a moment. I want to make progress, but I am giving way an awful lot.

We are led to believe that one of the intentions behind the measure is to curtail overheating in the property sector, but its effect will be relatively small because most properties are business properties.

Mr. Love *rose—*

Mr. Loughton: I shall give way once more, then I must make progress.

Mr. Love: I thank the hon. Gentleman for being so generous with his time. Does he accept that, according to the press statement that has been released, only 5 per cent. of residential properties are affected by the increase?

Mr. Loughton: I have said that most of the properties are business properties and the hon. Gentleman will find that the figure of 5 per cent. of residential properties, certainly in the south-east, is out of date, given what has happened in the property market. Stamp duty is an easy target. The tax is easy to collect, but its implications go far beyond what the Chancellor led us to believe, and it is biased against the south-east of England in particular.

Mr. Chaytor: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Loughton: I said that I had given way for the last time, but I shall do so again.

Mr. Chaytor: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman. Does not he accept that the value of a residential property owned by an elderly person who wants to move will have increased dramatically as a result of house price inflation in recent years? That increase represents a windfall and it is therefore perfectly reasonable to accept a marginal increase in stamp duty to acknowledge that windfall, which has not been available to people in other regions of the country. Does not he accept that people moving house will be able to afford such a mortgage only if their earnings are at that level? The measure is not a tax that will impact on people with ordinary earnings and I find it staggering that he defends people whose income is very high indeed as against the marginal increase in stamp duty.

Mr. Loughton: I am grateful for that lengthy intervention, but the hon. Gentleman is suggesting that people should forfeit the gain that they have made in the property market not through speculating, but by staying in a family home, perhaps for many years. People selling such houses are subject to 40 per cent. capital gains tax because no changes were made to it as it affects individuals. All the stuff and guff was targeted at companies, but he will have to take my word for it—the measure is a serious cause of a logjam in property markets, in the south-east of England in particular.

The second part of the point about stamp duty relates to stamp duty on equities, which was not mentioned in the Budget. There were expectations, and it might have been more reasonable if the increases in stamp duty on property were recycled into reducing or even abolishing that on equities. That is now a serious problem. The Government make an awful lot of money out of charging stamp duty at 0.5 per cent. on equities and the amount that that brings in has trebled since 1994, partly on the back of the rising stock market. The United Kingdom

charges the highest stamp duty rate of all the major world markets and we are glaringly uncompetitive. The rate is 0.3 per cent. in France, one three-hundredth of 1 per cent. in the United States and zero in Japan and Germany. Companies are portable, listings are available on markets around the world—particularly Nasdaq, which can be based anywhere—and 100 of Europe's top 300 stocks are listed in London, but can be traded on other exchanges. We stand to lose an enormous amount of revenue.

Market trading is versatile and can happen anywhere. It brings in some £3 billion, but if the Government do not address this problem seriously, that £3 billion, or a large part of it, could disappear overnight. Stamp duty, as an expert has said, is

an anachronism that is inconsistent with UK ambitions to remain a premier financial centre.

I ask the Government to re-examine the stamp duty problem and leaving it at 0.5 per cent. will not do.

The Chancellor mentioned the Cruickshank report. I have raised concerns about some of the practices that banks have been up to. The way to ensure that banks open up to fairer competition is to promote competition, which is why, during the last year's progress on the Financial Services and Markets Bill, Conservative Members suggested time and again that the Bill should make it not just a principle but an objective for the FSA to promote competition. Their proposal was rejected, and I think the Government may come to rue the day in the light of the Cruickshank report.

The Chancellor said something about simplifying capital gains tax, but the Budget does nothing of the sort. There are some 54 different rates of income tax and capital gains tax. As the Institute of Chartered Accountants has said, the huge number of alterations to the tax regime in recent years has made life increasingly difficult for taxpayers. None of the changes made today struck me as simplifying the tax system, let alone the capital gains tax system. The system is enormously complicated and exceedingly cumbersome, and it is costly for private individuals in particular to keep track of their capital gains. Those people were offered no hope and no improvement today.

As I said earlier, all mentions of capital gains were targeted on business start-ups. This was a Budget for internet millionaires. We say good luck to them, but what about all the individuals who were given nothing in terms of capital gains tax?

Let me now deal with the related subject of savings. Conservative Members have referred to serious problems with the savings ratio. The figure has been revised down from that of last year's Red Book. When the Government came to power, the savings ratio was 10.6 per cent. Last year, it was 5.75 per cent., and in this year's Red Book it is down to 5.5 per cent. The savings ratio has virtually halved over the last three years, and that is storing up problems for the future.

Perhaps it is no wonder that the Chancellor, in a generous gesture, has extended the £7,000 limit on ISAs for a second year. I hope that that move constitutes an admission that the savings ratio is causing serious concern and that the Government should take action to promote savings.

Ms Keeble: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Loughton: I want to make progress. I have already taken time in responding to interventions, and I do not want to exclude other speakers.

The Budget does nothing to deal with the fact that nearly 25 million adults have less than £500 in savings. Moreover, it takes no account of the fact that two thirds of the population buy lottery tickets each week. The whole savings culture has gone wrong under the present Government. They had another opportunity to address many of the anomalies and complications involved in the PEP and ISA system. There are many complications in the ISA system: people have been taking up maxi and mini ISAs, and have been given some sort of amnesty. The Government had a golden opportunity to merge PEPs and ISAs and to streamline the whole system. We were promised that two years ago. When I mentioned it in the Standing Committee considering the Finance Bill, I was told that the Government wanted ISAs to run for a year before they considered any streamlining, but a year has passed, and there is no mention of this in the Budget statement.

Ms Keeble: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Loughton: I will, for the last time.

Ms Keeble: I thank the hon. Gentleman for being so patient.

According to the M & G Great Britain savings survey, which was published this month—the consumer research was done last month—9 per cent. of the population held an ISA, while 10 per cent. held a TESSA and 10 per cent. had a PEP. It must be borne in mind that many people will have had both PEPs and TESSAs. That constitutes a resounding success for ISAs: a couple of months ago, at the end of the first year, 9 per cent. of the population already had one. I emphasise that the survey was independent.

Mr. Loughton: We could continue this discussion in another debate. I know that figures from the M & G survey, and other surveys, show that the number of people who have taken out ISAs has not yet equalled the number of people who have taken out PEPs.

I want to say something about the environment. Last year we were promised 22 environmental tax areas; we were also promised hypothecation of environmental taxes for the first time. We were promised that by a Government who claimed that they would put the environment at the heart of decision making. I welcome parts of that, and I have looked carefully through all the press releases; but, as so often happens with a Chancellor who wants us to believe that black is white, green becomes brown on closer inspection.

The Chancellor has tinkered with vehicle excise duty on cars—the qualification is to go up from 1,100 cc to 1,200 cc. That will have very little impact on emissions. The Chancellor has recycled his announcement about four bands for company cars in the future. We have been told

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about a possible relief for stamp duty on new brownfield developments. It is nothing to do with reducing VAT on brownfield developments, which we were promised. Indeed, the Deputy Prime Minister claimed just a few weeks ago in the financial press that this was a bit of a done deal with the Chancellor.

The Chancellor recycled the announcement of an increase of £1 per tonne in landfill tax, but that tax is not being recycled to help good causes such as local charitable or environmental concerns, as it was when the tax was invented under the last Government. There was nothing in the Budget to promote recycling of any kind, at a time when recycling is being threatened by a crash in the prices of raw materials.

When we look at the small print, we see that there is an aggregate tax. I think that that is a shame as the voluntary agreements offered by the industry offered considerable improvements. According to the fine detail, aggregates dug out of the ground for export will not be subject to the tax, but those for use in this country will. We are allowed to dig holes in the countryside if we are exporting aggregates overseas, and will not be taxed, but that will not be the case if we are using them to build roads and hospitals in this country. That strikes me as an anomaly. Opencast coal mining will also be exempt from the tax. This is supposed to be an environmental measure, but opencast coal mining is possibly one of the biggest blights on the countryside. In many respects, the Bill is more brown than green.

I welcome the end of the fuel duty escalator, but diesel fuel duty is still going up. Business is still going abroad, and foreign trucks are still taking over from British trucks on British roads. Cars using unleaded petrol will still have to pay more for their petrol—1.89p per litre. A study carried out just this week has shown that families in Sussex now spend more on running their cars than any other household bills. That is more than is spent in any other part of the United Kingdom. The average Sussex family spends £78 a week—17 per cent. of household income—on cars. That is more than food and more than housing costs.

There was nothing in the Budget to encourage travel by bus, tram, metro or bicycle, apart from the recycling of some of the grants relating to rural buses. Despite the early announcement on rural buses, the number of bus passenger miles travelled has continued to fall. We still have the worst record in Europe for passenger miles travelled on public transport—a third of the amount in Denmark and half of the amount in the Netherlands.

The Budget does nothing to deal with the fact that we have the longest commuting times per day in Europe. It does nothing to deal with the problem that more road links are congested for at least one hour a day here than in any other country in Europe, apart from Poland. I am glad that road fuel gas duty has been frozen, but I wish that the Chancellor had shouted more loudly about that. Last year the Government reduced it by 29 per cent., which was very welcome, but the Chancellor did not mention that today. The trouble is that, despite all the Government's claims, this and previous Budgets have done nothing to encourage the conversion of public transport vehicles such as lorries to the use of road fuel gases.

According to a written answer last week, since 1996 the number of heavy goods vehicles that have converted to the use of liquid petroleum gas has increased from 24 to the grand total of 68, while the number of buses now able to use it has increased by 15 to 36. In the whole country, despite all the tax measures promised and shouted about by the Government, 36 buses have taken advantage of the tax breaks to convert to LPG.

For all Labour Members' talk of capital allowances for business, there was no mention in any of the notes or in any part of the Chancellor's speech of the use of capital allowances to encourage innovative environmental technology, a measure that was supported by 94 per cent. of business leaders. That underlines the need for a green tax commission to check the Government's green credentials and to build consensus between the Government, business, industry and environment advisory boards.

I could mention energy tax, too. I hope that we will debate that another day. Suffice it to say that there were no great improvements to energy tax in the Budget—a tax that will make many parts of British industry, particularly the steel industry and horticulture, very uncompetitive.

In my constituency, the BOC Group is a large employer. Electricity represents some 78 per cent. of production costs: the cost will be some £8.5 million in the first year. The company is being taken over by a French and United States consortium, which will mean that production in this country can easily move to either of those countries.

Understandably, the company has said:

> We would have no choice, faced with such a massive cost, but to reflect it in our prices to customers, therefore passing a burden to other competitive British companies as well.

It is no surprise that, just yesterday, the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs said:

> We do not believe that the Climate Change Levy meets the tests of good taxation. The system of exemptions, negotiated agreements and reduced rates has produced an extremely complex and cumbersome market instrument which will result in a relatively modest emissions reduction.

There is an old Budget adage: the louder Government Members cheer on Budget day, the more they will regret it later, when the Budget has been properly analysed in the cold light of day. Today's Budget is no exception. The devil is in the detail. It is a classic socialist Labour Budget—tax up 9p with one hand but down just 1p with the other. Labour Members seem to have had difficulty in working that out.

After the Budget, the United Kingdom will still have the fastest rising tax burden in the industrialised world. No amount of fudging the figures, glossy brochures or spin doctoring will conceal that fact. With productivity growth slowing, with all help for industry targeted on new technology sectors—there is little help for traditional industries, which are increasingly tied up in red tape—and with the savings ratio plummeting, the Budget just stores up trouble for the future.

People are not stupid. They have woken up to the fact that services are getting worse and that they are paying more tax by stealth. They will treat with contempt a Chancellor who is more intent on building a war chest for election bribes than delivering effective services. The Government have been sussed. They are taxing more and delivering less.

8.3 pm

Ms Rosie Winterton (Doncaster, Central): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in the debate. It is a Budget that will be welcomed in my constituency and in south Yorkshire not only because of the extra money that it puts into health and education, but because of the emphasis on full employment—what welcome words they are for my constituency—and on tackling social exclusion. One of the major challenges that the Government face is to ensure that areas such as south Yorkshire, which suffered industrial devastation under the previous Administration, as my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, West and Penistone (Mr. Clapham) said, can reap the benefits of a Government who are putting economic regeneration at the top of their agenda.

So severe were the consequences of the previous Government's actions that GDP in south Yorkshire was at such a low level that the area now qualifies for objective 1 status. During the Conservative Administration between 1979 and 1997, poverty and unemployment rose dramatically in south Yorkshire. That is why measures such as the national minimum wage and the working families tax credit are so important for people in Doncaster and south Yorkshire. The action to tackle unemployment is crucial to regeneration in the area.

The fact that youth unemployment has fallen by 79 per cent., long-term unemployment by 65 per cent. and overall unemployment by 30 per cent. is due largely to the new deal, but the establishment of Yorkshire Forward, the regional development agency, has also been an important catalyst in regenerating the area. Indeed, a survey of 1,500 leading business men in the area by the *Yorkshire Insider* magazine showed that Yorkshire Forward was considered the most influential body in the region.

In the Yorkshire and Humber area, sub-regional economies can vary greatly. That is another major challenge for us to tackle. For example, Leeds has become a boom town, but, only a few miles away, there is quite severe deprivation, which was recognised by the designation of south Yorkshire as an objective 1 area. In my constituency, affluent streets lie almost alongside streets with high levels of poverty, poor housing and the poor health that go with that. Tackling social exclusion means ending that huge disparity in people's wealth and opportunities—people who live close together, but who are far apart economically. The regional development agencies have been tasked to iron out inequalities not just between regions, but within regions.

Objective 1 status will be crucial in ironing out the inequalities in south Yorkshire. That means a cash injection of around £90 million every year for six years, but it is important that match-funding be found. I know that that is something that Treasury Ministers are aware of. I hope that, during discussions on the Budget, they will feel able to give us some reassurances about that. I hope that they can look at how money, for example, from the Coalfields Regeneration Trust could be used to match objective 1 fund money.

One of the things that the Doncaster chamber of commerce has been examining closely is how to use objective 1 money to regenerate our area. Yesterday, I spoke to its chief executive about the Budget and local businesses' attitude to it. He emphasised how vital it would be for the Budget to assist small and medium businesses if the Government were serious about regeneration.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton, North–East (Mr. Purchase) said, the changes in capital gains tax, the permanent extension of capital allowances and the crucial steps to ensure that venture capital funds are used at regional level mean that it is a Budget for small and medium businesses. In an area such as south Yorkshire, that will help the economic base to diversify from traditional industries, which the previous Government ripped the heart out of, to important new industries. It will also help to attract new business start-ups and inward investment to sites that have been developed, such as the one at junction 4 of the M18, which is now attracting new businesses, thanks to the work of the local chamber of commerce, the local council and Yorkshire Forward.

One important way in which the regional development agency has been able to capitalise on the lead given by the Government is by encouraging partnership between local businesses and the community. That has resulted in a much greater awareness of what is required and of the importance of regenerating the local economy.

In my constituency, Peglers, a company that makes bathroom fittings and employs more than 900 people, also helps other local companies to flourish. It is trying to get one of its suppliers of coatings to open a subsidiary on its site in Doncaster as an offshoot from its other office in the north-east. It is considering how to help the smaller company with finances, personnel and research and development, so that it will grow within Yorkshire and help the local economy. That is an example of a business becoming involved in the community and using factors such as purchasing power to help other local enterprises.

We are increasingly making demands on businesses to become involved in local communities. Perhaps we should consider providing a fiscal incentive for businesses that invest in deprived communities. I know that there are special incentives for businesses to give money to charities and it may be possible to extend that principle.

The Red Book refers to the Government's national strategy for neighbourhood renewal. It says:

> The Government is committed to ensuring that the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods are given the support they need to maximise their economic potential.

I hope that we can do much more to develop partnerships between local businesses and communities. Perhaps the Government could assist businesses to invest in severely deprived communities.

Danum school in my constituency is looking to raise some £50,000 from the private sector to kick start its efforts to become a specialist technology school. Perhaps we could do more to encourage local businesses to invest in such projects. Danum school has placed strong emphasis on new technology, realising that such knowledge is vital if south Yorkshire is to compete in the changing industrial world. The regional development agency has emphasised that too. One of its requests for the Budget was that it would include measures to assist companies to get online and invest in new technology. Today's announcement of 100 per cent. capital allowances in respect of information technology for small firms and the £50 million package to get more small firms online will be welcomed in south Yorkshire by the

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regional development agency, the chamber of commerce and larger industries that want smaller businesses to get on-line too.

Today's announcement will also enable local communities to put together a coherent strategy, which may need more work, to look at how information technology can be spread further. Technology and training are vital for regions such as south Yorkshire, which is moving away from traditional industries and towards the new industrial world. That means a change of culture, with companies being encouraged to take more responsibility for investing in the future of their local communities and helping to provide better training. That change in attitude comes across strongly because the Government have taken the lead and stressed the need for partnership.

Good transport links are at the heart of helping businesses to grow and attracting new businesses to an area. Doncaster is well served by transport links. Last week, I spoke to representatives of a company who told me that they had come to the area particularly because of the motorway and rail networks. Transport is important to us, so we welcome today's announcement of extra investment in transport. Getting the go-ahead for Finningley to become a commercial airport would provide an enormous boost, not only because it would improve airport links for passenger and freight services, but because it would provide enormous potential for employment and lay solid foundations for future regeneration.

In addition to its objective 1 status, Doncaster will benefit from the new deal for communities. The Doncaster regeneration partnership is establishing business forums that bring together the local authority, the health authority—and all the social partners—and local businesses to give us an idea of what businesses want and to give the regional development agency better feedback about what skills are needed so that the skills action plan can effectively meet the needs of business. That is crucial for training and developing skills and is an example of partnership in practice. The new deal for the community will also enhance town centre communities.

The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) talked about stamp duty. The review of stamp duty relief in respect of new developments on brownfield sites is most welcome. I hope that the proposed stamp duty relief will extend to refurbishment—for example, where a warehouse is converted.

Since the Government came to power, my constituents, who were neglected by the previous Administration, have witnessed a sea change in their economic prospects, individually and regionally. The lead shown by the Government has meant that businesses are focusing on their contribution to the community. Companies, the council and the community are working together to turn round the local economy. Hope has replaced despair. Whereas there was a crisis of confidence under the previous, Tory Administration, we now have a climate of confidence. I believe that this Budget will build on that new-found confidence, and I welcome it wholeheartedly.

8.20 pm

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): This Budget is the work of a master craftsman. Every statistic chosen by the Chancellor for today's Budget statement has been very carefully honed and shaped, to paint the rosiest picture possible. The statistics are intended to try to direct and divert both the eye and the ear of the beholder from the substance to the gloss, perhaps misdirecting our attention from some of the Budget's more important details. As other hon. Members have already rightly said, the devil will be in the detail. The Budget may escape more detailed scrutiny in Budget week, and only subsequently be revealed for what it truly is.

Although I welcome any additional resources that the Chancellor has made available today, I should like to deal with three specific matters that will cause my constituents real concern: education, pensions and health.

One should compare today's announcement of an additional £1 billion for education with the tax cuts—which are four times greater than the increase for education—and examine some of the details of the practical effects that that funding increase might have in the constituencies. As I listened to the Chancellor, I was reminded of some papers that I recently received from a constituent of mine, Mr. Coolen, who is a parent governor of Nonsuch primary school, which is in my constituency. In the coming year, his school faces a funding cut of £28,000.

People might think that the school faces that cut because the local education authority has been mean and not done the decent thing by ensuring that the benefits of increased standard spending assessments are fully passported to schools. They would be wrong to think that. People might also think that the local authority has not done enough to ensure that it meets all the tests for the standards fund, and is therefore not benefiting from the Government's largesse in that fund. However, that is not correct. People might even argue that the local authority has not fully funded teachers' pay awards, and has thus shifted the burden on to the poor governors, leaving them to try to make up the difference. That would not be true, either.

In every single case, my local authority—the London borough of Sutton—has done what the Government have asked of it. It has ensured that the money that it says is available is put into schools. The simple fact is that there is not enough money. That is why not only one school, but many of my schools are facing financial difficulties in the coming year.

The specific school that I mentioned is a relatively small primary school. It is finding the going particularly hard and has a particularly severe squeeze on its budget because the number of pupils attending it is being reduced, partly as a consequence of the Government's initiative on reducing class sizes for younger pupils.

So although I entirely welcome the fact that the headmistress will eventually be receiving a cheque for about £3,000 for books and equipment, I urge Ministers not to expect huge parties to be thrown by staff and governors across the land to celebrate the arrival of such a cheque. All that money will do is make good the cuts that have been made because of the general underfunding of education. A good headline in today's press is not an adequate replacement for ensuring that our schools are funded adequately and properly, year in and year out.

Mr. Richard Ottaway (Croydon, South): Before the hon. Gentleman moves on from the subject of education in Sutton, will he join me in condemning Sutton's Liberal

Democrat-controlled council, whose funding of grant-maintained schools has led to pupils and their parents conducting a whip-round, simply to make up for the council funding deficit?

Mr. Burstow: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman has given me the opportunity to nail the Tory myth that is being peddled in my constituency. The hon. Gentleman may be a little detached from such matters now—although a few months ago he was responsible for whipping up such matters—but I should tell him that all the GM schools have had to accept that the LEA has bent over backwards to ensure that they receive fair funding. This year, in the budget that has just been approved by the local authority, there has been a substantial increase in the funding going to all secondary schools, but particularly to GM schools, to compensate for the fact that the Government's fair-funding formula—which he declined to mentioned—has now been properly funded. That is the consequence of a collaborative and co-operative approach, rather than the confrontational approach that the Conservative party wants to try to foster in my constituency.

The Government hope that many pensioners will have felt a very warm glow when listening to the Chancellor's words today. However, let us examine some of the truth and detail underlying those words. On 1 April, most United Kingdom pensioners will be receiving through their letter box a 75p increase in the basic state pension. People—not only pensioners, but many people—feel very angry about the Government's failure this year to provide a decent increase in the basic state pension. They feel insulted, and that will not be assuaged by today's warm words from the Chancellor.

The situation is worse than that, as many pensioners will be receiving less than a 75p increase. It is worth reminding the House that one quarter of pensioners—about 2.5 million of them—will be receiving a far smaller pension increase this year. Moreover, most of those pensioners are women. Many women pensioners may not have complete contribution records, or are widows, or are on pensions of no more than £39.95 per week. What does the Government's inflation increase amount to for them? It amounts to a weekly basic state pension increase of about 45p. That is what the Government are giving 2.5 million of our poorest women pensioners.

What would the Liberal Democrats do? Last week, in our alternative Budget, we outlined precisely what we would do. This year, we would have paid a £2 increase in the basic state pension. That is not a dramatic sum, but it is certainly more than the Government were willing to find—they had the money in the social security budget—to increase the basic state pension.

The evidence is very clear: the poorest of our pensioners are the oldest of our pensioners; and the majority of the oldest of our pensioners are women. We must therefore look at ways in which we can most effectively target help to reach those pensioners.

The Government place their hopes and aspirations on the so-called minimum income guarantee. However, that guarantee is no guarantee at all, as it requires people to undergo a means test. Many hundreds of thousands of people in the United Kingdom, some by choice, simply do not undergo that means test. On the Government's own figures, 700,000 people do not claim under the minimum income guarantee, and are consequently living below the poverty line.

Liberal Democrat Members say that the Government, in this Budget, should have moved towards adopting a different strategy for targeting help. They should be targeting help on the basis of age, not only on means, and using the basic state pension as the vehicle for delivering that help. We say that that could be done in age additions, starting at the age of 80.

In 1971, the Conservative Government introduced a 25p age addition, which provided a little help for pensioners. In 1971, 25p was worth something; today, it does not even cover the cost of a first-class postage stamp. The addition has not been uprated, on the basis of any index, since 1971. Hon. Members should go to a meeting of pensioners groups in their constituency, mention that 25p and see how delighted they are about how generous successive Governments have been on the addition. Year after year, they have expected the figure to be uprated, but it has not been. If it had been uprated on the basis of earnings, it would now amount to £3.70. Liberal Democrat Members believe that there should be a £5 age addition at the age of 80. We believe that that is affordable, and that it could have been afforded in this Budget.

What about those who are 75? Currently, they receive no age addition whatsoever. We think that wrong. The Government themselves recognise in their minimum income guarantee that there should be an age addition at 75, but they do not believe that it should be provided in the basic state pension. We propose that a £3 age addition should be included in the basic state pension.

How would our proposals affect increases for pensioners? They would result in an increase of £2 per week for anyone retiring at 60 or 65. At 75, pensioners would receive an extra £5 a week in their pension, and they would receive it now. Those over 80 would receive an extra £6.75 a week in their pension, which would begin to make a difference to pensioners who are living in poverty.

Beyond that, we have seen the Chancellor's announcement about the generosity of the winter allowance—an extra £1 a week for pensioners. That is the sum total of what the Government are doing to try to help some of the poorest of our pensioners, alongside, perhaps, some of the richest. There are still thousands of pensioners in my constituency waiting to receive their winter allowance. Some have been told that they will probably not get their outstanding backdated payments until next winter, when they will be portrayed, no doubt, as a bonanza for pensioners.

No one would wish to say that the free television licence proposal for those over 75 is not welcome; I know that it is in my constituency. However, there is a question. There are pensioners receiving just a 45p increase in the basic state pension who are below the age of 75. Where on earth are they to find the money to pay for the increase in the television licence until they turn 75? The money is not there. The Government have not provided it, and they are making it harder for those pensioners to make ends meet.

On tax—and the tax situation for pensioners in particular—it is welcome that, one year on, the Government have accepted that the 10p tax rate ought to be applied to the savings income of pensioners. That issue, as my colleagues and I argued during debates on the last Finance Bill, should have been addressed then.

[Mr. Burstow]

However, the Government said that it was not necessary because they were being generous enough, and that the measure was not intended to help the income of pensioners. It is welcome that the Government have decided to make the rate retrospective and to apply it a year back. That is a welcome acknowledgment that the Government were wrong not to have included the measure in last year's Budget.

In the detailed press releases, there is a reference to the tax back campaign—something that is long overdue. Millions of pounds of taxpayers' money are sitting in the Treasury: money that should not have been paid because the pensioners were not on the income to warrant paying the tax. They do not know that they are entitled to claim it back. The Government campaign appears to be that they will have an extra page on the Inland Revenue website. Wow—that is how those people who do not know they have money sitting in the Treasury are to learn that they can get tax back. This is not a tax back campaign, but a way of maintaining the Treasury's grip on money that does not belong to it. The Treasury should be doing more to notify those pensioners of their right to get that money back.

Another tax issue that I hope the Government will act on concerns pensioners whose incomes are below the threshold for paying tax but are nevertheless obliged every year to fill in tax assessments. What a waste of time—what a waste of public money in sending out those forms. Why cannot we have some form of certification process, where pensioners can exclude themselves by declaring that they will not be in receipt of incomes above the tax thresholds, thus saving the taxpayer the need to administer a system that is generating no income but is causing a great deal of worry and anxiety for many pensioners?

On health and long-term care, the £2 billion announced today by the Chancellor—to be reannounced tomorrow, and probably many times after that by other Ministers—is welcome. It is undoubtedly a welcome acknowledgement by the Government that they got it wrong on NHS funding for the first three years of this Parliament. An emergency infusion of cash now is necessary because the Chancellor left the NHS bleeding to death for the first two years the Government were in office by sticking to the Conservatives' spending plans.

The extra emergency money is coming in ten days before the beginning of a new financial year. That is boom and bust gone mad—it is absolutely crazy. How can we expect NHS managers to plan sensibly in an environment where they are told ten days before the beginning of a financial year that they have an additional £2 billion to spend? At this moment, we do not know the details, because the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State will spend four months working out how to spend the money.

Mr. David Taylor: That £2 billion represents about £3 million per average parliamentary constituency, and represents about £10,000 per day. It is not as if the money must be spent on the first day, the first week or the first month. The hon. Gentleman is exaggerating the difficulties that any health authority or trust will have in dealing with the money.

Mr. Burstow: Try telling that to the 512,000 people who are currently on waiting lists to see a consultant before they even get treated. Try telling that to the people who have had their operations cancelled in the last year. Try telling that to my health authority, which has been told that, on the current allocation, it will be £4 million short if it honours the Government's commitment—made on its behalf—to fully fund the nursing and doctors' pay awards. That is why a system where the Chancellor announces at the Dispatch Box ten days before a financial year begins that, suddenly, there is an extra £2 billion to be made available is not a sensible way of spending public money.

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the real test of the usefulness of this additional money will be whether it is to be passported through to health authorities and trusts, so that people at the sharp end can spend that money to deliver better health care, or whether it will be held back by the Government to use for its pet projects?

Mr. Burstow: We await with bated breath what the Prime Minister has to say to the House tomorrow. There must be a real fear that there may be a similar approach in education, where the standards fund is used as a way of following Ministers' pet projects, rather than meeting local priorities. We will judge on what the Government say and what they then do in practice.

Mr. Alan W. Williams: I find the hon. Gentleman's comments on pensions and health extraordinarily grudging. We are talking about £2 billion on a budget of £40 billion. There is an extra 4 per cent., when the Budget this year is 5 per cent. up in real terms on last year. Cannot the hon. Gentleman find it in the bottom of his heart to give the Labour Government credit for doing something right?

Mr. Burstow: If I sound grudging—Labour Members think that I do—it is because many of my constituents feel grudging. They have suffered over the last two years from an underfunded NHS and a Government who over-hyped and over-promised in opposition and have subsequently failed to deliver. The announcement today is about trying to put right the fact that the promises were unfunded. To the extent that the announcement puts in place the necessary funding to deliver these proposals, of course I welcome it. However, that is as far as I go in welcoming this sum today.

The crucial question—as the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) said—is how the money will be spent. It must be invested in building up the capacity of the NHS. That means, as the Government have rightly acknowledged, more nurses and doctors. We must make it worth while for some of the 70,000 nurses who are currently outside the health service to come back into it, to start to fill some of the 15,000 nursing vacancies.

There is a need to invest in physiotherapy and occupational therapists. If all the money goes to the acute sector, it will not meet people's real needs. We need investment in recuperative and rehabilitation services so that we will have easier discharging from hospitals and reduced emergency re-admissions to hospitals, which all too often is one of the biggest problems. We need to look at ways to ensure that we help older people to continue

living in their own homes, rather than being prematurely consigned to care homes, as is all too often a byproduct of our current health care arrangements.

On the funding of long-term care, the Government's silence—which continued today—is deafening. A royal commission was established in December 1997 and it reported, as it was requested to do, in just over a year, in February 1999. We then waited week after week, month after month, for the Government to say what it was going to do in response to its recommendations. We were told in December that we would have a debate in which the Secretary of State would outline the Government's proposals. However, we were then told in December that the Government were going to review the matter still further and that we would have a White Paper in June this year.

All this means that there will have been no legislation in this Parliament to change the legal framework under which long-term care is financed and operated. So much for the Government who promised before the general election that they would do something to prevent hundreds of thousands of people from being forced to sell their homes to pay for their care. Under this Government, 100,000 more people have been forced to sell their homes to pay for their care, because the Government have done nothing to implement the royal commission's proposals.

It is hardly surprising that we have constituents coming to our surgeries who have been confronted by local authority accountants proffering a bill to them to pay for their care. That has happened to families such my constituent's, Mr. Albert Philo. His family cannot believe that after decades of hard work and diligent taxpaying, they have to pay for nursing care. Mr. Philo has a medical condition—dementia—and his family thought that the NHS was free at the point of use on the basis of need. However, Mr. Philo's wife is being pursued for payment for his care, pushing her into debt and causing great anxiety. The Budget does nothing to sort out the chaos that is long-term care finance.

The Government have made much of their support for carers. We have had a national carers strategy, and that was welcome because it codified much good practice around the country. However, we heard nothing today about carers, and the Government have allocated a mere 15p extra a week for carers. The vast majority of carers are older people, caring for a husband, wife, parent or adult child. Because those carers are pensioners, they are not entitled to the invalid care allowance. If the Government valued older carers, they would extend ICA to all pensioner carers.

In the Budget today, the Chancellor offered pensioners an inflation increase in the basic state pension of £2—in April next year. Wow! He also offered them an extra £1 a week in their pocket through the winter allowance, and a consultation on the income tapers on the minimum income guarantee. But what does the Budget do now to make a difference to pensioners? It puts 75p in the pockets of pensioners, with possibly a little bit more through the winter allowance in due course. When pensioners come to examine the rabbit that the Chancellor has pulled out of his hat for them this year, they will find that it was not just emaciated but well and truly dead before he even drew it out of his hat.

8.42 pm

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North): I am pleased to congratulate my right hon. Friend the Chancellor on his Budget speech. By contrast with the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow), I shall try to bring a note of enthusiasm and gratitude into the debate and not repeat the Liberal Democrat approach of occasional helpful suggestions spoiled by opportunism and grudging acceptance of what are major improvements to the public services and quality of life of people in this country.

The Budget will be warmly welcomed by my constituents in Bury, North. Whether they are pensioners, parents bringing up children, patients, doctors, nurses or ancillary staff in our hospitals or teachers in our schools, they will be pleased that the Chancellor has listened in the past few months and responded to many of their pleas. I also welcome the fact that the Budget moves our party forward in its historic commitment not just to achieving full employability but to achieving full employment.

In my constituency, the most recent recorded figure for unemployment was 2.7 per cent. Not everyone will need reminding that that figure is below the 3 per cent. recommended by Beveridge in his definition of full employment in 1945. That 2.7 per cent. represents a dramatic fall in unemployment in the past two years, including, most notably, a 70 per cent. reduction in youth unemployment.

I was astonished by the line of attack on the Budget from the official Opposition. Since I was elected a Member of Parliament three years ago, thousands of people have written to me and come to my surgery and I have had thousands of discussions in the street, at social events and on constituency visits, and no one has ever said to me, "I am really worried about the tax burden and the percentage of GDP being taken by tax."

The Conservative party has failed to move on from the election campaign that it fought in 1987, which was dominated by its obsession with tax cuts. It does not understand that people are now calling for more investment in public services, and fails to grasp that they understand that there is a price to be paid for that. My constituents tell me—I have no reason to think that they are different from people in any other part of the country—that their priority is more investment in jobs, education, the national health service, better public transport, an improved environment and a lower level of crime. The Conservative party's obsession with the tax burden does not address those issues.

In most western European democracies, tax as a proportion of gross domestic product varies only slightly. Perhaps there is a limit below which it should not fall, and that may be 35 per cent. Equally, there is a limit beyond which it should not increase, and that could be 40 per cent. Within that band, and allowing for the circumstances of different countries and different stages in the economic cycle, the tax burden as a proportion of GDP is not the main issue in the debate about tax, public services and the economy.

The distribution of the tax burden and the way in which the revenue raised is invested are the most important matters. We are seeing a much fairer distribution of the tax burden. Those who can afford to pay are expected to pay a little more, and many hundreds of thousands of the lowest-paid workers have been taken out of the tax net. We are seeing also that the Government are spending tax

[Mr. David Chaytor]

revenue more productively than ever before. We are investing for the future rather than picking up the economic problems that we inherited from the previous Government.

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon): The hon. Gentleman and I probably have more in common than either of us would care to admit. The hon. Gentleman talks about fairness in the tax burden, however. The Government have abolished the married couples allowance, which has led in reality to a flat-rate subsidy to all taxpayers—worth the same to them all. Mortgage interest tax relief now has the same quality. Would it not have been better to use progressive rates of income tax? Is not that the best way to get a fairer distribution through the tax system, with a higher rate for the highest earners?

Mr. Chaytor: The hon. Gentleman raises an interesting point. However, if a party makes a commitment in an election manifesto not to raise income tax rates, it should adhere to it. When we come to the next general election, I think that the electorate will be pleased that it has had a Government for four or five years who have stood by their commitments on tax, in contrast with the previous regime.

I shall refer briefly to three issues. First, my local authority is one of the most successful in the country in terms of organisational efficiency and support for schools—which was recognised in the recent Ofsted inspection. That applies also to the results delivered by both primary and secondary schools in the area. Bury's primary and secondary schools deliver astonishingly good results on the basis of a meagre level of resource. They will be delighted to learn of the 300 per cent. improvement in the books and equipment allocation to primary schools and of the new £30,000 allocation to secondary schools.

I am delighted that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has started to make direct allocations to schools. One of the remaining problems in funding education is not that the overall increase is too small but that the method of distribution through the standard spending assessment system remains grossly unfair. Despite Bury being in the top 10 per cent. in terms of examination results at various primary and secondary schools, it is in the bottom 20 per cent. in terms of funding. On all the socio-economic indicators, it should be somewhere in the middle. Following the announcements of my right hon. Friend and those of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, we are seeing direct net cash allocations to schools to compensate to some extent for the deficiencies in the SSA system.

Mr. David Taylor: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way, and I note that the £1 billion announced today is equivalent to about £1.5 million per parliamentary constituency, and to about £10 million for the county constituencies in Leicestershire. That money will be welcomed and well used, but the difficulty is that the SSA distribution in Leicestershire leaves us £13 million adrift of the average county. Does my hon. Friend not agree that the reform of SSAs, for which we have called for so long, cannot be long delayed?

Mr. Chaytor: I can only agree with my hon. Friend. I urge him and other hon. Members with constituencies whose local authorities are in the bottom 40 of the funding league table to continue to argue for complete reform of local government finance. Perhaps they should argue specifically for the use of the DETR index of social deprivation as the main tool for the allocation of education funding.

I turn now to the question of health. Again, my constituents are delighted with the new health spending that has been announced already. After many years of neglect, it has helped us finally to merge our two hospitals on to one site, and to modernise our accident and emergency unit.

However, my reservation is that far more money could be squeezed out of the total health budget if we completed the modernisation of the structure of the national health service and moved away from the internal market, which reproduced bureaucracy as if there were no tomorrow. I urge the Government to build on the new investment allocated to health by continuing the process of merging trusts and reconfiguring health authorities, which is taking place in the context of establishing primary care trusts and primary care groups. Far too much money in the NHS is tied up in duplication and bureaucracy.

Even so, I must tell the House that the nurses and midwives who have lobbied me recently about levels of understaffing and recruitment problems will be delighted with the new investment announced today. The general practitioners who have been talking to me for two and a half years about the need for higher funding will also be delighted, as will those patients in Bury still on waiting lists—although I must note that those lists have fallen dramatically in the past two years.

Mr. Hammond: Can the hon. Gentleman tell the House what the out-patient waiting list—the list of those waiting for a first consultation in out-patient departments—is in Bury?

Mr. Chaytor: No, I cannot. However, if the hon. Gentleman has a particular interest in the subject and wants to discuss it with me afterwards or write to me about it, I am sure that I shall be able to find the information for him.

Finally, I want to say a few words about environmental policy and the issue of green taxation. Two Budgets ago, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor was criticised by environmental groups for doing nothing to advance the cause of the environment. I think that he received an award for being a very un-green Chancellor. Last year, his reputation changed dramatically. He was widely praised for the various initiatives that he introduced, and was applauded as the first green Chancellor. That was thanks to his changes in transport policy and the fuel duty escalator; to the climate change levy; to the taxes on aggregates and pesticides, and to other measures.

This year, I imagine that the verdict on the Budget will be a little more neutral. However, I welcome the slow but steady progress towards a green tax policy that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor is still making. I welcome, too, his announcements on the aggregates tax and the landfill tax. I expect that the Opposition will say that that is just another recycled announcement, but we are talking about the Budget: if a proposal is relevant to this year's measures, the fact that it was announced last year is insufficient reason not to mention it again.

I also welcome the implementation of the commitment to reform the taxation of company cars. That has been a central plank of the welfare state for the middle classes for many years.

Nevertheless, I want to raise one or two reservations. I understand the political reality behind the doubling of the oil price over the past 12 months, and I also understand why it is impossible to continue with the fuel duty escalator. However, we should not believe that we can carry on burning hydrocarbon fuels as if there were no tomorrow. Frankly, hon. Members who believe that it is environmentally sensible or sustainable to argue for lower fuel duties on petrol or diesel are living in cloud cuckoo land.

We need to develop the debate about fuel tax policy and get away from the Dutch auction on tax. Underlying this is a very serious problem. We need to ask ourselves why the price of oil has risen by 100 per cent. in the past 12 months. Why does it cost $30 a barrel? What is likely to happen to oil prices and oil reserves in the years ahead? Can we conceivably carry on using oil as we have done in the past, even if there is oil still to be used?

Within 10 years, we will reach the peak of global oil production. After that time, existing oil reserves will start to run down. There may be new discoveries, but as each new oilfield is discovered and exploited, the cost of extracting the oil becomes greater. As more and more countries industrialise, demand for the use of oil will increase. The idea that we can continue for ever to live in a cheap oil economy is nonsense. We must get used to the fact that oil will become scarcer, more expensive and, as oil reserves diminish, an increasing proportion of global oil reserves will be controlled by middle eastern countries, particularly Iraq.

There is only one intelligent solution, which is dramatically to increase the use of alternative fuels. In the press notices that the Chancellor has provided, I am delighted to see that there is a fiscal incentive for the use of alternative fuels in the proposals for a banded vehicle excise duty and in the reform of company car taxation. However, I still do not think that that goes far enough. In the next 10 years, we must dramatically reduce our dependence on oil as a fuel for motor vehicles and increase our use of liquid petroleum gas, compressed natural gas, fuel cells and various hybrid forms of motor engine. If not, in five, 10 or 15 years' time, we will be completely dependent on oil supplies that are in the stranglehold of Iraq. There is no question about that.

This has been a marvellous Budget. However, although huge strides have been taken on the green tax dimension of the Budget in the past two or three years, we still have a long way to go. We may be on target to meet our Kyoto target of a 12.5 per cent. reduction in carbon dioxide emissions by 2010, but beyond 2010 the reductions in emissions that we will have to achieve will increase dramatically. There are estimates of 60 per cent. cuts by 2030. We cannot achieve those cuts in carbon dioxide emissions, which are crucial if we are to stabilise the problem of climate change, without realising that our chronic high dependence on hydrocarbon fuels must come to an end.

Finally, I congratulate my right hon. Friend. I will be delighted to catch the 9.30 pm train from King's Cross this evening and go back to my constituency with the good news. I am confident of a very positive response.

8.59 pm

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): I hope that my contribution to the debate will raise new issues rather than repeating what has already been said—which is unusual in itself. I always think that a person who speaks on the first day of the Budget debate is either very bright or very bold. I should like to think I am the former, although by the time I have finished, hon. Members may think I am merely the latter.

The Chancellor spent the first part of his speech talking about the prevailing economic circumstances. He talked about employment and inflation. He did not, however, speak about the decline in the savings ratio, which has halved during the Government's time in office, and the consequent damaging effect on manufacturing, particularly on exports.

The Budget contained nothing for manufacturers, despite all that we have heard in recent days and weeks about the plight of exporters. Nor did the Chancellor give much attention to investment. Some concessions have been made, particularly on high-tech investment, to which I shall refer later, but investment in manufacturing industry is below that of most of our world competitors and that is a serious problem for our economy.

The Budget certainly taxes more and delivers less, particularly for rural Britain. It contains no aid package for agriculture, which has been badly hit—in spite of protests in the House and in Parliament square. Pig producers can scarcely produce pigmeat economically; they cannot sell it for what it costs to produce. The dairy and beef industries are in crisis, and the arable sector faces prices equivalent to those of 25 years ago.

My constituents, such as pig farmer Stewart Stables, and Jane and Michael Cook, who farm cattle, are hard pressed by prevailing circumstances which the Government have failed to address in this Budget. Unlike the hon. Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor), they will be not pleased: they will be deeply disappointed. There is nothing for poultry farmers, who face ever more competition from abroad.

There is nothing for rural services either. We heard a lot about spending increases for education, health and transport—on which I shall elaborate later—but little about how the money might be skewed to favour disadvantaged areas, particularly rural areas. Rural Britain has missed out. Given the nature of the crisis in rural Britain, that is extraordinary.

Let me turn to the national health service. I have had a chance to study the detailed proposals for the NHS, and Labour Members may be surprised to learn that, although great play has been made of the extra money, the figures for year-on-year growth fail to match the aspiration—I use that word advisedly; the Prime Minister told us that that was what it was—that NHS spending as a proportion of gross domestic product should match the European average. The increases do not provide a foundation for meeting that aspiration. There is a 7.9 per cent. increase for 2000-01, but growth tails off to 5.8 per cent. for the next three years, averaging out at 6.3 per cent. overall. To meet the Prime Minister's aspiration, the figure should average closer to 7.5 per cent. The pledge—which later became an aspiration—has gone out of the window.

The problem behind the Government's approach to NHS spending is that they do not understand the difference between affordability and cost-effectiveness.

[Mr. John Hayes]

They do not understand the difference between political judgments and the clinical judgments on which NHS spending should be based. The distortion created by their obsession with waiting lists has badly damaged the NHS.

Health service managers have been left confused by the continual reannouncement of figures. The British Medical Association wrote to the Prime Minister to complain that it was impossible for health service managers to plan effective delivery of services when they did not know how much they would receive. Today's Budget statement was peppered with reannouncements.

Naturally, we welcome extra spending on the NHS. We have heard some silly nonsense from the Labour Benches to the effect that the Conservatives do not welcome justified and targeted spending on public services to benefit the disadvantaged. Of course we support that. The point made by the hon. Member for Bury, North—that all tax and all spending were good—was primitive to say the least. Do Labour Members not understand the difference between tax yield and tax rate? Do they not understand the difference between targeted effective spending and spending per se? The Conservatives are merely saying that if the Government take money from people, they have a responsibility to ensure that it is spent wisely and accountably. That is the point that we have made repeatedly.

Dr. Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak): Is the hon. Gentleman suggesting that the Government's proposals for increased spending on health and education would not be a wise use of taxpayers' money?

Mr. Hayes: I was about to come to that point. We do not yet have the details about the £1 billion that was announced today, but the certain problem with that proposal is that it takes a broad brush approach to education expenditure. To target that money at the most disadvantaged pupils and schools, we need to address the formula funding package. That is understood by professionals in the education service.

Of course, no school will say no to extra cash, but all schools will admit that the root of the problem is the way in which we fund education. I admit that the previous Government were responsible for formula funding, although it was based on preceding traditions—as was brought out in one of our recent debates on education. However, the formula needs adjustment so that the extra money goes where it is most needed. It is not good enough to take a broad brush to education expenditure; one has to spend money differentially—in favour of disadvantage—to raise standards throughout.

Let me offer the hon. Lady an example. The schools that will suffer most from today's proposal—or that will benefit least—will be small rural ones, or those in inner cities that have the lowest number of pupils. Is it right or wise to allocate £1 billion on that basis? Would it not have been better to allocate the money in favour of disadvantage? The proposal is headline-gathering; it does not involve the intelligent use of the funds to increase the quality of education for the majority of the children who need the most help.

There was also an announcement on e-commerce and investment in high-tech industries and information technology. We should consider that in parallel with the attack on IT skills that was the result of the IR35 changes. The Budget states its aim:

> To encourage firms to take up the challenge to get online, the Chancellor announced . . . that firms would be eligible for discounts for electronic filing and payment of tax returns.

There was a reference to 100 per cent. tax relief on investment in IT.

To be fair and accurate—qualities for which I am known—it was suggested that in addition to the 100 per cent. first-year capital allowances for small enterprises investing in information and communication technology, there would be a £60 million package

> to help SMEs understand what getting online means.

However, that £60 million is relatively small fry, so those changes will breed an acquisition culture in high-tech and ICT, rather than an application culture.

We should be encouraging small and medium-sized enterprises to make more effective use of ICT. We do not want people to make more and more investment in hardware, if that hardware is not applied effectively and fruitfully in the development of their business. The changes will encourage acquisition without necessarily encouraging good application. That has been the story in the past for both the private and the public sectors. Any hon. Member who doubts that should read the surveys of good IT practice, which suggest that, despite investment in IT, much of it has been under-utilised through lack of understanding. Given that people will find it harder and harder to acquire the skills, the consultancy and the training that they need as a result of the Government's attack on the industry's private consultants through the IR35 changes, the future is gloomy for IT investment as a result of the Budget.

The Budget is big on headlines and soundbites, but as we have seen in previous Budgets, we can trust and value only what is actually delivered, rather than what we are told will be done. It is certainly true that the tax take has increased during the lifetime of the Labour Government. That has come home hard to people. I was amazed to hear Labour Members claim that they had never received a single letter complaining about tax increases. Are they telling us that people have not written to them complaining about the abolition of the married man's tax relief, the abolition of MIRAS or the possible introduction of a pesticides tax, which has now, happily, been abandoned because of the campaigning of mainly Conservative Members? Have they not received letters about the threat that the climate change levy will represent to arable farmers and to horticulture? The Red Book recognises that those industries are energy intensive, but sufficient help is not being provided to help them to cope with the levy.

I do not know how the Government can have the brass neck—that was the phrase used by my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague)—to announce measures that are headline and soundbite oriented against a background of profound disappointment in communities throughout the country. Someone talked about more humility. I would like more humility, but I would also like more accuracy. I welcome extra spending when it is targeted and is effective in doing good, raising standards and in providing a better quality of life. I do not

welcome stealth taxation and ineffective spending, but that is what lies at the heart of the Government's policies and of this Budget.

9.11 pm

Mr. Alan W. Williams (East Carmarthen and Dinefwr): At last, we have heard a 10-minute speech, and I shall try to keep my speech to that length to allow other hon. Members to take part.

I very much welcome the announcements in the Budget. I have listened to four or five hours of speeches and many comments from Opposition Members, including from Liberal Democrats, have been very grudging, nitpicking and mean-minded. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Treasury team and the Government have a terrific grasp of the economy. We are in a strong position, with steady growth of 2.5 to 3 per cent. a year and low inflation, which is well under control at less than 2.5 per cent.

We also have an incredible surplus in the Government accounts. Last year, it was projected to be £2 billion, but it will, in fact, be £17 billion. Why should the Government be in surplus? Would it not be wiser to invest the money in health, education, pensions and other services? I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Dr. Jones) will agree when I say that I do not understand why we have a preoccupation with repaying debt. The debt burden was 44 per cent. when we came to office and it will be 33 per cent. in a few years' time. Why pay it off? We have one of the lowest debt burdens in Europe.

Money is abundantly available to increase public expenditure. I am delighted that an extra £1 billion for education was announced today and that it will go to individual schools, bypassing local education authorities. I am pleased that there will be more piloting of educational maintenance allowances for 16 to 18-year-olds who stay on at school. I hope that they will be important during the next Parliament and especially in areas where participation rates in further and higher education are low.

I welcome the £2 billion for the national health service. In a budget of £44 billion, it represents an extra 4 per cent. and a substantial rise when we had already budgeted an extra 5 per cent. for the health service this year. In real terms, the increase is 9 per cent. Over the next four years, that is an average 6.1 per cent. increase in spending each year. We need such investment and I am pleased for my constituents that it will be made.

Over the past three years, we have done many things for pensioners. The one thing that they particularly want is the restoration of the earnings link, but we have refused to do that because of the long-term implications. However, every measure will help and the extra £50 for the heating allowance is very welcome.

I also look forward to the new pensioners' credit, and to the consultation that will take place over the next year about its nature. I am certain in my mind about where it should be directed. We have a minimum income guarantee that helps the bottom decile of pensioners, but the pensioners in the bottom five or six deciles need help, so the pensioners' credit should be directed at them.

Mention was made earlier of nursing care. I hope that when the comprehensive spending review announcements are made in July, it will be made a Government responsibility and become part of the NHS. That would particularly help older pensioners, who are the poorest pensioners.

Don Cruickshank's report on banks, which was published yesterday, is very welcome. It comes as no surprise to hear that he thinks that the banks are making unjustifiable profits to the tune of between £3 billion and £5 billion a year. I am pleased that the matter is being referred to the Competition Commission. This morning, *The Guardian* published a powerful editorial about imposing a windfall tax on the excess profits that the banks have been making in the past three to five years and using that money for the NHS. Certainly, the politics of that would be well justified; it would be popular, although not of course with the Opposition. We ought to look at that suggestion very carefully.

The Government have done very well on prices. The Department of Trade and Industry has put pressure on the regulators to investigate prices for water, electricity and other utilities. On average, water bills in Wales are £34 lower this year, electricity prices will be 10 per cent. lower by the end of the year, and action is being taken on supermarket prices and car prices. That is better than tax cuts, because water and electricity costs bear more heavily on low income households. We are making very good progress on that.

My one concern about the economy is the value of the pound. I know that the issue is never directly addressed by the Treasury or the DTI, and it is certainly not addressed in the Budget, but it is a problem. We have been sanguine about the high pound during our period in office, but it is certainly causing great pain to manufacturing, including the steel and coal industries. As we have heard over the past week, Rover has suffered. Farmers are also badly affected.

Mr. Hayes: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Williams: No, I will not because others want to speak.

We have a high pound-weak euro paradox. Those factors are different sides of the same coin. One of the problems with the weak euro is that it makes membership of the euro almost impossible at present exchange rates—membership is not on the horizon. When I hear the Chancellor, the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and the Prime Minister say that we want stability in the economy and an end to boom and bust, of course I agree with those mantras, but industry also wants a sustainable, competitive pound, which we do not have at the moment. We must fulfil that aspiration as soon as we can.

I am pleased with the Budget, particularly the measures on health, education and small businesses, and with what they will do for my constituents. I now look forward to the announcements in July in the comprehensive spending review, because the Chancellor has put £4 billion into the economy today, and there is a lot more left where that came from. I hope that he will put it to good effect later this year.

9.19 pm

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): To judge by the comprehensive spending review, one would not have believed that today, on Budget day, the hospital in Ashford would announce that the accident and emergency

[Mr. Nick St. Aubyn]

unit just up the road from my constituency would nevertheless still be closed. One would not have believed that today, on Budget day in the year 2000, the accident and emergency unit in Guildford is still under threat.

If the extra £20 billion in health and the extra £20 billion in education that the Chancellor announced in the CSR cannot stop the closure of key services in our constituencies, why on earth should we be impressed by the additional £2 billion in health and £1 billion in education that he proposes to spend in the coming year?

The problems that we have are far too deep-seated for the Chancellor's announcements simply to spirit them away. I accept that waiting lists in the west Surrey area and in the south-east as a whole have gone down by 4,000, but the numbers waiting to go on the waiting list—the numbers waiting to see a consultant—have gone up by 40,000 in the same region.

The truth is that the Government tax more and deliver less. That is because they have not tried to manage the money that they have raised. They thought themselves so clever to have picked everyone's back pocket without anyone realising it that they have not recognised that that is real money, which needs to be looked after carefully and used wisely.

In education, the Government came up with the idea of cutting class sizes in the first three years of a child's education. We are in favour of lower class sizes, but we would not have done that in a way that meant that class sizes for every other year group in schools have had to go up. The Government said in their class size pledge that in the lifetime of this Parliament the cost would be £100 million. Now we know that its cost will be at least £620 million—more than six times the amount that they budgeted for.

When we did our own analysis and asked what would have happened if the Government had tried to use the independent sector to provide some of the places that were needed for the first three years in education, we found that the cost of delivering their class size pledge would have been less than £60 million—a tenth of what they propose to spend to deliver it.

That example illustrates that it does not matter only how much a Government are raising in tax or how much they propose to spend in key services such as health and education but how they intend to spend the money to maximise its value. That is how the Conservatives have previously taxed less and spent better, and how they will do so again.

Mr. David Taylor: It is interesting to hear the hon. Gentleman stating how important it is for Governments to use taxpayers' money wisely. How would he categorise the £5 billion that is the approximate current cost of the BSE crisis, the £10 billion cost of the poll tax debacle, and the £28 billion overspend in the last year of the Conservative Government, largely because of the cost of social and economic failure?

Mr. St. Aubyn: The hon. Gentleman should study the figures more carefully. This Government inherited a deficit of only £9 billion. That was the outturn. We were so cautious that we provided for a bigger deficit, but the outturn from the previous Government was only £9 billion.

That leads to my next point. The Budget today demonstrates that the panic measures introduced by the new Chancellor in 1997 were an overreaction. There was no need to attack savings with his pensions tax and his abolition of TESSAs and PEPs. There was no need to do that in order to bring the country's finances back into balance. Today's figures and today's projections for revenue from taxes demonstrate that. The damage that the Chancellor did to the economy three years ago is being paid for now in much lower levels of saving, after his attack on saving, and, therefore, much higher interest rates, with real damage to the real economy.

But what was really missing today in this, the first Budget of the new millennium, was any indication that the Chancellor understands the implications of the new economy that is sweeping the world. We know that from all the evidence before our eyes and from what is already happening in the United States. We know that from the Government's statements about their aspirations for Britain's role in the new economy. Instead, the Chancellor was bogged down in his analysis of the old economy.

Let me give one example: stamp duty on share transactions. In a week when three stock markets in Europe, those of France, Belgium and Amsterdam, have combined to create a real rival to the London stock market, with far lower dealing costs from stamp duty than we have in Britain, the Chancellor was silent on that critical subject. If he fails to address that issue, the revenue from stamp duty will be spirited away as more and more share trading happens on that alternative rival market, and the more that happens, the more other profits and revenues, which flow back to the Exchequer in increased taxation, will also disappear across the channel. By failing to address the new economy, the Chancellor is undermining his ability to raise tax in the future.

Mr. Hayes: Another example of the Chancellor being bogged down by assumptions about the old economy was the section of his Budget speech dealing with share ownership. He talked about share ownership with a maximum value of £100,000 for up to 15 employees. That will allow small firms to stay small rather than allow medium firms to grow bigger. The Chancellor needs to understand that, when he cuts capital gains tax, many of the dot.com companies' life cycles may be only two to five years, so reducing it to 10 per cent. in four years is not good enough.

Mr. St. Aubyn: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for anticipating my next point. The other day I visited a firm in my constituency called Lionhead, run by a gentleman called Peter Molyneux, who before that had started a company creating some of the world's most successful computer games. Having sold on that business, which grew from employing two to 500 people in the Guildford area, he started the new company, developing some exciting computer games. He made exactly that point to me.

In an industry such as computer games, which now has a turnover in Britain which exceeds that of our film industry and has the potential to grow many more times over if it is treated correctly, the penal rates of capital gains taxation, and the regime that will still apply after the Chancellor's announcement this afternoon, mean that many businesses like that of my constituent's, without his dedication to wanting to see Britain succeed in this critical part of the economy, will be sited overseas.

As computer games will soon be sold over the net—there will be no shop to go to, they will simply be downloaded—they can be sold from any part of the world and there is a tax competitive global market here. Yet our Chancellor completely failed to spot the fact. Here in the new millennium he does not understand what the new economy means.

The Chancellor's concession on capital gains tax will cost him £250 million in the coming year, but his additional revenue in the short term from capital gains tax in the same year will go up by an extra £1 billion. He is taking four times more in extra capital gains revenue than he is giving back with his pettifogging concessions. The result again will be that, while he has revenue in the short term from capital gains, as he will have revenue in the short term from stamp duty, in the long run he will undermine the economy's ability to generate any valuable tax revenue at all in the areas where our economy must compete as a soundly based service economy.

We need to consider comprehensive tax reform for the future. Our structure of capital taxation—capital gains tax, inheritance tax, stamp duty—is decades old. Indeed, some of it is centuries old. We need thorough-going reform, which the Chancellor lacks the courage to deliver, even if he had the imagination to realise that it was necessary.

The Chancellor's attack on savings in the past three years has created the problem that an increasing number of people choose to spend the gains that they make through investment and houses rather than reinvesting it, saving it and passing it on.

If the changes have to occur, we must begin by applying a great deal more honesty than the Chancellor displayed this afternoon. He attacks the tax cheats in our economy; perhaps we should consider the person who has done most to cheat the taxpayer: the Chancellor with his billions of pounds in stealth taxes.

One of the press releases stated that a helpline would be established for those who wanted to ring up and find their way out of the hidden economy. Perhaps the Chancellor needs a helpline to find his way out of the stealth tax economy. Such a helpline is available to him: it is the shadow Chancellor's telephone number. If the Chancellor needs it, I can give it to him without delay. He needs help if we are to rescue our economy and our tax system from the fiddling, meddling, stealth taxes and confusion that the Chancellor has built up in the past three years.

9.31 pm

Ms Chris McCafferty (Calder Valley): I shall be brief because I realise that other hon. Members want to speak. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Chancellor on his Budget. In reading the very small print on the last page of the Budget document, I am especially delighted that the Chancellor has listened to hon. Members from all parties who supported a reduction in VAT on sanitary products to 5 per cent. The 250 hon. Members who signed my early-day motion on the subject will applaud the Chancellor's sensitivity in acknowledging that those products are not luxury items and his understanding that the measure helps not only women but families, especially poor families. Perhaps it is a pity that the Chancellor missed the opportunity to announce the measure himself.

As was previously mentioned, the campaign to reduce VAT on sanitary products began in the 1970s after the failure to categorise them as essential items in the family budget. Many Members of Parliament who were involved in that campaign are still in the House. In the 1980s, Shirley Williams, now Lady Williams, held a campaign on the issue, and in the early 1990s my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey), who is now a Minister, led another campaign. A petition that contained 500,000 signatures was presented to Mrs. Thatcher in the 1980s, but it was completely ignored.

Despite all efforts, previous Chancellors have refused to right the glaring wrong. My right hon. Friend has recognised that while VAT on sanitary products is a female issue, it is also a family issue and a poverty issue. A family with a mother and two teenage daughters on a low income or benefit cannot avoid the expense of sanitary products. They are not like bread or jam; women cannot decide, "I'll skip it this week."

Today's measure is fair and lowers the cost of a necessity. It sends a message to women that the Government will continue to work towards equality in the tax system as well as in the workplace and in society.

Life without sanitary products would be unpleasant, unhygienic and unthinkable. That is why 15 million women spend so much throughout the year on sanitary protection. I welcome an important measure for women everywhere.

9.34 pm

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Calder Valley (Ms McCafferty) and I am touched that so many hon. Members have stayed behind to hear what I have to say.

The Budget is typical of the Chancellor. His description of the economy and the colour of his language made a marked contrast with the reality of what we find buried in the Red Book and the reality that I see on the ground in Shropshire. The Shropshire economy is in crisis. My pig farmers are emigrating to Saskatchewan, dairy farmers are applying to get out of dairy farming and get rid of their quota at the rate of 10 or 12 a week, high-tech businesses write to me about the iniquitous imposition of IR35—which was not mentioned in last year's Budget—and the director of a construction business has already clocked up 9,000 miles this year in a pursuit of payment, made ludicrous by the fact that he has to present an identity card carrying his picture to get paid. There has been a £30 billion explosion of tax on business and extra regulation has cost £5 billion. The average family is £600 a year worse off and, pertinently for a rural area, the average car owner is £900 a year worse off.

In previous Budgets we were promised that extra money would be spent on services, but I do not know where it has gone. It has not filtered through to my part of the country. West Mercia police force, which gained 405 officers under the Tories, has lost 78 since the Government came to power. It applied for 36 under the new scheme but has been given only 18, so we are 60 down. The fire brigade is 47 per cent. underfunded by central Government and has to be bailed out by council tax raised by the council. On education, spending on a primary pupil in Shropshire is £2,220, but £3,396 in Southwark. On the national health service, people were turned away from urgent treatment during the Christmas period and there are patients in my constituency who are not being given beta interferon. Above all, my constituents resent the £1,000 million or more that the

[Mr. Owen Paterson]

Government are spending on themselves—Parliaments, Assemblies, reviews, special advisers and general hangers on.

Mr. Hayes: I interrupt my hon. Friend to prevent him from becoming even more distressed about the plight of his constituents. The Government recognise the problems in areas such as his and the Cabinet Office report on rural areas says that the rural economy is in crisis. But does he agree that we heard nothing about how the Government will address that countryside crisis?

Mr. Paterson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We heard nothing at all about the rural economy and that report says that Shropshire's average income is 22 per cent. less than the British average.

Some threatening figures are tucked away in the Red Book. The savings ratio is dropping from 5.75 per cent. to 5.5 per cent. That accounts in part for the unnecessarily high interest rates that we have suffered over the past couple of years, which have made the pound even stronger against the pathetically weak euro and damaged agriculture and small business. Tax and social security contributions as a proportion of gross domestic product are also increasing from 36.9 to 37.3 per cent., and it is obvious that the Government have not controlled social security spending. Benefits are set to increase from £93.3 billion in 1998 to £104.5 billion. If we throw in the working families tax credit—which we should, according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development method of computing—that amounts to £110 billion.

Extra taxation and regulation have led to an explosion of the black economy, which can be glimpsed in the collapse of tobacco duty. The take has dropped from £8.2 billion last year to £5.7 billion this year. The most obvious manifestation of the increase in the black economy is the large number of anonymous white vans in the country. I should very much like to know Ministers' estimate of the size and the rate at which the black economy is growing.

Turning to legal road users, £36 billion is taken from them in taxation each year, but only £6 billion is spent on roads. For every £10 of fuel, £8 is tax. Of every £8 of tax, only £1.50 is put back. The Automobile Association estimates that £12 billion needs to be spent on the roads and Shropshire, my own patch, has a £100 million backlog of road repairs. That represents a stark contrast with the United States, where about £50 billion is raised in tax and £49 billion spent on the roads. In an area such as mine, the car is the basic means of getting around and two thirds of people in Shropshire drive to work in a car. The price of petrol has been increased by 8.6p a gallon today and the vehicle excise duty changes assume that drivers have the choice of running a smaller car. That is not necessarily so in a rural area as people's very jobs probably depend on having a larger car or a van. In a rural area, tax changes have no marginal impact. People must drive: their jobs depend on it. Taxation simply reduces their spend, and makes every business less competitive.

The most dramatic manifestation of that is the road haulage industry, which I have mentioned before. As of this morning, diesel was 65p a litre; it is now 67p a litre. Let us compare that with the equivalent of 35.5p in Belgium, 36p in Luxembourg and 37p in Spain. This morning, vehicle excise duty was £5,750; on a 40-tonne lorry, it has been reduced to £3,950. Apparently, the BBC reports that the road haulage industry is ecstatic, but I do not think so, because the difference between us and the rest of the continent is still marked. VED is £358 in Luxembourg, £328 in Spain and £308 in Portugal.

I have been present for most of the debate, but I slipped out earlier to talk to the man who was cited in last year's infamous KPMG report as one who was happy with the current haulage taxation regime. He has calculated that, although VED improvement and changes in fuel duty make him £61,472 better off, he is still worse off by £1,367,788 running a business based in the United Kingdom rather than one in Luxembourg. There is a vast difference between the benefits of lower social costs and corporation tax in this country, and the gains from cheaper VED and fuel duty in Luxembourg. He says of the Budget:

> I don't think it helps at all. We're still not competitive against a European haulier who comes here with cheap diesel, ridiculous VED and no vignette or road tolls. I will still continue to move my vehicles abroad.

I warned of this last year. I do not take any pleasure in reporting to the House that that haulier has since reduced his trucks from 100 to 75, and reduced the number of his employees from 160 to 125.

We are looking at another Longbridge here. There are 2 million people in haulage, distribution and goods vehicle manufacture. Although a cap has been imposed and we have been held to the rate of inflation on fuel, it is estimated that 26,000 haulage jobs will go, along with 27,000 associated activities. My constituent Mr. David Yarwood, who runs a business called Greyroads Ltd, has injected a little Shropshire common sense into the situation. He says:

> We must look on the bright side. It can now be only a matter of time before the government realises they too could soon be joining the out of work hauliers, then perhaps this country could get back to some sort of normality.

This is an entirely stupid policy. If we add the loss in cabotage to the loss of international business, the loss represented by fuel bought abroad and the cost of job losses, we find that the difference to the Exchequer is £1.1 billion.

The allowance to 44-tonne trucks today is a clear breach of Labour's manifesto. On 4 February 1997 the Prime Minister, then Leader of the Opposition, said:

> This cannot make sense and a Labour government will not agree to heavier lorries.

That was a manifesto pledge, and it is even in the Government's White Paper. That shows that the Government do not understand the environmental impact of their policies.

It is clear that there is no environmental gain: 97 per cent. of goods are carried by road, and if they are not carried by British hauliers they will be carried by foreign hauliers. Figures issued by the Library today show an astonishing increase from 155,000 foreign vehicles leaving the country in the third quarter of 1997 to 220,000 leaving it in the third quarter of 1999. We have the road damage and the pollution, but everything else goes abroad: the corporation tax, the VAT and all the other benefits.

I envisage further damage to the economy from the energy tax proposals. What on earth is the environmental, social or economic advantage of flying in horticultural products on jumbo jets that do not pay aviation fuel duty?

Ominous indications are buried in the Red Book. Substantial increases in public expenditure are planned. Those will be sustainable only if the economy does not turn down. The Government's outrageous increase in taxation will not encourage the creation or growth of a single business in north Shropshire in coming years.

9.45 pm

Mr. Gareth Thomas (Clwyd, West): I am grateful to the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr. Paterson) for abbreviating his speech to allow other Members to get in. Indeed, I will confine my comments to a few remarks, so that others may speak.

The Budget will be welcomed in both my constituency and the country at large because it addresses the economic and social priorities: the need to build on the foundations of stability, sustained growth and low inflation that have been laid by the Government; the need to improve public services, which were allowed to run down under the previous Government; and the need to tackle the blight of poverty that scars society and that, again, is part of the legacy of the Conservative party.

One of the most striking features of the Budget is that the purse strings have been loosened, but prudently. It is welcome that the Budget gives a very large boost to national health service funding: there will be real growth of 6 per cent. per annum, increasing from £45 billion last year to £69 billion by 2003-04. That represents the largest spending increase for the NHS, which will be warmly welcomed by my constituents.

The £1 billion increase in education spending will also be welcomed. The figures for Wales—as I am a Welsh Member, it is pertinent to refer to the matter—have not been announced. Of course, we have a directly elected Assembly, which is charged with responsibility for allocating funds, but I would be surprised if it did not follow broadly the same pattern of spending.

The Chancellor is right to introduce measures to support families and to tackle child poverty. I am particularly gratified with the increase in child benefit to £15 for the eldest child. That represents a 26 per cent. increase over the duration of the current Parliament. The 1p cut in the basic tax rate will mean that the tax burden on working families will be at its lowest since 1972.

The Government are spending an additional £7 billion on pensioners over the Parliament. Many will share my view that more needs to be done to tackle pensioner poverty, but let us give credit where credit is due. The increase in capital limits attached to the minimum income guarantee, the increases in the winter fuel allowance, together with other measures that have been introduced during the year, will substantially improve the quality of life of many pensioners.

Great strides have been made in increasing employment opportunity and in making work pay for many millions of low-paid families. Extending the new deal to the long-term unemployed is particularly to be welcomed, as are the Chancellor's announcements on building stronger businesses and on help for small and medium enterprises. I am pleased to note the cuts in capital gains tax and corporation tax, which will create an environment that is amenable to growth and job opportunities.

In conclusion, it would be remiss of me, as a Welsh Member, not to refer to objective 1 and the need to ensure match funding, which is very much a vexed issue in Wales, where the debate has raged for the past year or so. I fully accept that the Government can make no commitments until the conclusion of the comprehensive spending review. I note that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has undertaken not to let Wales down, and I take comfort from the fact that the Red Book includes some interesting indications of the thrust of Government policy.

On page 52, the Government state that part of their economic strategy is to

> encourage balanced economic growth across all regions and to enable each region to make the most of its comparative advantages.

My hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster, Central (Ms Winterton), who is in her place, represents an objective 1 area. She will also take comfort in the commitment on page 28 of the Red Book that the CSR process is aimed at determining how departments' programmes can best

> contribute to the achievement of the Government's objectives . . .

One of those objectives must be to ensure balanced development across the country.

This year's Budget is proof that the Government's sound management of the economy is allowing us to achieve our overall objectives of social justice, equality of opportunity, full employment and the eradication of poverty.

9.52 pm

Dr. Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak): I also congratulate my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer on giving short shrift to the siren voices on the Conservative Benches calling for tax cuts. That is the last thing that we need in the west midlands, where we are still reeling from BMW's betrayal of Rover. Tax cuts would certainly result in higher interest rates and further strengthening of the pound, which, in the debate on Rover, Conservative Members claimed to be against.

Even if Conservative Members do not understand, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor stated three times that fiscal policy and monetary policy must work in tandem. First, he said that fiscal stability was needed; secondly, he said that the Budget would lock in greater fiscal tightening; and then he said that the Budget would lock in even greater fiscal tightening. Despite that, the tax take will still be lower than it was during seven years under Mrs. Thatcher's Government.

There is clearly no need for tax increases. The Government have concentrated on making sure that taxation is fair and tax reductions are targeted on those who are less well-off. I commend my right hon. Friend for that, although I would prefer less reliance on means testing.

Of course, there is only so much that my right hon. Friend can do to bring down the value of the pound to a more competitive rate that would assist our manufacturing industry. One reason for the strength of the pound is the weakness of the euro, and that is partly due to mismanagement by the European investment bank. I urge my right hon. Friend the Chancellor to use whatever influences are available to him to impress upon the

[Dr. Lynne Jones]

European Central Bank the importance of adopting a symmetrical inflation target, as that policy has been most successful here.

Mr. St. Aubyn: Does the hon. Lady feel that we should on no account join the euro unless the European Central Bank adopts the suggestion that she has made?

Dr. Lynne Jones: I think that the sooner we can join the euro, the better. However, I should like there to be better management by the European Central Bank—*[Interruption.]* That is not inconsistent. Fundamentally, the European economy is sound. Bankers should have greater confidence in that fact and not try artificially to stimulate the euro by increasing interest rates. The euro should be allowed to fall to its natural level, after which it will start to bounce back. However, whenever the euro rallies slightly, that seems to encourage major holders of the currency to sell, which is counterproductive in reaching the ultimate objective.

The euro could be managed better. If the bankers took advice from the Chancellor, I am sure that it would be better managed, and that we could eventually have a more competitive pound and an enhanced ability to join the common currency.

In this Budget, we are starting to see a Labour Government recognising that taxation is not such a bad thing. We pay our taxes because we receive services in return. As the fourth most wealthy country in the world, we should be able to afford excellent public services. The Government realise that, despite the extra cash that has gone into the health service, a great deal more needs to be done.

I do not necessarily believe that, ultimately, health spending must be increased to the same level as that in other European countries. The NHS, by its very nature, is more efficient in the provision of services. Nevertheless, we need a more service-oriented approach in health provision—as I discovered to my cost yesterday. After sustaining a small injury to my hand, I had to sit for two hours, with a whole crowd of other people, in my local hospital's casualty department. We expect to be able to make appointments in the private sector—whether it is to see a hairdresser, to reserve a table in a restaurant or to have a car repaired—and we do not expect to have to wait. We should demand the same level of service in the public sector, in our NHS, as we demand in the private sector.

The Governments who have been pandering to the idea that we have to keep taxes down have artificially prevented the British people from spending more on health and education services. As society becomes more wealthy, we expect to have excellent public services. I congratulate the Chancellor on his announcements on spending boosts for those services.

I have some concerns, however, about other matters. I thoroughly agree with my hon. Friend the Member for East Carmarthen and Dinefwr (Mr. Williams) when he points out the need for greater capital investment. Although the extra money for transport—£250 million—is welcome, in the west midlands, Birmingham city council is arguing that we should be increasing investment in public transport by about £400 million, although obviously not all in one year. We need such up-front capital investment to boost business investment and to encourage greater investment in our region.

The Chancellor said that he was committed to balanced economic development across the regions. We need more capital spending on our infrastructure. Even with the planned increases, we shall still not return to the capital investment level as a percentage of gross domestic product that was reached in 1994-95 by the previous Government. We are still far from the capital investment levels achieved by previous Labour Governments.

There is no need for us to use private finance for public sector capital investment. I am not advocating that we should let borrowing rip, but there is clearly scope for investment that will reap dividends in future revenue income. Transport is a very good example of that. If we make up-front capital investment, we can introduce environmentally friendly congestion charges, which would pay for that capital investment. It would also be beneficial—

It being Ten o'clock, the debate stood adjourned.

Debate to be resumed tomorrow.

PETITION

Benefit Payments

10 pm

Mr. Adrian Sanders (Torbay): I wish to present a petition from residents of Torbay—collected in sub-post offices in the constituency—who are concerned about changes to the methods of benefit payment. It reads:

To the House of Commons.

The petition of residents of Torbay declares that the proposed changes in the method of benefit payments will have a detrimental effect on the post office network in Devon and Cornwall.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Secretary of State for Social Security to reconsider these proposals.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

To lie upon the Table.

Flights (Windsor)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Clelland.]*

10.1 pm

Mr. Michael Trend (Windsor): I welcome the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions to the Dispatch Box for what I understand is his third Adjournment debate of the day. That will be good for the CV, if not one for the records. I am sure that he is the master of all the subjects in question.

I am grateful to have the opportunity to bring back to the House a matter of the greatest concern to my constituents. Many people who live in and around Windsor work at Heathrow airport and for the airlines. Many constituents use the airport for business and leisure travel. We are not anti-airport, but we do have a fundamental objection to the night flights which come over us and the west of London. We want to enjoy good neighbourly relations with the airport, and that is simply impossible so long as we are woken up night after night by the planes thundering by overhead.

I believe it is high time the Government introduced a complete ban on night flights into Heathrow. Other airports all over the world have done so, so why cannot we? Other Governments have ordered their priorities so that the citizen's wish to sleep well at night is, rightly, put before the commercial convenience of airlines. Why cannot we do the same?

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): Is not one way of dealing with the commercial considerations of airlines and the need of our constituents in Slough and Windsor for a peaceful night's sleep to accept the case for the development of terminal 5, at the price of ending the night flights?

Mr. Trend: The Under-Secretary will know that many people's views on the proposed new terminal 5 are profoundly and unfavourably influenced by the continued obstinacy of successive Governments on night flights. Why should the airport be allowed to expand, with all that might follow, when the Government still compel Heathrow to be such a bad night-time neighbour?

The Under-Secretary will know also that a case will shortly go before the European Court of Human Rights concerning how the decisions are made. At Strasbourg, the Government will have to argue their case in a degree of detail that we cannot go into on an occasion such as this. The Under-Secretary may know that local authorities have a good track record of judicial review over night flights. My local authority, the Royal borough of Windsor and Maidenhead, has already said that it will seek to challenge any new proposal through the judicial process if necessary.

Does the Under-Secretary not see that the Government bring all this trouble on their own head because, when dealing with night flights into Heathrow, we are still living almost in the days of Crichel Down, rather than contemporary Britain? The man in Whitehall apparently still knows best, but will not tell us why. His sleep-deprivation studies demonstrate any ludicrous proposition that is advanced.

In the absence of other evidence, we must assume that the Government's position is that economic arguments in favour of night flights are convincing, important and should prevail. But what are these arguments? The airport has publicly stated that night flights are not central to its commercial interests, so it must be the airlines. What is at stake for them commercially? I would be much obliged if the Minister tried to answer that question tonight.

Typically at the moment, there are around 15 or so flights a night. Can the Minister tell us, roughly, how he evaluates the economic benefit of these services? How does he calculate the cost of the fundamental disruption to people's lives? Has the Minister ever attempted the roughest casting off of commercial interest, which I expect is minimal, against the human misery that I and my constituents experience every night those planes are allowed to land over our heads, or the cost to the country as a whole of what follows from that mass sleeplessness?

I am sure that a time will come when some Government will realise their proper responsibilities to the people who live around the airport, but meanwhile we have to accept—like it or not—that we are engaged in yet another round of consultation over night flights, a round that has been dragged out to an almost cruel extent. The delay, far from being seen as an act of fairness of the part of the Government, has had the effect of drawing out anxieties and fears to an intense degree in all the communities that live around Heathrow—what one might call misery blight.

The Minister will know that those who live to the west of the airport have already expressed a clear preference for the status quo. That response shows that the strength of feeling on the night flight issue is especially strong in the communities to the west of the airport. Indeed, I cautioned the Minister's predecessor that the odium that the Government would incur from people who live west of the airport for any change in landing preferences would far outweigh any thanks they might receive from those who live to the east.

The Government have tried to present their position as fair, on the grounds of the numbers affected by noise, but that is a false position. Far from there having been an in-built bias in favour of those who live to the west of the airport, the reverse has always been the case. In fact, the difference in scale of the numbers has already been accounted for. The original reason why there was any preference at all was because the noise of aircraft taking off was substantially worse than that of landing. That meant that a benefit was built in for those who lived to the east of the airport and that was the reason for the so-called Cranford agreement. Because of some welcome developments in technology, take-offs are no longer the major problem. Noise from landings is now the major problem. The Government's attitude seems to be that because people on the west side of the airport had the worst of it in the old days, they might as well have the worst of it now that landings are the big issue. I do not understand how or why that is fair.

With the decision already announced at the close of the second part of the tripartite consultation process, to introduce runway alternation for night landings that take place from the west, the Minister will appreciate that the Government have already doubled the area that will be affected on our side of the airport. It gets worse. The deadline has just passed for the third stage of the current consultation on night flights into Heathrow. No attention was paid in that consultation process to the great majority

[Mr. Trend]

who want an end to night flights or to retain the status quo. My constituents have already been told that the misery of night flights will be extended to two flight paths rather than one, and now they have been asked how much misery they want.

The choice is between roughly three times or more than four times as much noise as at present. My constituents have told me that that is Hobson's choice and that they do not want to be cast in the role of Hobson. Moreover, there is a growing suspicion that in the closing stages of the consultation process, the Government are attempting to set those who live on one side of the airport against those who live on the other.

If one asks the people who live to the east of the airport if they want less noise, of course they will say, "Yes, thank you very much." If they are asked how much less noise they want, they will say: the greatest amount available. However, my constituents have not been given that easy choice. Many of them are inclined to demand that the status quo be retained. I have tried to put it to them that we have a powerful Government who can do as they please. If they wish to inflict added misery on us, that is what they can do.

I have put it to my constituents that if the Government are offering a choice between two evils, the sensible thing to do is to opt for the lesser evil. However, many people to the west of the airport are not prepared to accept that argument. They are so angry with the whole process and the way in which it has been handled that I expect many of them will cut through all the technical jargon in the highly complex consultation paper—which was a disgrace in itself—and reiterate their view that all scheduled night flights should be ended or at least that the status quo should be maintained.

I hope that the Minister will understand the predicament for those of us who live to the west of the airport with respect to the choice that we have been given. I hope also that he will treat seriously those who are not inclined to play the Government's game. We see a trap, and we do not want to walk blindly into it.

Let us assume for the sake of argument that the worst happens and the Government use their undoubted powers vastly to increase the night noise over Windsor and its surrounding area. What will happen next? People who have bought houses and moved into Windsor and the surrounding area are aware that they are close to Heathrow airport. Indeed, they are much closer than many other people think. My constituency comes within a mile of the airport's boundary. I cannot imagine anybody moving into the area in recent years who did not know that. People are realistic and they weigh the pros and cons and make up their minds on sensible grounds. However, I believe that they will not take lightly a substantial worsening of the circumstances that will be brought about by the Government's diktat.

Surely those days have passed. Why should people put up with such a situation? The quality of their lives will be diminished and the value of their property may well suffer. Quite reasonably, they will seek redress, and where will they seek it? After 18 months of campaigning on the issue locally, I am sure that the great majority of those who live around the airport understand that the decision belongs entirely to the Government, not to the airport. They will therefore be banging on the Government's door.

Furthermore, my local borough points out that, with road traffic, it is a requirement in law that noise mitigation be available to properties that are subjected to an increase of 1 decibel or more above a predetermined limit as a result of alterations to the highway. Should we not expect consistency with that policy from the Government in respect of changes that are made to the night flights regime; or will someone have to slog his way through the courts to test the position, especially as the proposed increase in night flights over Windsor is substantially worse than that covered by road traffic law?

I ask the Minister whether it is fair suddenly and greatly to increase noise and nuisance for any part of our population? I teased an earlier Minister with the prospect of setting up a loudspeaker van outside his house and relaying the noise of planes landing at the same time and at the same volume as night flights over Windsor. Rather humorously, I thought, I was told that that would be impossible. When I asked why, I was told that it would be against the law. That is precisely my point. If it is against the law in another part of the country, why should it not be so for my constituents?

As a civilised country, we should not allow one interest to affect to such a degree the basic rights of the people as a whole. If the Minister told BA tomorrow that it must rearrange the few planes affected by a night flight ban, it would no doubt protest, grumble and then quickly find a way of coping and rearranging its schedules. If the hon. Gentleman did that, he would at a stroke become a hero to the hundreds of thousands of people who live round the airport. These people believe that they have a right to a good night's sleep. Does he not believe that all the people on both sides of the airport who are afflicted by dreadful noise in the middle of the night have a right to a good night's sleep?

The Minister must believe me. When aircraft are flying during the day, it is sometimes impossible to hear what someone is saying on the other side of the room. He must believe me also when I say that when one is woken up in the middle of the night, it is extremely difficult to go back to sleep because of the continuing noise of the aircraft. I think that I can speak for hon. Members on both sides of the House in saying that our constituents deserve, and have a right to, a good night's sleep.

10.14 pm

Mr. Tony Colman (Putney): This is the fourth debate that we have had on this subject this Parliament. The hon. Member for Windsor (Mr. Trend) spoke on it in 1998, and I have done so in 1997 and 1999. I unite with his strong and strident call for a ban on all night flights. It is about time that the Government stood up to the airline industry. The 16 flights could be reallocated to times after 6 o'clock, and I do not understand why there has been delay year after year.

In the brief time allowed to me, I shall support the proposed changes in relation to the preferential use of Heathrow's runways at night. It is time for fairness and justice on both sides of the debate. I have pointed out to the House before that 64,000 people live under the runway approach on the easterly preference, and that 580,000 live under the runway on the westerly approach. The latter include my constituents in Putney. The figures are from the House of Commons Library, but I believe that they grossly underestimate the numbers of people involved, given that millions of people in central and east London are also affected by the flights.

The consultation process closed on 17 March. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will say tonight that he will alleviate the misery suffered by people living to the east of the airport. I remind him that only 11 per cent. of flights come in over Windsor, whereas 89 per cent. of them come in over Putney.

10.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Chris Mullin): The hon. Member for Windsor (Mr. Trend) put his case very powerfully. I understand the frustration that he and his constituents feel. My flat in Lambeth—which I readily acknowledge is miles away from Windsor—is also directly under the flight path. Although that causes me no special problem, I know that sleeping with the window open means that I wake up, and that I can hear every night flight coming over. I know that the problem is much worse for people in constituencies such as those of my hon. Friends the Members for Putney (Mr. Colman) and for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart), and for people in the constituency of the hon. Member for Windsor.

The hon. Member for Windsor was generous enough to say that the policy in dispute was espoused by successive Governments. However, as his speech progressed, I began to think that he was suggesting to his constituents in Windsor that it was only the present Government who were responsible. He was right to say that the policy had drifted for years under successive Governments—the policy to be reviewed in the court case to which he referred was made in 1993. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman pursued previous Governments on this important issue as rigorously as he pursues the present Government.

The hon. Gentleman said that his constituents would prefer the status quo. I completely understand why people in Putney and Windsor would want a total ban on night flights, but that may not be possible, as I shall say in a moment. If a ban is not possible, it seems only right that the pain should be reasonably shared. I notice that the burden of the consultations that have been carried out is that that view coincides with public opinion on the matter.

In his short contribution, my hon. Friend the Member for Putney cited relevant figures from the Library. I do not believe that people living on one side of the airport can be exempt from 90 per cent. of the pain while larger numbers of people living on the other side are obliged to live with it. I say that even at the risk of forgoing the privilege of being a hero in Windsor: I have enjoyed my 15 seconds of fame and I know that it is very fleeting.

I turn now to the ban on night flights and to the consultation process referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Putney. The consultation document entitled "Proposals for Changes to the Preferential Use of Heathrow's Runways at Night" was issued on 23 November. The consultation process ended last Friday. I hope that my hon. Friend will forgive me if I say that the process of studying the approximately 6,000 responses has barely started. I am not in a position to say what the outcome will be, although I assure hon. Members that all responses will be carefully considered before a decision is reached.

The Government undertook the consultation in response to calls for fairer and more equitable arrangements. That process began in 1996, when the Heathrow airport consultative committee carried out a review of the westerly preference, which has operated at Heathrow since the 1960s. It provides for westerly operations to continue, day and night, when there is a light following wind. Its purpose is to reduce the number of occasions when aircraft take off in an easterly direction over the more densely populated areas east of the airport, where noise preferential departure routes cannot be designed to avoid built-up areas. To the west of the airport, over the hon. Gentleman's constituency, the departure routes pass between the main built-up areas. The airport consultative committee also undertook two trials of runway alternation at night, in 1996 and 1997.

The consultative committee reported its findings to my Department, and it was decided to consult widely on the many and complex issues raised. Ten options for possible changes to the preferential use of Heathrow's runways at night were set out in part 2 of the Government's second stage consultation paper issued in November 1998. Some 2,803 responses were received. Most respondents were concerned to have the least possible number of flights overflying their particular areas, which is understandable, and most—by a ratio of 16:1—supported the introduction of runway alternation at night.

Given that clear response, the Government were able to enter into early discussions with BAA plc, leading to the introduction of runway alternation at night on 19 December. However, the responses to the 1998 consultation on the options for modifying the directional preference at night did not provide a clear basis for reaching a final decision at that stage. People expressed strong views east and west of the airport—just as happened this evening. There was, however, recognition among many of the representative bodies that the current arrangements were not fair and equitable, and that they could be improved. The Government share that view, as I said in my written answer to a parliamentary question from my hon. Friend the Member for Putney last November.

The underlying message in the responses to the November 1998 consultation was that fair and equitable arrangements were considered more important than alternatives that would reduce disturbance to the absolute minimum in terms of the population affected. For this reason, we decided not to take forward various options, such as introducing a 5-knot easterly preference at night, and using the southern runway only during easterly operations.

When the westerly preference was introduced in 1962, and for many years afterwards, night-time departures at Heathrow were significant enough to warrant its operation at night. In 1971, some 43 per cent. of night movements were departures; today, the figure is only 4 per cent. We consider that it no longer makes sense from a noise amelioration point of view, and is incompatible with our broad aim of reducing the impact of the airport on the local environment, deliberately to increase the number of occasions on which early morning arrivals need to overfly the most densely populated areas east of the airport by maintaining the westerly preference at night. We made that view clear in the latest consultation paper.

During a typical year under the present arrangements, about 89 per cent. of arrivals between 4 am and 6 am overfly the built-up areas of London to land in a westerly direction. Around 11 per cent. land in the other direction over Windsor. It was no surprise to us that many

[Mr. Chris Mullin]

respondents considered that unfair. The population distribution under the final approach paths, east and west of the airport, is described in the latest consultation paper. By far the greatest number—the ratio is 9:1—live east of the airport. The present arrangements clearly fail to recognise that.

A Government who failed to recognise these fundamentals would be failing in their duty to minimise the nuisance caused by aircraft noise for all communities around the airport. We have therefore invited views on two proposals. The first is to suspend the westerly preference at night after the last departure until the first departure the next morning. Over the long term, that would be likely to result in 64 per cent. westerly operations and 36 per cent. easterly operations.

Secondly, for the same period of the night, it is proposed to put in place a fixed weekly rotation between easterly and westerly operations subject to overriding weather conditions, which would be likely to result in about 53 per cent. westerly operations and 47 per cent. easterly operations over the long term. Either option would be much fairer that the present arrangements.

Night flights formed the substance of the speech by the hon. Member for Windsor. As he made clear, many people want a complete ban, for reasons that I readily understand, and as people made clear in their responses to the 1998 consultations. We carefully examined the arguments for and against such a ban, and I continue to review them. As previous Governments had, we found a need to strike a balance between protecting local communities from excessive aircraft noise at night and providing for air services to operate at night where they benefit users and the local, regional and national economy.

The Government's decision not to introduce a ban was announced on 10 June last year, and the new arrangements came into effect in October. Noise quotas for Heathrow were reduced by up to 20 per cent. Important long-haul services to and from Heathrow need either to land or take off at night at one or other end of their journeys. Many departures from Heathrow are required to take off before the start of our night restrictions and arrive during the night at their destinations. Whether they land here during the night, or land or take off at night at the other end of their journey, they make an important contribution to the economy and help to ensure that London maintains direct daily links with countries that produce 90 per cent. of the world's gross domestic product.

The case for night flights was examined in 1998. It is not possible to attribute economic values to individual flights as they form part of an integrated system of air services. However—and this addresses one of the specific points made by the hon. Gentleman, in 1998—the industry estimated the value of an additional daily long-haul scheduled flight to be between £20 million and £30 million a year in revenue terms, taking no account of wider economic factors. Whether or not we use the services ourselves, most of us benefit directly or indirectly from their contribution to the economy and to London's strong position both in world markets and as a popular destination for tourism. As a trading nation, we ignore that at our peril.

The hon. Gentleman said that many countries had introduced bans on night flights. I have asked about that point, and I cannot find any example of a major country in Europe. I should be grateful if the hon. Gentleman could draw my attention to any example—if not now, in due course.

The European convention on human rights, to which the hon. Gentleman referred, recognises the necessity of striking a balance between the rights of the individual and the economic well-being of a country. States are allowed a considerable margin of appreciation in striking that balance, the need for which has been recognised by successive Governments. I refer the hon. Gentleman to the example contained in the *Official Report*, 22 May 1993, at column 1061, and I give him no prizes for guessing who was in Government at the time.

The Guardian report on Monday 13 March touched on that issue. While it did not give a full account of the case to be heard in the European Court of Human Rights next May, it was right to say that the court will have to consider whether the Government reached its decision on night flight restrictions at Heathrow in 1993 in accordance with the law and with important and well-established principles. *The Guardian* was quite wrong to suggest that the Government had failed to put up a defence in the case: we did so in August 1998. The case is important, but it is for the court to decide it, not for us.

The hon. Gentleman and my hon. Friends the Members for Putney and for Slough, whose constituents are affected, are not the only hon. Members to raise night flights regularly with me since I became the relevant Minister. I recognise the importance of the matter, and I am anxious to maintain a dialogue. I am sorry that I cannot give the hon. Gentleman satisfaction tonight, but I look forward to pursuing the matter with him and with others in future.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-nine minutes past Ten o'clock.

House of Commons

Wednesday 22 March 2000

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

CITY OF LONDON (WARD ELECTIONS) BILL *[BY ORDER]*

Order for further consideration, as amended, read.

To be further considered on Wednesday 29 March.

Oral Answers to Questions

WALES

The Secretary of State was asked—

Housing

1. **Mr. Elfyn Llwyd** (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): When he last met the First Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales to discuss allocation of funds for housing in Wales within the block grant. [114262]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Paul Murphy): I meet the First Secretary regularly. We discuss a range of issues.

Mr. Llwyd: I thank the Secretary of State for that helpful answer. No doubt he worked very hard on that one.

The Local Government Bill contains somewhat compelling incentives to transfer existing housing stock to registered social landlords, but is it the Government's policy to force councils to continue with those transfers, even when it is not financially viable or helpful to them?

Mr. Murphy: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that those matters are ultimately for the Assembly to consider, but, of course, they have been considered in England and, as far as I am aware, in Scotland, too. Options are available. There is no compulsion because there is a variety of ways in which to deal with housing: responsibility can be given by a local authority to an arm's-length company or to a registered social landlord, or the matter can be dealt with in some other way.

Mr. Barry Jones (Alyn and Deeside): There is some anxiety in my constituency among Flintshire county councillors, notably Ron Hill and Ron Hampson, who want decaying council estates that were built after world war two to be endowed with new windows, central heating and new doors to make them warm, damp free, modern and up to the standards of this century. Will my right hon. Friend have a quiet word with the First Secretary to express the wish that some of those estates be modernised urgently? If he sees him, can he ask him again for £25 million in Airbus grant?

Mr. Murphy: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his remarks. He may rest assured that I readily convey his remarks and those of other right hon. and hon. Friends to the First Secretary when I meet him. I agree with my right hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd): housing is an important matter for our communities, especially as a large amount of housing stock is ageing. It is a question of being able to look at priorities and planning for the future.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): Does the Secretary of State agree that, for every pound that is spent on the new Assembly building, a pound less can be spent on housing? In that vein, will he join me in congratulating the new First Secretary on breaking from the old First Secretary and announcing today that he is suspending any development on the new building pending another review? That is a good start, but the block grant for spending on public services can be further protected if the Secretary of State persuades the First Secretary to scrap any replacement for what already exists and works adequately.

Mr. Murphy: It would be beyond my powers or responsibilities to tell the First Secretary or the Assembly what to do. It is for the Assembly to decide how to spend its money. I understand that the First Secretary is reviewing the whole position of the new building in Cardiff. I am sure that he is doing that with prudence in mind.

Local Government

2. **Mr. Jon Owen Jones** (Cardiff, Central): What discussions he has had with the Welsh Local Government Association about the Local Government Bill [*Lords*]. [114263]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. David Hanson): Both my right hon. Friend and I have had discussions with representatives of the Welsh Local Government Association about the Local Government Bill. On 25 February, I addressed a meeting of the Welsh Local Government Association co-ordinating committee.

Mr. Jones: Is it true that the First Secretary, Rhodri Morgan, has insufficient powers to deal with the abuse of allowances in Cardiff, whereby the new leader of Cardiff council receives an allowance that is three or four times greater than that of any other leader throughout the United Kingdom? If it is true, what will the Minister and the Government do to amend the Local Government Bill to give the Welsh Assembly sufficient powers to deal with the issue, which is of widespread public concern?

Mr. Hanson: As my hon. Friend may be aware, under clause 88 of the Local Government Bill, the Assembly will have the power to make regulations to require councils to set up an independent panel to review councillors' allowances. The Government are looking at the feasibility of including a provision in the Bill to enable

the Assembly to set up an all-Wales panel. The Assembly has certain powers under existing legislation to examine that issue.

I recognise that, at the moment, local government has the autonomy to set its own allowances. However, like my hon. Friend, I think that councils and their members should bear in mind their responsibilities to the electorate and exercise their judgment with care and prudence.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): I am interested in that response. I agree with much of what the Minister has said, but, with all the talk of modernising local government in the Local Government Bill, is he not embarrassed that there is a dose of good old-fashioned Labour greed? I am talking about Russell Goodway, the Labour leader of Cardiff council, who receives £58,000 and is the highest-paid councillor in Britain, working a three-day week.

There is another point here, too. When eight Labour councillors refused to back Russell Goodway's £58,000 salary, initially, they were suspended. Will the Minister say what discussions he is having with his colleagues about introducing some true democracy into the Labour party in Wales? Earlier today, Russell Goodway said:

> I'm saying that in 5 years time, what's happened in Cardiff now will be the norm across the country.

Does the Minister agree with that?

Mr. Hanson: I remind the hon. Gentleman—he may have forgotten—that, in 1995, it was a Conservative Government who changed the legislation and allowed councillors to set their own allowance levels. Labour Members will look after the Labour party, and the hon. Gentleman should look after Conservative-controlled councils—such as Westminster. Although he may not be aware of it, the Labour party in Wales has upheld the appeals of the members who were suspended and has asked the council to review its expenditure on councillors' allowances. I reiterate that councillors and Members should bear their responsibilities to the electorate and exercise their judgment with prudence.

Mr. Ted Rowlands (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney): When my hon. Friend next meets the Welsh Local Government Association, will he tell it to get on with the fundamental review of the whole revenue support grant arrangement—which, over a number of years, has led to the most extraordinary distortions in council tax figures, and has particularly led to huge increases in some of our poorest authorities?

Mr. Hanson: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. He will be aware that the Assembly and the Welsh Local Government Association have examined the formula and agree that it needs revision. They are examining how they will develop a new formula, to be agreed and in place for next year's financial settlement.

Livestock Industry

3. **Mr. Nicholas Winterton** (Macclesfield): What discussions he has had with the First Secretary on the future of the livestock industry in Wales. [114264]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Paul Murphy): I meet the First Secretary weekly and we discuss a wide range of issues, including the future of the livestock industry in Wales.

Mr. Winterton: Will the Secretary of State for Wales accept that the livestock industry is in severe crisis? Is he aware that the deadline for the British Government to claim agrimonetary compensation is the end of April? Does he agree that such compensation is one very good way of assisting the livestock industry? Is he also aware that all other European Union states claim their full allocation under agrimonetary compensation? Will he claim the full amount for livestock farmers in Wales and give an assurance that he has no intention of reducing support for hill farmers?

Mr. Murphy: A considerable amount of support has been given to hill farmers. The hill livestock compensatory allowance for Wales was increased by £15 million, from £42 million for this year and for last year. I understand the hon. Gentleman's point on agrimonetary compensation. However, he will be aware that £88 million has been paid to farmers in this country because of the high cost of the pound, and that, over the past number of years, much more than that has been paid. He will also be aware that the Prime Minister intends to hold an agricultural summit next week, at which there will be representatives from the farming community in Wales and all those matters will be discussed.

Mr. Richard Livsey (Brecon and Radnorshire): May I repeat the question, in a slightly different way, that has just been asked? It is reckoned that farmers in Wales are owed £45 million in agrimonetary compensation for 1999–2000. Although the right hon. Gentleman has mentioned years prior to that year, we are talking about the current financial year, which is just ending. Farmers in Wales are absolutely on their knees. Will the Secretary of State go to that summit with the Prime Minister and advocate very strongly that farmers should receive the money that they have failed to get in the marketplace in the past 12 months because of the high pound? I am very surprised that the Chancellor did not deal with that subject yesterday.

Mr. Murphy: I understand the problems that are caused by the high cost of the pound and by exchange rates. The hon. Gentleman is aware that we have to examine many other issues in trying to ensure that, in the years and decades ahead, Wales continues to have a viable farming industry. That objective will form much of the agenda in Downing Street next week, when I am sure that the point that he has made will be made forcibly by the farming communities themselves.

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): Will the Secretary of State confirm that he or a representative from his Department will be present at the farming summit in Downing Street on 30 March? In the absence of

the agrimonetary compensation scheme that has been requested from the Opposition Benches this afternoon, what other proposals will be taken to that summit?

Mr. Murphy: I can confirm that my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary will be present at that summit and he is aware, of course, that the dairy sector in Wales has serious problems. The National Farmers Union met in my office some weeks ago on that matter, and I am sure that the hon. Gentleman has also met the union. We will emphasise the importance of trying to do something to help the dairy sector in Wales, by examining promotional campaigns for milk and in other ways as well.

Local Authority Representatives

4. **Mr. Huw Edwards** (Monmouth): How many representatives of local authorities he has met in Wales since November 1999. [114265]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. David Hanson): Both my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I have met a number of representatives of local authorities in the past few months. In particular, since October 1999 I have met representatives of 17 local authorities in Wales to discuss the Local Government Bill, and I plan to meet representatives of the remaining five local authorities as soon as possible.

Mr. Edwards: I thank my hon. Friend for the meeting that was held in the Welsh Office with representatives of the community councils in Monmouthshire. They are concerned about the 18 per cent. increase in council tax that results from the funding formula, and about how it discriminates against rural areas such as Monmouthshire, which also has pockets of deprivation. Those include Llanelly Hill and the Rother estate, both of which will be visited next week by the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs as part of its inquiry into social exclusion. I remind my hon. Friend that the schools in those estates—Llwynu and Darenfelin—will be delighted with the Chancellor's announcement in the Budget of the extra funding for primary schools.

Mr. Hanson: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. As I mentioned to my hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Mr. Rowlands), it is a common view on the part of the Welsh Local Government Association and the Assembly that the formula for distributing grant to local authorities has some faults and needs revision. Those bodies are working to produce a new, fairer formula shortly. On the second point, I am proud to be here today as part of a Labour Government who have made available some £50 million in Wales as a result of the Budget, which the National Assembly can use to tackle those very issues in regard to schools. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Chancellor on his initiatives because the Conservative party would never have given that extra funding to schools in Wales.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): When the Minister met local authorities in Wales, did he discuss the problem of the systematic politicisation of NHS appointments, which was identified by the Commissioner for Public Appointments in her report this morning? Can he explain why that Government report has not been placed in the Library or in the Vote Office prior to the commencement of business this afternoon?

Mr. Hanson: I have not had the opportunity to discuss that particular aspect with local authorities. It may be before the hon. Gentleman's time, but I can recall people such as Sir Geoffrey Inkin and Ian Grist, the latter being the former Member of Parliament for Cardiff, Central, who went straight into the chairmanship of a health trust following his defeat in the election. We shall examine the report, but I suggest to the hon. Gentleman that his question is an example of the pot calling the kettle black.

Mrs. Betty Williams (Conwy): When my hon. Friend had the deep and meaningful discussions with local authorities' representatives, was he able to discuss openness in local government? Many colleagues on both sides of the House signed an early-day motion a few months ago that criticised some councillors in Gwynedd for being economical with the truth when declaring their interests. Given that, since then, those councillors have had to apologise to the council, does that not show that openness in local government is very important?

Mr. Hanson: I note what my hon. Friend has said about Gwynedd county council. The Local Government Bill will ensure that local authorities have a strong ethical dimension and that we provide an ethical framework to which councillors can adhere. On the question of openness, I urge all local authorities to ensure that the minutes that they take of cabinet committees are put into the public domain as far as possible, so that people can judge, examine and scrutinise effectively local authorities' decisions.

Mr. Robert Walter (North Dorset): The hon. Member for Monmouth (Mr. Edwards) was right to express his concerns about council tax increases in his constituency. However, if he were more in touch with his constituency—as I was this morning in speaking to the local authority—he would know that the council tax increase in Monmouthshire is 24 per cent. and a typical band D council tax will go up from £480 to £603. That is to pay for the four overspending local authorities in Wales. How will the Under-Secretary of State tell council tax payers in his constituency and in the Secretary of State's constituency why they are suffering council tax increases of more than 10 per cent. when the average for England is only 6 per cent. and the average for inner London is under 5 per cent.?

Mr. Hanson: The hon. Gentleman would know a lot about council tax in England as he represents a seat in Dorset. Having said that, Monmouthshire still has the third lowest council tax in Wales. I hope that the hon. Gentleman recognised that in his discussions this morning. The Assembly and the Welsh Local Government Association have agreed that there should be a damping scheme for 2000-01. The formula for distributing grants to local authorities is flawed. That is why the Assembly, the Welsh Local Government Association and the Government, as we take an interest in it, will look at how that formula works in future years.

Toxic Waste

5. **Ann Clwyd** (Cynon Valley): What discussions he has had about disposal of waste from the former Phurnacite plant in the Cynon Valley with environmental authorities *(a)* inside and *(b)* outside Wales; and if he will make a statement. [114266]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Paul Murphy): I meet regularly with the Environment Agency Wales—we met most recently on 1 March 2000—and discuss a wide range of issues. I have also spoken with the First Secretary about that site.

Ann Clwyd: I hope that my right hon. Friend will discuss the former Phurnacite plant, as I have been talking about it ever since I was elected to Parliament. It was the worst industrial polluter in Britain when it closed down 10 years ago, and the toxic waste that was left is still on the doorsteps of the people of Abercwmboi. There is an impasse between the local authority and the Welsh development agency. Whatever method is used to dispose of the toxic waste, will the Government make available extra funds to pay for its disposal?

Mr. Murphy: I am obviously conscious of my hon. Friend's interest in the matter. Indeed, some years ago she and I visited the site and I am aware of the difficulties that have arisen because of its situation. My hon. Friend may rest assured that I shall raise the matter with the First Secretary at the first available opportunity.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Has the Minister had a chance to consider the impact on the Phurnacite plant in the Cynon valley of the climate change levy and the—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. The plant no longer exists. We are discussing the toxic waste that remains.

Economic Policy

6. **Mrs. Jackie Lawrence** (Preseli Pembrokeshire): What recent discussions he has had with the First Secretary about the impact of Government economic policy in Wales. [114267]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Paul Murphy): I meet the First Secretary regularly and discuss a range of issues. I welcome my hon. Friend back to the House and hope that she is now fit and well.

Mrs. Lawrence: I am sure that my right hon. Friend welcomes the investment in health and education that was announced in yesterday's Budget. Does he join me in welcoming the measures to assist small businesses in Wales, particularly the taxation measures? When he meets the First Secretary, will he urge him to waste no time in establishing a venture capital fund for Wales to help small business start-ups?

Mr. Murphy: My hon. Friend is right to emphasise the help that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has given small and medium-sized enterprises, of which there are 29,000 in Wales. In addition, the national health service in Wales will benefit by £1.3 billion over four years; £50 million will go to schools in Wales and £9 million to transport in Wales. Half a million Welsh pensioners and 335,000 Welsh families with children will benefit from the excellent Budget that my right hon. Friend announced to the House yesterday.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): What contribution is made to the Welsh economy by the Welsh proportion of the 284 Labour councillors appointed to NHS trust boards?

Mr. Murphy: I am not quite sure of the relevance of that question to the main question. Members of local authorities in Wales, from whichever political party, have made a significant contribution to the quality of life in Wales.

Learning and Skills

7. **Mr. Martin Caton** (Gower): What discussions he has had with public and private sector representatives in Wales about the Learning and Skills Bill [*Lords*]. [114268]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. David Hanson): Since the Learning and Skills Bill was introduced last December, I have met, and discussed the Bill with, National Assembly members. I have had a number of meetings with representatives of the Wales TUC, CBI (Wales), the Welsh Development Agency and local authorities.

Mr. Caton: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. Does he agree that the creation of the Council for Education and Training in Wales gives us the chance of a new start for post-16 education? It will replace competition with co-operation in our institutions, and give equal values to different options in education and training after 16. The hope is that it will get rid of some of the demarcation lines in institutions. Will he join me in congratulating Gorseinon college in my constituency on its high-quality, cross-curricular approach, which has led to the college winning the prestigious Paul Hamlyn Beacon award for outstanding achievement in the performing arts?

Mr. Hanson: I certainly join my hon. Friend in congratulating Gorseinon college on winning the award, as it is an important achievement. The Learning and Skills Bill aims to modernise post-16 education and training in Wales, to drive up standards and to address the skills needs of the economy, business and individuals. It also aims to ensure the greater coherence and choice to which my hon. Friend referred. I commend the Bill to the House, and I hope that it will receive the support of all hon. Members in Wales, and elsewhere.

Child Abuse Inquiry

9. **Mr. Martyn Jones** (Clwyd, South): When he expects to introduce legislation to implement the recommendations of the north Wales child abuse inquiry. [114270]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Paul Murphy): The report of the tribunal of inquiry into the abuse of children in care in north Wales made

72 recommendations, most of which do not require primary legislation. At the top of the list is the tribunal's call for the appointment of a children's commissioner for Wales. I have already announced that the Government will table an amendment to the Care Standards Bill to make provision for the children's commissioner for Wales covering children in care.

Mr. Jones: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply. He will know that I am not happy with the way in which the Waterhouse report was drafted, but its recommendations are very important. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that the children's commissioner will have the widest possible powers?

Mr. Murphy: My hon. Friend will be aware that the Care Standards Bill is being used to introduce the children's commissioner to ensure that the recommendations of Waterhouse on children in care are implemented as speedily as possible. The National Assembly is currently examining the matter of the commissioner's wider remit. We will discuss the remit with the Assembly to determine how best to take the matter forward.

Child Poverty

10. **Mr. Alan W. Williams** (East Carmarthen and Dinefwr): If he will make a statement on the level of child poverty in Wales. [114271]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. David Hanson): The joint ministerial committee on poverty has agreed to future joint working between the UK Government and the devolved Administrations to tackle poverty across the UK.

The National Assembly for Wales has set up a social exclusion unit to look at poverty issues and will promote effective joint working to combat family poverty and social exclusion in Wales.

Mr. Williams: Does my hon. Friend welcome the increase announced in yesterday's Budget of 20 per cent. in the children's tax credit, which is part of the working families tax credit? The children's tax credit has been raised by £4.35 to £25.16 a week. Is not that an excellent way to tackle child poverty, and make work pay?

Mr. Hanson: I certainly believe that the working families tax credit is a valuable benefit for people in Wales. About 75,000 working families in Wales will benefit from the provision, and the increases will be most beneficial for people on low incomes and for those who suffer poverty. Coupled with the biggest-ever rises in child benefit which this Government have introduced, some 335,000 people will benefit from child benefit increases in Wales. That is good news for people in Wales, and helps us to meet our targets of tackling poverty and halving child poverty in the next 20 years.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): What does it do for child poverty in Cardiff when the Labour leader of Cardiff council awards himself £58,000 a year for a three-day week? The council tax payers in Cardiff have to pay 10 per cent. more to finance that salary.

Mr. Hanson: No amount of spurious fluff from the hon. Gentleman will hide the fact that the Conservative party opposed the working families tax credit and would never have introduced the increases in child benefit. The long-term child poverty that this Government have to tackle is the result of 20 years of Conservative government.

I have explained to the House the position regarding Cardiff city council. The hon. Gentleman knows that the Government will tackle child poverty, and that the Conservative party would not.

Local Government

11. **Mrs. Betty Williams** (Conwy): What discussions he has had with the Welsh Local Government Association about the Local Government Bill [Lords]. [114272]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. David Hanson): Both my right hon. Friend and I have had discussions with representatives of the Welsh Local Government Association about the Local Government Bill. On 25 February, I addressed a meeting of the Welsh Local Government Association co-ordinating committee.

Mrs. Williams: Does my hon. Friend agree that the new deal that will give local councils responsibility to promote well-being in their areas is a significant step forward, and one that shows that the Government have listened?

Mr. Hanson: The well-being power will ensure that councils are at the centre of their local communities. The Government have given an important power and councils throughout Wales and England will benefit from it.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [114288] **Dr. Stephen Ladyman** (South Thanet): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 22 March.

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall be having further meetings later today.

Dr. Ladyman: Does my right hon. Friend agree that he has a duty to respond publicly to suggestions that are made to him for managing the economy? If so, will he examine research provided to me yesterday by the Library that shows that if a Government came into power committed to cutting the tax burden by as little as 1 per cent. a year, in a year when growth was slightly lower than expected they would have to cut spending by

£20 billion, and that proportionately £3.5 billion of cuts would have to be found by the national health service? As that is the Opposition's suggestion, does not my right hon. Friend have a duty to ensure that people have an opportunity to compare Tory policy with yesterday's Budget?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has touched a raw nerve. The only reason that we have the money to invest in the health service and in our schools is because we introduced policies of welfare to work, which were opposed by the Conservative party. We reduced national debt, which was given us by the Conservative party, and we achieved strong economic growth, when the Conservative party predicted recession and when their policies would have caused recession. The choice is very simple; a strong economy under Labour or boom and bust under the Tories.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): A year ago the Prime Minister claimed in the House that business taxes were coming down. Taking into account yesterday's Budget, will he give the updated figure for the total increase in taxes on business over the lifetime of this Parliament?

The Prime Minister: We have cut the rate of corporation tax, and corporation tax and small business taxes are now at their lowest level ever.

Mr. Hague: Is not that answer an example of why nobody believes anything that the right hon. Gentleman says about tax cuts? The actual figure given by the Scottish Chambers of Commerce yesterday shows that the additional cost to business—*[Interruption.]* I know that Labour Members do not like hearing from Scotland any more, but they should hear from it. The additional cost over the lifetime of this Parliament is £25 billion to £30 billion. Characteristically, the Chancellor never mentioned in his Budget speech one of the biggest taxes levied on business yesterday, and that was the change to double taxation relief. Is the Prime Minister aware that PricewaterhouseCoopers voiced its extreme concern this afternoon about the matter and said that it fears that the yield could run into several billions of pounds? It fears that this will make the UK one of the least attractive places for large international groups. Is the right hon. Gentleman completely confident in the figures that the Chancellor has given to the House?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I am aware of the PricewaterhouseCoopers letter and its concerns. We believe them to be mistaken and we have asked PwC to discuss them with us. I believe that its assessment is based on a misunderstanding of the tax position.

Mr. Hague: After what everyone has been through with the Government's figures over the past few years, when it is a contest between the Chancellor's accuracy and that of the most reputable and largest accountancy firm in the world, suspicion is likely to arise on the Government Benches. If the right hon. Gentleman will not acknowledge that business taxes are increasing, what is the up-to-date figure for the total increase in taxes as a result of last year's Budget and the present Budget coming into force next month?

The Prime Minister: As I have explained to the right hon. Gentleman on many occasions, yes, we had two years clearing the deficit that we inherited from his party but now, I am delighted to say, the tax burden is falling. However, I do not want to leave the PricewaterhouseCoopers point before I have answered it again for him. PricewaterhouseCoopers has written on behalf of certain of its clients. It is important for us to investigate whether that is true or not, but I think that the right hon. Gentleman is being absolutely fatuous in suggesting that that applies to the entirety of business in the United Kingdom.

Mr. Hague: Greater credibility would be attached to the Prime Minister's statements if he could answer a simple question such as the one that I just asked him. What is the total net increase in taxes coming into force next month? All he has to do is look at one page of the Red Book and deduct it from another page. The answer, even on the Government's figures, is a £365 million tax increase coming into force next month. On the figures from the House of Commons Library, which strip out all the fiddles, it is a £1.4 billion increase. Will the Prime Minister now tell the House—because this is one of the reasons that it happens—how many people will lose the married couples allowance next month without receiving any compensating children's tax credit?

The Prime Minister: Child benefit has gone up and there is the basic rate income tax cut. The tax burden this year is falling according to the figures in the Red Book, not rising. For 1999-2000, it is 37 per cent.; next year it falls to 36.9 per cent. With the action that we took clearing the deficit for the first two years, any rise is less than the rise in the last two years of the Tory Government when the right hon. Gentleman was in the Cabinet. It is less than the rise under Margaret Thatcher and less than the rise profiled under Tory plans. In future Budgets, the right hon. Gentleman can also see the path of the tax take. The 10p starting rate, the basic rate tax cut, the increases in child benefit and the working families tax credit mean that Britain's working families are better off.

Mr. Hague: The question was about the married couples allowance. For someone who is meant to know about the Budget, the right hon. Gentleman does not know very much. The question was how many people are losing their married couples allowance without anything to compensate for it next month. The answer is that 10 million people are losing that allowance, with nothing to compensate.

Let me read the right hon. Gentleman a letter from a taxpayer—I will send him a copy. It says:

> Having received my tax code now for the year 2000-2001, I am deeply disappointed by the Labour party's continued lying and "spin" about the protection of the family.—*[Interruption.]*

We know that Labour Members do not want to hear from an actual taxpayer, but taxpayers know more about it than the Prime Minister. The letter goes on to say:

> I read there will be a "Children's tax credit" that only comes into force from April 2001 . . . How this new tax credit can be replacing a loss of allowance for this year is beyond me, as it is introduced a year later.

What is the justification for the gap between the abolition of the married couples allowance and the introduction of the children's tax credit?

The Prime Minister: They get the basic rate cut this year, plus there is a £4 rise in child benefit this year, and a £2 rise for the second child, and the average family will be better off as a result of this. If the right hon. Gentleman is opposing all these measures, let me point out another thing. He was a Member of the Government who cut the married couples allowance from 40 to 15 per cent. In fact, his shadow Chancellor cut the married couples allowance, cut mortgage interest relief at source, raised VAT on fuel and introduced the fuel duty escalator. So we will take no lessons from him on tax rises.

In the end, the question is whether we have sorted out and stabilised the public finances so that the economy is strong. We have, and let the right hon. Gentleman get to his feet now and say whether he opposed all the measures that we have taken to sort out the finances.

Mr. Hague: The truth is that business taxes are up £30 billion, and the Prime Minister will not admit it; total taxes next month rise by £1.5 billion, and he will not admit it; 10 million people lose a key allowance next month, and he will not give the numbers in the House of Commons; they will lose it with no compensation for a year, and he has no explanation to give the House of Commons; the tax burden continues to rise, even while the Chancellor denies it; and taxes are up by 8p in the pound for businesses, pensioners, drivers, savers, home owners and millions of families. The Government who promised that there would be no tax increases have cynically and totally broken their promises.

The Prime Minister: On tax, in relation to the married couples allowance, again, the right hon. Gentleman is wrong, because of the child benefit rises and because of the basic rate income tax cut—plus the 10p starting rate cut, plus the lower national insurance help. He is simply wrong on that point. In fact, because of the changes that have been made, the figures show that the average family is better off as a result of the Budget. Indeed, by April next year, when all the changes come into effect, on average, households will be £460 a year better off and families with children will be £850 a year better off.

There is a choice between sustaining the public debt and going back to the policies of boom and bust—the right hon. Gentleman's policy—or sorting out the public finances with the result that we can have stronger growth, more employment, rising living standards and better take-home pay. The truth is that the right hon. Gentleman is fine when he is attacking us—as he showed when he got to his feet just now—but when it comes to his own policies, he does not have a clue.

Q2. [114289] **Mr. Malcolm Savidge** (Aberdeen, North): Having just heard the predictable routine from the Leader of the Opposition—the man of all gags and no policy—and before we hear the predictable routine from the leader of the Liberal Democrats, who promises to satisfy the complete wish list of the entire electorate from a single penny on tax, let me ask my right hon. Friend this: will he continue his routine of building a sound economy from which we can carry on providing improvements in our essential public services of health and education, and in the welfare of young and old?

The Prime Minister: The single most important thing is the strength of the economy. For the first time in decades, under the Labour Government, Britain has come through a slow-down in economic growth without a recession. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, we had interest rates of 10 per cent. for four years and 15 per cent. for a year. What happened then? Because the Conservatives lost control of public finances, they had to put taxes up—they did so 22 times. The only way to sort out the economy for the long term was to take the difficult decisions that we took to put sound public finances in place with monetary discipline; then, the country is better off. That is the way to make working families better off in this country; it is the Labour way. We know the Tory way: it is tax rises, public service cuts and boom and bust.

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): The hon. Member for Aberdeen, North (Mr. Savidge) is having his own high-profile week, but may I point out to him that I do not think that Catherine Zeta-Jones will be alternatively attracted based on what he said this afternoon?

Does the Prime Minister acknowledge that, for the Conservatives, the issue is tax cuts whatever the cost? Surely the legitimate question to the Government is: tax cuts, but at what cost?

Will the Prime Minister confirm two facts—that although the projected underspend for the Department of Social Security budget this year is £2 billion, pensioners will receive only a 75p uprating?

The Prime Minister: That is not all they will receive, is it? They are receiving help not only through the minimum income guarantee, but through the £100—to be £150—winter allowance; the 10p rate on savings; the free television licences for the over-75s; the free eye tests and the concessionary bus fares. We are doing much for Britain's pensioners, but, yes, we also believe that it is important to proceed with the basic-rate cut for Britain's hard-working families.

Mr. Kennedy: The Prime Minister confirms what the Chancellor did yesterday, which was to recycle two old policies and promise a consultation. The tragedy is that, by the time this consultation reports after its completion, it will be too late for too many pensioners. Surely the basic state pension should be uprated more at a time when there is a £12 billion budget surplus.

The Prime Minister: First, it is worth pointing out to pensioners that the Liberal Democrats' policy at the last election was not to raise pensions in line with earnings. Now that we have sorted out the economy largely by ignoring their advice, it is true that they want more. We have not just introduced policies with no effect for pensioners; it is not just a consultation document. The rise in the savings limits means that more people get help,

and the minimum income guarantee and the £150 are not illusory benefits. But what the right hon. Gentleman will never do when he explains Liberal Democrat policy is explain to people what the cost of that policy is. The effect of his tax policies will be that average families even on average incomes will be £5, £6 or more a week worse off. That is the consequence of his policy and I do not think that it is fair to those families.

Q3. [114290] **Mr. Derek Wyatt** (Sittingbourne and Sheppey): I listened with interest to the earlier exchanges on tax. This morning, I had breakfast with 60 members of my chamber of commerce and they and 1,680 small and medium-sized enterprises and businesses are grateful that capital gains tax has been reduced. On small and medium-sized enterprises and chambers of commerce, does my right hon. Friend agree that chambers of commerce have the grass-roots ability to be at the centre of the knowledge economy? I notice that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer said yesterday that chambers of commerce can participate in the new enterprise firms if they are in high unemployment areas. May we participate and, if so, may I offer Sittingbourne and Sheppey as a pilot?

The Prime Minister: The national enterprise campaign will be launched on 11 May and it will be a business-led campaign that will be spearheaded by, among others, the chambers of commerce, the Confederation of British Industry and the Institute of Directors. The measures that we have announced this year, together with the 3p cut in small company rates, will cut corporation tax bills of small businesses on average by nearly 25 per cent. Along with the measures on electronic commerce and capital gains, this is a good environment for business. Most important of all, the best environment for business is a strong economy. That is why it is so important that we run the economy in a disciplined and sensible way. I believe that business wants investment in education. The Conservatives may oppose extra investment in education, but I believe that many business people recognise the importance of education and skills for our economic future.

Mr. Jonathan Sayeed (Mid-Bedfordshire): When the Prime Minister takes his family on their summer holiday this year, will he pay the full cost of that holiday himself or will he expect some fat-cat acquaintance to subsidise him yet again?

The Prime Minister: That question is typical of today's Conservative party.

Q4. [114291] **Mr. Roger Berry** (Kingswood): May I welcome the biggest-ever real-terms increase in spending on the national health service that was announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer yesterday? I note the silence of Opposition Members at this point. Does my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister agree that there are potentially great health benefits from developments in human genetics, but that there are opportunities for genetic discrimination by, for example, employers, insurance companies and others? Will he consider referring the issue of genetic discrimination to the Disability Rights Commission, which I am delighted to remind the House will open its doors in only a few days time?

The Prime Minister: This is an important, difficult and new issue. As my hon. Friend is aware, from April this year, the new independent Disability Rights Commission will promote equalisation of opportunities for disabled people. As an independent commission, it will, of course, decide its own priorities, but I understand that the issue of genetic testing is one that it will consider in the context of drawing up its future work plan. The issue obviously has important ramifications and consequences for disabled people and I know that the Disability Rights Commission will want to consider it. I am proud that it was this Government who introduced the Disability Rights Commission in this country.

Q5. [114292] **Mr. Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield): I welcome the money allocated for the NHS, which will help repair the damage of the past two years. Is the Prime Minister aware that, as the Chancellor of the Exchequer was making his statement yesterday, the cash-strapped South Staffordshire health authority was also making an announcement? It proposed closing the Hammerwich hospital and the Barton hospital, eliminating the maternity unit and the dialysis unit at Lichfield Victoria hospital and slimming down the minor injuries unit. Will the Prime Minister promise please to intervene personally to prevent that very thing from happening?

The Prime Minister: It is for the local health people to draw up their local health plans. I do not think that it would be right for me to intervene. If the hon. Gentleman wants more money for the national health service, he does not want the tax policy of the Conservative party. I am sorry, but at some point in time, the Conservative party will be forced to choose. Is it in favour of extra investment in schools and hospitals or of a tax policy that will not allow that investment to be made?

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): Answer the question.

The Prime Minister: That is the answer to the question.

Judy Mallaber (Amber Valley): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the announcement in yesterday's Budget that VAT on sanitary protection is to be cut from 17.5 per cent. to 5 per cent., the minimum for essential goods, will be welcomed by women throughout the country and will be of particular benefit to those on low incomes? Will he join me in congratulating all those who have campaigned for a very long time on the issue, especially my hon. Friend the Member for Calder Valley (Ms McCafferty)?

The Prime Minister: I certainly do congratulate her. Women's sanitary protection is currently taxed at the standard rate of 17.5 per cent., but from 1 January next year such products will be taxed at the reduced rate of 5 per cent. It is another Labour tax cut for the many.

Q6. [114293] **Mr. Edward Davey** (Kingston and Surbiton): Can the Prime Minister confirm that, despite the Budget yesterday, his Government are set to miss and to break his manifesto promise to raise the proportion of

the national income spent on education in this Parliament? Will he explain why he is allowing his Chancellor to spend almost three times as much on a cut in the basic rate of income tax next year as he has given to schools? Will he tell the House and the people of this country what has happened to his election priority of education as opposed to Tory tax cuts?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is wrong. The proportion of the national income spent on education will rise in this Parliament. The percentage rise for this year is 8 per cent. We have put an extra £1 billion into education starting this April. That is more than the Liberal Democrats ever asked for. What happens with the Liberal Democrats, as ever, is that the moment we do even more than they ask, they just up the demands. It is about time that the hon. Gentleman explained to the country how he could spend even more on schools, pensioners and local government. No doubt he will be telling us that we have not spent enough on the health service either. *[Interruption.]* We did not quite get an answer to that. It is not possible to get all those increases out of an increase of 1p on the basic rate of tax. It is just not, and it is about time that the Liberal Democrats took a lesson in economic literacy.

Mr. Paul Goggins (Wythenshawe and Sale, East): Will the Prime Minister join me in welcoming the announcement by my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister this morning that the Government are to invest £250 million in the extension to the metrolink tram system in Greater Manchester? Does he agree that it is excellent news for the north-west and will provide first-class connections with Ashton, Oldham and Rochdale and, in my constituency, quality public transport connections to Manchester airport and Wythenshawe town centre and hospital?

The Prime Minister: I remember visiting the metrolink. It is a fantastic project. The extension will be well worth the money. One of the benefits is that, because it is based on an integrated transport policy, it has cut car usage. It is beneficial environmentally and it allows people to get to work more easily. It gives people greater freedom. It is a first-class public transport system.

Q7. [114294] **Mr. Edward Garnier** (Harborough): Yesterday's Budget statement showed that the Chancellor of the Exchequer, despite his many psychological flaws, is a man of greater intellectual and political ability than the Prime Minister. Will the Prime Minister now redeem himself by lifting at once the threat of closure hanging over the brand-new breast cancer unit at Glenfield hospital, Leicestershire?

The Prime Minister: I do not know about the particular circumstances of that hospital, but I am perfectly happy to look into them. Yet again, however, a Tory has had the cheek to get up and tell us that we should spend more money on the health service, when the Conservative party is opposed to spending more money on the health service—[HON. MEMBERS: "No!"] They say no, but, a few days before the Budget, the shadow Chancellor was asked whether he wanted taxes to be reduced or spending to be increased and he replied that the Chancellor should cut taxes. The truth is that the Tories know that they have been rumbled. They are not just a boom-and-bust party; they are a cuts-in-the-NHS party as well.

Mr. Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Hall Green): If the Foreign Secretary visits Iran later this year, which aspect of Iranian policy will be of greatest concern to the British Government? Will it be the continuing reports of torture, executions and human rights violations, or Iran's weapons of mass destruction programme, which recently led the commander-in-chief of American forces in the middle east to describe Iran as the most dangerous state in the region?

The Prime Minister: Of course there are concerns about Iran's policy in several different areas, but the question is whether we should refuse to engage with the new Iranian Government. We believe that it is better to engage with them, because there are elements with whom it is important to have a dialogue. That in no way diminishes our concern about other matters, and we shall voice those concerns in a proper way. However, the dialogue that we have begun with the Iranian Government is the right course of action.

Q8. [114295] **Mr. Nick Hawkins** (Surrey Heath): Is the Prime Minister, for once, a touch embarrassed that the independent Commissioner for Public Appointments has pointed out that 83 per cent. of all councillors appointed to NHS boards since Labour came to power are Labour councillors—no fewer than 284 of them? Will he, for once, abandon his smug sanctimoniousness and apologise for his culture of cronyism?

The Prime Minister: Now, in the country as a whole, about 70 per cent. of chairs and non-executive directors have no declared political activity at all; 50 per cent. of appointees are women; and 11.5 per cent. are from ethnic minorities. I am proud of that record.

Q9. [114296] **Liz Blackman** (Erewash): In the light of announcements already made, no one can doubt the Government's commitment to end fuel poverty, but there is still a great deal of ground to cover. Can my right hon. Friend assure the House that the inter-ministerial group that is charged with setting out the Government's fuel poverty objectives and how to meet them will report back as speedily as possible and enable us to eradicate that scourge for ever?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I can give that assurance. The programme will combat fuel poverty by supporting the installation of energy-efficient central heating systems in up to 1 million low-income homes. It is estimated that the residents of about two thirds of the households thus helped will be aged 60 or older. We have already doubled grants for people on low incomes under the new home energy efficiency scheme. From this winter, the fuel payment for pensioner households will be increased to £150. In addition, we have reduced VAT on domestic fuel to the lowest permissible level. All those measures mean that we have made a start on tackling a serious problem affecting millions of people in this country.

Q10. [114297] **Mr. Simon Hughes** (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): On the subject of asylum seekers, immigrants and beggars, and given the Government's

welcome commitment to anti-racism, may I ask the Prime Minister to look at this Monday's editorial in *The Daily Telegraph*? It said of the Home Secretary that

> fanning resentment against . . . immigrants . . . is the height of irresponsibility.

It also says that careful language is necessary and the avoidance of "cheap populism" desirable. Will the Prime Minister ensure that Home Office Ministers and all those for whom he is responsible do not speak or act in a way which encourages some of the press to pander to the twin evils of racism and prejudice?

The Prime Minister: Of course we will not pander to that. However, there is a genuine problem with asylum in this country. Unless reasonable and tolerant people deal with what are plain abuses of the system, unreasonable and intolerant people are encouraged. The proper way forward is to do what we are doing: introducing tough new asylum measures that will allow genuine asylum seekers through, but will halt those bogus asylum seekers who do nothing but harm to the cause of proper asylum seekers.

Therefore we are introducing tough new measures in April that will replace the benefit system, open the new centres, which are important, and speed up the process of dealing with asylum claims. I reject entirely the argument that those measures are in any shape or form whipping up prejudice. They are, in fact, the best way of preventing it.

NHS Modernisation

3.30 pm

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): With permission, Madam Speaker, I wish to make a statement.

Yesterday the Chancellor announced funding for the national health service, not just for the coming financial year, but for the three years following. Taken together with this year—the first year of the current comprehensive spending review—it means the biggest sustained investment for the health service: a 35 per cent. real-terms rise over five years, and a real-terms average increase of 6.1 per cent. per year over the next four years. That is a rise of more than double the average under the previous Government.

Yes, there have been larger one-off rises, but never a rise sustained in this way. It means that by 2003–04, NHS spending will have risen to 7.6 per cent. of gross domestic product. That is a huge increase in any terms. In a period of predicted economic growth, it is unique. It comes with an immediate injection this year of £2 billion extra for the UK, which includes the tobacco duty increase of £300 million.

We have done this because we believe in the national health service. We never want to see it broken up, reduced to a rump service for those who cannot afford to pay for private health care. The NHS is a unifying force in this country, and under us it will remain so.

Here is the challenge to us in government and to all who work in the health service, however. Everybody knows that the NHS needed the new money announced yesterday, but everybody knows, too, that the NHS needs fundamental reform if it is to provide the standard of care that people deserve in the 21st century. With the money must come the modernisation. A step change in resources must mean a step change in reform.

In our schools, we now accept that, though more investment is necessary, it is not sufficient. There is a real and often hard debate about standards, performance and reform. No one really believes that the one without the other will work. Now it is time to raise the same debate in the national health service.

This afternoon, I will set out the key challenges facing the health service, the means by which we intend to tackle them and the methods for involving the people who work in the health service in this vital task.

I say to our hard-working and dedicated staff in the health service: "You challenged us to come up with the money. We have done so. It was hard won and hard fought. There were many calls upon it—many places where it might have been spent. We rose to your challenge. Now I ask you to rise to ours. Work with us to make sure that this money is spent well: make sure that the national health service confronts the hard necessities of reform to improve the value that we get for the money that we spend."

Some health authorities and trusts carry out four times more hip replacement operations than others. We need to know why. How is it that some trusts can provide elective surgery for all their patients within six months, while in others one in eight patients have to wait more than 12 months?

In some accident and emergency departments, non-urgent patients are treated within half an hour, while in others there is a four or five hour wait. There are trusts that see nearly 100 per cent. of their out-patients within three months, while others manage less than 60 per cent.

The proportion of operations done as day cases varies from 75 per cent. in some places to less than 30 per cent. in others. There are around 5,000 elderly patients who do not need to be in hospital but are there because of complications between social services and hospitals over their care arrangements.

Some hospitals employ twice as many nurses as others to staff critical care beds. Why is there a twofold difference in the cost of care between the best and the least efficient hospitals? Some hospitals manage without long trolley waits while others have them on a regular basis. Some patients can get a routine GP appointment within 24 hours in some surgeries, but have to wait four or five days in others. The top 25 per cent. of trusts use their consultants twice as productively as the bottom 25 per cent.

There are huge variations in the proportion of patients at risk from heart disease, who get the appropriate drugs to help control their blood pressure and cholesterol. Nurses in some hospitals discharge patients from accident and emergency, and in others they do not. Some hospitals use physiotherapists to help reduce waiting times for orthopaedic appointments; others do not. Links between social services and GPs work well in some areas, but in others are virtually non-existent. Some medical teams are so much better at preventing and managing conditions such as diabetes and asthma than others.

Those are big issues. The reasons for the variations are of course complex. Some of the problems will be because of a shortage of staff and equipment, but some will be the result of poor management and inefficient organisation. Some will arise out of outdated demarcations between professionals within the service. Some will be systems failures, and some will be professional failures. Each of them must be confronted and analysed, and solutions found.

These are the five challenges that I set for the health service. First, there is the partnership challenge for all parts of the health system—GPs, hospitals, their consultants, primary care groups, social services and community health services. How do we work together to end bed blocking, reduce unnecessary hospital admissions and provide the right level of beds and services for each level of care?

Secondly, there is the performance challenge, to ensure that, using information, incentives and inspection, all trusts and primary care groups come up to the standard of the best; that we provide the right support and intervention for those that struggle to provide proper standards of care; and that the systems are in place to identify and root out poor clinical practice.

As a first step towards meeting that challenge, the Secretary of State for Health will later this afternoon give details of £660 million of the extra £2 billion for next year that will be allocated straight away to health authorities, trusts and primary care groups. He will set out how the extra money will be coupled with new incentives to ensure that every pound provides value for money.

[The Prime Minister]

Thirdly, there is the challenge for the professions to strip out unnecessary demarcations, introduce more flexible training and working practices and ensure that doctors do not use time dealing with patients who could be treated safely by other health care staff.

Fourthly, there is the patient care challenge. Hospitals and primary care groups should ensure that they all adopt best practice, design out delays and introduce convenient booking systems so that patients with the most serious conditions get treated quickly, and no one has to wait too long for an operation that they need.

Fifthly, there is the challenge on prevention: to balance spending on tackling the causes of ill health with treating illness; to develop a more systematic approach to treating people at risk from chronic diseases; and to persuade more people to play their part in achieving better health by adopting a more healthy life style.

Those are tough challenges. Together we need to find answers. If excellence can happen in one part of the country, I say, "Why can it not happen in all parts of the country?"

In the past two to three years, there has been substantial change and improvement. The internal market has gone. A record number of hospitals have been built. Nurses are returning to the health service. More doctors are in training. There are new services, such as NHS Direct. New standard procedures have just been published for cancer and heart treatment. Casualty departments are being modernised. There is the new Commission for Health Improvement, an Ofsted for the NHS, charged with raising standards in all hospitals, and a new institute to advise on the best treatments and drugs.

But we all know that that has not been enough, and too often the pressure of change has been made doubly painful by the pressure of scarce resources. Now we have a chance to put the extra money to work.

I have set out the challenges, but I offer to meet them in partnership with those in the NHS. In the next few months, the Secretary of State for Health and I will meet and talk to the people responsible for health care in every part of the country. We will consult the leaders of the professions and the health organisations.

For each of the five challenge areas, there will be a dedicated unit to examine the problems and come up with solutions.

Madam Speaker: Order. There are too many conversations taking place around the Chamber.

The Prime Minister: The units will be jointly led by a Health Minister and a key leader from the health service.

The health service is a national health service, and I have therefore invited the First Minister in Scotland and the First Secretary in Wales to join me in a UK-wide group to develop and drive through the reform that we devise.

In addition, for England, a new Cabinet committee chaired by me will be established to agree and monitor the standards of service and improvements that people can expect by the end of the financial year 2003–04.

In July, we will publish a detailed four-year action plan for the NHS. It will outline the improvements that we seek, the changes necessary to achieve them and the timetable for their delivery. That will not complete the journey of renewal for the NHS, but it will take us a long way towards our destination.

It will take tough, often painful decisions about change in order to make progress. However, I want all parts of the health service to sign up to the plan, to feel ownership of it, to agree the priorities we set out, and to help us deliver them. I want the country to unite around it for the future.

However, I do not and will not yield to those who believe that the NHS has had its day. It has not. A modernised health service, not private medical insurance, is the future. The values of the health service are every bit as relevant today as they were 50 years ago, but they have to be applied in a different way, for a different age.

The health service is one of the great institutions that binds our country together. It is one of the great civilising achievements of the 20th century.

It is our task as the party that created the national health service to renew it for the 21st century and defeat the pessimists and the privatisers who would see it dismantled.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): The media informed us throughout the day that we would hear the Prime Minister's plan for the reform and modernisation of the health service. There was obviously some mistake in their briefing. If all the clichés and waffle that one could express about the health service had been swept into a heap, the result would be remarkably similar to the Prime Minister's statement.

The statement included such concepts as, "We must now all work together"—brilliant idea! The Prime Minister said that we must all match the standard of the best—what a very innovative thought! He suggested that together, we need to find the answers—absolutely inspirational! There will be a new Cabinet committee chaired by the Prime Minister. Wow! A new Cabinet committee! By July, there will even be a timetable for delivery. We believed that 1999 would be the year of delivery, but there will be a timetable for delivery by the middle of 2000. Today, the Prime Minister produced a timetable for a timetable.

To avoid further distortion by the Prime Minister, I make it clear from the outset that we welcome the additional funding for the national health service. We have always provided additional funding for the health service. However, the fact that the Prime Minister has made his first statement in three years about a matter of domestic policy is a clear demonstration of the Government's abject failure. The need to relaunch their policies on the health service clearly shows that they have failed so far.

After three years of mismanaging the health service, the Prime Minister has the nerve to make a statement about professional failures. What about ministerial failures in running the health service in the past three years? Through his statement, the Prime Minister has taken personal responsibility for the health service, from the Secretary of State for Health. We shall now hold him personally responsible.

Does the Prime Minister now accept that the problems of the NHS have become worse since the Government took office? Is it not the case that the out-patient waiting

list has doubled, with 250,000 more people waiting to get on the waiting list? Has the right hon. Gentleman forgotten that his promise to take 100,000 people off the waiting list was an early pledge? When he said that, people thought that he meant early in the Parliament, not early in the next millennium.

Now the Prime Minister is launching yet another new initiative, setting out on yet another crusade to save the health service. People remember the Chancellor's £21 billion announcement of two years ago, which turned out to be £3 billion a year, and that the promised improvements did not take place. The right hon. Gentleman may have fiddled the figures before, but now people have figured the fiddles: they know what the Government are up to and they know that the Government have let people down. Will he accept that one reason for the letdown, which must be seriously considered in all those discussions that he is to have, is the way that clinical priorities have been distorted? Will he recognise that that has happened?

The chairman of the British Medical Association consultants committee, Dr. Peter Hawker, says that the Government have tested

> the tolerance of patients who are waiting even longer for treatment, and the goodwill of Health Service staff by persisting with an initiative that distorts clinical priorities and denies care to people in more acute medical need.

That is what the BMA consultants think, so if the Prime Minister is to go around listening to people, that is the sort of thing that he will hear. He had better start thinking about it now. His Secretary of State claims that there is no distortion. Why does he not tell the Secretary of State to wake up, get into the real world and acknowledge that there is distortion? He has to deal with that soon, because is it not the result of such distortion that 160,000 people felt compelled in the past year to pay for their own operations rather than rely on the NHS? That is the situation—the situation that the right hon. Gentleman has created.

Is it not the Government's failure that whether people have money has become more important to their health care under Labour's management of the health system than ever before in the history of the health service? Is that not the classic story of what happens when the system is run by ill-informed and interfering busybodies whose only interest is in newspaper headlines and who produce the exact opposite effect of that which they intend? Can we have a guarantee in the Prime Minister's new, relaunched plan for the NHS to end the distortion of clinical priorities and a guarantee based on waiting times and clinical need? Why does he not set aside all the pride of the past few years and support a guarantee on that along the lines of the patients guarantee put forward by my hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox)? Can he not see that there is no point announcing money—*[Interruption.]* Well, the right hon. Gentleman will find that these points come up from the health professionals, so he had better start listening to them.

Can the Prime Minister not see that there is no point announcing money for the NHS unless we make sure that it gets to the patient being treated? This time, will he get the money into the hands of people who know what to do? The Government's record has not been encouraging; it has been a story of centralisation, with decisions taken further and further away from patients. What is more, have not the people whom he has trusted to take decisions been appointed not on the basis of what they know about the NHS, but on how much crawling and toadying they have done to the Labour party leadership?

Has the Prime Minister read the report of the Commissioner for Public Appointments, who says:

> It is clear that there have been instances where a person's political association has been a decisive factor in the consideration of their . . . appointments . . .
>
> Less successful candidates have been brought forward to replace those . . . identified on merit . . . ?

There is evidence to indicate that candidates who declare political activity on behalf of the Labour party have a better chance of being appointed than other candidates. That is the evidence to which the right hon. Gentleman did not respond at Question Time. Can he not see that there is no point in his wringing his hands and gnashing his teeth about people in the health service when he has produced a system of appointments debased, corrupted and contorted by the crony culture that he has built all around him?

Is not that culture also one of the distortion of numbers? Does the Prime Minister realise that no one any longer believes the figures that he presents about the health service? When people hear about the £2 billion, they know that there are already £1 billion-worth of deficits in the health authorities and £200 million of underfunded pay awards. People wonder what will happen with the £2 billion. Unless the Prime Minister can give positive answers to my hon. Friends' questions about health facilities that are closing now, and whether that will change under his plan, the figures that he is reciting will not be believed in the country at large.

Now that the right hon. Gentleman has finally recognised that he is presiding over a permanent crisis in the health service, is it not time to put in place a proper programme of reform? Is it not time that we had health care based on clinical need? It is not time that we had money going as close as possible to the patient? Is it not time that the Prime Minister co-operated with all parts of the health care sector—the NHS and the private sector—in increasing the total resources available for health care? Is it not time that he got rid of his ideological blinkers, his crony appointments and his failed approach based on political priorities?

Is it not true that this statement, which contained so many clichés and so little in actual announcements, is the ultimate demonstration of all mouth and no delivery? Is it not time that the right hon. Gentleman started to deliver?

The Prime Minister: If anyone wants to know why the Tories should not be trusted with the national health service, they need only listen to that contribution from the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague). The Tories opposed the formation of the health service, and now they oppose the plan to modernise and reform it. It is unbelievable. [Hon. Members: "What plan?] What we have set out has been welcomed by every group in the national health service, but it is opposed by the Conservative party. As for the health record, we are putting in a 6 per cent. real-terms increase, which is double what the Conservative party put in. The right hon. Gentleman's priorities, which include tax cuts for a few, would mean that the Tories could not possibly afford that sum of money.

We know already that the right hon. Gentleman is opposed to the tobacco duty increase. [Hon. Members: "Oh."] That is right. *[Interruption.]* So that would be

[The Prime Minister]

£300 million out of the £2 billion straight away. *[Interruption.]* Well, the right hon. Gentleman attacked the increase in tobacco duty yesterday, presumably not because he supported it. Let me state the position that we inherited. The number of beds had been cut by 40,000; the number of nurses in training had been cut; the hospital building programme had stalled; waiting lists for in and out-patients were at record levels, and there was a £500 million deficit.

If hon. Members want to know how good the right hon. Gentleman would be at managing the health service, let me point out his record when he was in charge of the Welsh national health service. When he was in charge of the health service in Wales, it lost doctors; it lost 1,200 hospital beds; waiting lists rose by 6,000; 300 nurses, midwives and health visitors were cut; and health spending increases were just a little over 1 per cent. So we know what would happen if the Tories were put back in charge.

The right hon. Gentleman goes on about private health care. We are perfectly happy to co-operate with the private sector, but we oppose forcing people to take out private health insurance. In case the right hon. Gentleman should deny that that is his party's policy—as Tories try to do occasionally—I shall quote his health spokesman. When he explained Conservative party policy, he said that

> people would look to the NHS to provide them with service when they had serious life-threatening conditions, and would look to their private insurance to help them with those things where the NHS had to ask them to wait.

That is why the right hon. Gentleman's health spokesman called the policy a "Trojan horse". It is a Trojan horse.

However, I would have hoped that the right hon. Gentleman could support the process that we have set out today. Having delivered the money, we will now sit down with people in the health service and work out how it is best spent and how we modernise and reform the system. Of course it is right for us to talk to those people before we publish the plan. I make no apology for that; they asked for a promise, and we have delivered it. What the right hon. Gentleman has done today is put himself outside the consensus in the country that recognises that, yes, the health service needs more money, but it also needs to reform and change. We, the party that created the health service, will now work with people in the health service to rebuild it. From today's response, those people now know that the right hon. Gentleman would destroy it.

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): Yesterday's announcement of additional funds for the health service is welcome news indeed. I also agree—as, I am sure, do Members in all parts of the House—that if we want to take the country with us, it makes sense to proceed with a view to the future rather than merely fighting past battles. Does the Prime Minister accept that that process would be assisted if he acknowledged that those of us who have argued for the injection of roughly the sums announced yesterday have not been behaving irresponsibly, as that is now the policy of Her Majesty's Government?

Will the Prime Minister also acknowledge that, in conducting his review, he should be upfront with the profession and the public, and openly admit that waiting list targets have distorted clinical priorities? He has cited the deplorable state of affairs in which 5,000 elderly people are languishing in hospital because no other facilities are available. Does he accept that the position is not helped by the fact that the Government have yet to respond to the findings of the royal commission on long-term care for the elderly, and that that too must be seen as part of the process? The response would be incomplete if it did not take account of those findings.

Will the Prime Minister confirm, given that the review will be rather centralised, that the extra money will find its way down to the regions—to both trusts and health authorities? All too often, extra money announced at the centre is not deployed as effectively as it might otherwise be because of insufficient flexibility locally.

At present many trusts are in deficit, and are having to conduct reviews as we speak. As we heard at Prime Minister's questions, closures are imminent. Given the extra money that has been announced, will the Prime Minister instruct the trusts to put their reviews on hold?

Finally, may I raise the vexed issue of appointments to trusts? A commission is being established for the appointment of Cross-Bench peers. Is that not a good precedent for appointments to NHS trusts? Could they not be dealt with by an independent commission, and could not political fingers be kept out of this particular pie?

The Prime Minister: On that last point, the Secretary of State is announcing our proposals in response to what Dame Rennie Fritchie said.

The findings of the commission on long-term care will be dealt with as part of the comprehensive spending review. Obviously, very important issues are involved. The £2 billion will go down to primary care groups and trusts: my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health will explain how that will happen when he makes his speech.

I think that we must make a distinction. The right hon. Gentleman asked me to put on hold any hospital changes in the country. Of course I do not know the individual circumstances of each case that is put to me, but there will be circumstances in which reorganisation is the right way forward. We cannot freeze health care in exactly the same way for ever. However, there are also areas in which reorganisation will be specifically a result of problems with resources.

The differences between those two cases are exactly what we need to explore with people. Our proposal for a partnership for change, which will lead to the publication of a plan in July, will not work unless people are prepared to make difficult choices as well as easy ones in the health service. It will not work unless people are prepared to accept, for example, that it is important for us to see how elderly patients are best dealt with in the service. What is the right system to ensure that we give them the level of care that they want?

I welcome the right hon. Gentleman's approach in saying that this is the right way: to have the money upfront, and then to say, "Let us sit down with those in the NHS to work out both how we spend the money, and how we make the necessary changes." The right hon. Gentleman's constructive approach stands in very marked contrast with that of the Leader of the Opposition.

Mr. David Hinchliffe (Wakefield): Anyone who cares about the NHS and its basic principles will warmly

welcome yesterday's announcement of the huge funding increase and today's statement: they are in marked contrast with the position of the Conservative party, which appears to have completely given up on the NHS and which wants to push people into the private sector. It is interesting that, during the last Tory Opposition-day debate on the health service, two Conservative Back Benchers were present at the end of the Front-Bench speeches. There is no interest on the Conservative Benches.

May I press my right hon. Friend on three specific points? First, he will accept that, in putting that money into the NHS, we need to make best use of the resources that we have. On that basis, will he look at whether the organisational structure that we inherited from the Conservatives—the internal market, the split between trusts and health authorities—is the best arrangement? There is much evidence nationally of waste as a consequence of that split at local level.

Secondly, my right hon. Friend referred to the relationship between the NHS and social services. Will he look at combining the two organisations, as they are combined very successfully in Northern Ireland?

Thirdly, will my right hon. Friend look at the way— [HON. MEMBERS: "Order."] I will conclude on this point.

Madam Speaker: The hon. Gentleman certainly will.

Mr. Hinchliffe: I will, Madam Speaker.

Will my right hon. Friend look at the way in which, in certain areas, waiting lists are artificially created to cause demand for private treatment by the same consultants who treat people in the NHS locally?

The Prime Minister: I am sure that the items to which my hon. Friend draws attention can be looked at. Of course, primary care groups and trusts are a way of trying to preserve the concept of devolved budgets, which was the one part of the internal market that had some merit, but to get away from the idea of the paperchase for the contract, which did much damage. We want to try to keep that co-operation locally and to keep devolution, but to do away with the vast bureaucratic expense.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Order. The last questioner was the Chairman of the Select Committee on Health. I will not have further long questions. I ask for brisk questions now. I have today's business to safeguard.

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley (South-West Surrey): Leading the health service and health care generally must be one of the greatest challenges of our generation. I am not sure that it inspires people to know that politicians are trying to take over all the leadership.

The Prime Minister talks about the professions, but not about health service managers. If all the credit is taken by politicians, but, whenever there are problems, managers are named and shamed, it has a particularly poor effect. "Health Chiefs Face the Sack" is not a helpful headline. The Prime Minister has recognised managers and leaders in industry. Will he please give recognition and support to health service managers in health care?

The Prime Minister: Of course management in the health service is important. The managers are a vital part of the service, but I draw the right hon. Lady's attention to the fact that the NHS Confederation welcomed the extra money that we put in yesterday and the offer of partnership for change. It is simply sad that the Conservative party has set its mind against it.

Dr. Howard Stoate (Dartford): As someone who still works part-time in the health service, may I say that the vast majority of NHS workers in my constituency of Dartford both recognise and welcome the need for substantive changes in their working practices? What reassurance can my right hon. Friend give to the 1 million-plus people who work in the health service that he recognises their extremely valuable contribution and that he will continue to support them in the way that he has so far?

The Prime Minister: I certainly give that assurance. That is one of the reasons why we put in the additional money. Let us look at just one group in the NHS, the nurses. As a result of the additional staffing pay, we have had a 25 per cent. increase in the number registering for nurse training. We also made a very substantial pay increase—I think the largest that has been made—to 60,000 grade E nurses. We are trying to reward people in the health service better, but we must also look at more flexible working practices and more flexible use of people's working time. We must see how we can improve the quality of life for the staff in the health service, too.

Sir Brian Mawhinney (North-West Cambridgeshire): Is the Prime Minister aware that, although he is right to draw attention to the service distortions that need to be dealt with, there was one alliterative challenge that he did not include in his list: patient choice. Was that an oversight, or a policy decision?

The Prime Minister: No. I do not know exactly what part of patient choice the right hon. Gentleman is referring to. If he is referring to the split between public and private—

Sir Brian Mawhinney: No.

The Prime Minister: Well, in that case, I am afraid that I am at a loss to know exactly what the right hon. Gentleman's question is dealing with. At least he gave us some welcome for a process that will involve people in the health service. There are no holds barred in that—we shall sit down and talk about all the issues. If the right hon. Gentleman cares to explain at some other time exactly what he means by patient choice, I shall have a look at what he says.

Mr. Win Griffiths (Bridgend): May I also welcome the fact that the Government are not jumping straight into decisions on how the £2 billion should be spent in the health service? I am also pleased that the Prime Minister said that there will be a joint committee to examine those decisions. The NHS Information Authority produced figures on the 50 most common inpatient treatments and the 50 most common day-case treatments. In Wales, for 22 of the 50 inpatient treatments, costs could vary by more than 200 per cent; for some treatments, costs could vary by a factor of five; and, for 12 of the day-case treatments, costs could vary by a factor of between five

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and 10. The issue, therefore, is finding the place where treatment can be provided best and most cheaply, and not simply throwing money at the health service and saying, "Get on with it."

The Prime Minister: That is absolutely right. The debate about variations in performance, and how we tackle them, is the debate that I had hoped we would have in the House today. Of course it is right that we need more resources and money in the health service. However, I think that there is a very honest appreciation by the vast majority of people in the health service that some performance variations cannot be explained by social factors, investment or money alone. There are failures in the system that need to be addressed. There is also, of course, really good practice in the health service which could be made universal if we had the right means to do it.

Mr. Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe): Will the Prime Minister concede that the Conservative party has been arguing the case for more money and reform in the national health service for more than 10 years—usually while facing resistance from Labour Members and the bogus claim that we secretly want to privatise the NHS, which he has repeated today. Will he also concede that today's statement shows that the Chancellor did not want to pre-empt his comprehensive spending review for the next four years on the scale that he did yesterday? Did not the Prime Minister, in return, agree that he would take personal responsibility for trying to ensure that the money would be spent better—and did not the cliché-ridden jargon that he produced a few moments ago show that so far he has no idea how to deliver on that?

While we will all keep an open mind until July, when the Prime Minister comes forward with a plan, will the Chancellor ensure that all the money that he announced yesterday—not only the £2 billion, but the current allocation—will be given to the health authorities and trusts that need it, as there is £500 million of financial deficit out there, rather than being kept back in little packages at the centre, in the Department, to be announced and reannounced as gimmicky new initiatives in the next few months?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. and learned Gentleman probably does not agree with the Conservative policy on tax, and at least he is consistent in his view of his own Front Benchers, but the fact is that one cannot possibly have a policy which maintains that, regardless of economic circumstances, one will cut the tax burden the entire time without making swingeing cuts in public services.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman may not be properly familiar with the latest thinking on the Tory Front Bench, but let me point out to him what the Conservative chief health service spokesman—the latest Conservative health spokesman—said. He said:

> Philosophically we have moved on . . . Insurance companies could cover conditions that are not high tech or expensive, like hip and knee replacements, hernia and cataract operations, which currently involve long waiting times. We could then leave expensive treatments like cancer therapy to the NHS.

I appreciate that that is not the right hon. and learned Gentleman's policy, but that is Conservative Members' policy.

In answer to the right hon. and learned Gentleman's question about the £2 billion, it is important that we get that money down to the front line. As I said, the Health Secretary will be giving details of that in his speech in the debate. However, I think that the right hon. and learned Gentleman, like me, will have to accept that there is no point in my coming to the House to say, "Here are all the details of everything that we are going to do. Now, I am going to go out and have this discussion." It is important to have that debate and discussion within the health service, and then come to the House with the plan. Then people can have a chance to question us on it. Of course we have ideas about how some of the problems should be dealt with, but it is important to have a dialogue and partnership with people. It is unfortunate that the type of one-nation Conservatism that the right hon. and learned Gentleman represents is no longer represented on the Conservative Front Bench.

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax): I thank my right hon. Friend for his welcome statement on the huge increase for the NHS and his commitment to getting better value for money out of it. I ask him to remind the Opposition that the proposals come on top of the biggest hospital building programme ever embarked on by any Government. Will he join me in paying tribute to the former Secretary of State for Health, my right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson), and to the current Secretary of State, without whose commitment and dedication, we would not be getting a brand-new hospital in Halifax next year, for which we have waited 30 years?

The Prime Minister: I am pleased to do that. It is not merely the hospital building programme, because we have an extra 4,500 nurses now in the health service; more doctors and cardiac and cancer specialists are in training; and every accident and emergency department that needs it is being modernised. We have made many changes already, including getting rid of the old Tory internal market and ensuring that the primary care groups and trusts are put in place. However, as my hon. Friend acknowledged, we must now go further, and we shall be able to go further quicker because of the additional funding that has been introduced. Nobody should be in any doubt about the Tory party's position, which is a desire to demoralise people about the health service so that there is no alternative left to them but the Tories' private health insurance way.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): Yesterday the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced apparently huge additional sums for the health service, which are welcome. Today, the Prime Minister has announced reform and modernisation, and we all hope that that will be successful. However, does the right hon. Gentleman not agree that the NHS is sadly all too often used as a political pawn by all political parties? The people whom we are honoured to represent in this place will not accept that Governments of whatever party are really committed to the health service until they see an improvement in the service they receive. A Liberal Democrat councillor in the Macclesfield borough had a cancer operation cancelled four times because of the shortage of intensive care beds—and people who are waiting in pain for a hip operation should not have to wait so long. Only when such cases are dealt with promptly in accordance with

clinical need will people believe that the Government are dealing with the health service as they would wish them to.

The Prime Minister: That is obviously right and I thank the hon. Gentleman for his more constructive attitude. We should be able to reach a stage at which, as a result of the extra money, we can provide the intensive care beds that we need. We have increased the number of intensive care beds, but not by nearly enough, and we accept that. It cannot be done unless the money is put in, but that will only be a start. It is also the case that some acute beds in hospitals are not properly used, so change and modernisation have to happen as well. I hope that, by putting in the money and—for the time being at least—resolving the funding issue, we can get on with talking about the modernisation issue. I hope that the hon. Gentleman and other more constructive members of his party will join in that debate.

Mr. Chris Pond (Gravesham): Does my right hon. Friend recognise that in my constituency people will prefer the five Ps of his modernisation programme—partnership, performance, professionalism, patient care and prevention—to the two Ps of pessimism and privatisation of the Conservatives, and the 1p that seems to solve all the Liberal Democrats' problems. Is he also aware that, despite the fact that we have a brand-new acute hospital of which we are very proud and which will open soon, some anxiety is still felt in my constituency about the provision of community beds. When he and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health talk to West Kent health authority and to the primary care group, will they underline the importance of a community hospital, because we have been waiting for one for a long time?

The Prime Minister: I shall certainly do that. One of the important parts of this exercise will be to make sure that we have the right level of care within the system: the right primary, intermediate and acute care. Part of the changes that are necessary will be to ensure that patients are treated at the appropriate level of care, in contrast with what often happens at the moment.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): I noticed that in his statement, the Prime Minister made no mention of mental health services, although that might be a Freudian slip. Nor did he mention the national health service in Northern Ireland. I assure the right hon. Gentleman that we welcome the increased financial provision; on the other hand, we have to face harsh realities. In respect of private care and clinical priorities, why should a person with a heart condition be told that if he paid £100 he could see the surgeon sooner, then pay that £100 and still be waiting more than nine months later for the urgent treatment that he requires? It is time that we stopped bluffing ourselves that clinical care is a priority.

The Prime Minister: I do not know about the individual case to which the hon. Gentleman refers, but precisely such issues need to be investigated. Change and reform as well as additional resources for the health service in Northern Ireland will be major part of our work.

Mr. David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire): Following the completely crass and deeply damaging decision by Leicestershire health authority, the status of the most modern, best-located acute hospital in Leicestershire, with the highest reputation, is due to be downgraded. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that before the extra £30 million is allocated to Leicestershire and its health authority, there will be a requirement that such decisions and plans about acute hospital provision will have to include a logical and sane approach to the allocation of resources.

The Prime Minister: Again, I am in difficulty in commenting on individual cases, the circumstances of which I do not know. Of course there will be additional money for the health authorities, but they will then have to look at their own priorities and judge them accordingly. It is important that we do not try to micro-manage every decision that is taken by health authorities around the country, but obviously additional resources will help to make their decision making more open.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): In a damning report published this morning, Dame Rennie Fritchie spoke of a disconnection between the purpose of the board of an NHS trust or health authority and the ability of the people serving on it under Labour's policy of systematic politicisation of the appointments process. Given that she has pointed to examples of people appointed to NHS trusts and health authorities other than on merit, will the Prime Minister now identify those who have been appointed ahead of more able candidates and ensure that more able people are put in their places so that there can be progress in the NHS instead of the failure that has occurred under the present Government?

The Prime Minister: I shall simply refer to the following sentence of the Fritchie report:

> The issue of the politicisation of appointments is not new—the practice of inviting MPs to comment on the shortlists of candidates was first introduced by Conservative Government . . .

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): May I express the hope that the very rigid criteria that are used in allocating money for in vitro fertilisation—criteria that vary across the United Kingdom—can now be relaxed as I have a particularly difficult case in my constituency?

The Prime Minister: I think the best thing is that I look into my hon. Friend's point and write to him.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): Does the Prime Minister accept that after 18 years of dreadful NHS Tory rule, he inherited in Oxfordshire operation waiting times that were too high and have got higher; out-patient waiting times that were too high and have got higher; and a mental health trust deficit that has got worse? He also inherited Oseney Court elderly persons' home, which has now closed under new Labour and Cutteslowe Court old people's home which has been closed for financial reasons. Eighteen beds at Abingdon community hospital have now been closed under Labour. Will any of those closure be reversed? Will he apologise to the people of Oxfordshire for the delay in bringing funding to the health service? What does he have to say to Dr. Bob Hoyle, formally a Labour councillor in the heartland ward of Temple Cowley in the constituency of the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, who joined the

[Dr. Evan Harris]

Liberal Democrats today in protest at Labour's decision to put pre-election tax bribes ahead of health service funding.

The Prime Minister: We have made the largest-ever investment in the health service, and it is being introduced now. This is the right time for that investment, because the Government had to cure the financial deficit that we inherited when we took office. We have done that, and we have gone through two tough and prudent years, as we promised at the last election. We did not break an election promise when we kept to very tight spending plans, we fulfilled one. We knew that we could not inherit a £28-billion borrowing requirement and do nothing about it.

The hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) did not give the full facts about what has happened in Oxfordshire. In fact, more money has been put in than the Liberal Democrats ever asked for, and in-patient waiting lists are down. It is correct to say that out-patient lists are longer, but that is why we must make sure that we put in the necessary investment, which must go along with change and modernisation. In that way, we shall get both in-patient and out-patient waiting lists down. It is also why we must make the extra investment to pay for nurses, doctors and specialists in the service.

However, the process is not helped when Liberal Democrat Members pretend that all the problems of all those public services can be solved overnight, and that there is a limitless amount of money that can be spent. That contention is not true, and it is not responsible. The Government have been determined to avoid boom and bust in the economy, and in the investment in public services. We have been able to put in sustainable investment only because we took the right decisions on the economy. In the end, that is better for the health service and for patients.

Points of Order

4.21 pm

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. My point of order concerns a matter of which I gave you notice. The independent commissioner's report on NHS appointments was released at 10 o'clock this morning, but it was not made available in the Library of the House and in the Vote Office until 3 o'clock this afternoon, after most hon. Members had entered the Chamber for Prime Minister's questions. Was it not essential that hon. Members of all parties should have had access to the report and been able to read it so that they understood what it contained before the statement on the NHS? If the Prime Minister had had a chance to read it, he would not have given the misleading response that he gave to me.

Madam Speaker: I think that it was a discourtesy to the House that the report was not available, but I am sure that the hon. Gentleman appreciates that distribution of the report was not the responsibility of the Government, as the commission is an independent tribunal. While I have been in the Chair, I have received a letter from Dame Rennie Fritchie, in which she states:

> As an officeholder who is independent of Government, I did not know about the convention that copies of reports such as mine should go to the Vote Office for the interests of Members. I understand that you have received a number of complaints that the report was not available in the House, I am sorry for this, and I apologise.

I think that that clears the matter up.

Mr. Michael Jabez Foster (Hastings and Rye): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. My constituency of Hastings and Rye has been popular with visitors since 1066. Indeed you, Madam Speaker, came to my constituency a week or so ago. You were courteous enough to tell me about that visit, which did us all a great honour. Over the past few months, four Conservative Front-Bench spokespersons have visited my constituency, but none has given me any prior warning. One of the hon. Members involved told me about the visit after it had happened, and two others apologised when I brought the problem to their attention. I shall not mention their names, but last Wednesday, yet another Conservative Front-Bench spokesman, the hon. Member for North-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Moss)—

Madam Speaker: Order. I think that I have got the hon. Gentleman's point. These are matters that must be resolved between the hon. Members involved. I always take the opportunity to write to hon. Members when I visit their constituencies. Rye is a wonderful place, and I hope to return to it. In the letter that I sent to the hon. Gentleman, I also said that he should not raise matters such as these on the Floor of the House, but should deal directly with those hon. Members who visited his constituency without letting him know.

Child Curfew (Specified Age)

4.24 pm

Mr. Vernon Coaker (Gedling): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to change the maximum specified age at which a child may be subject to a notice given under a local child curfew scheme.

It is important to state first that the Government regarded tackling anti-social behaviour as one of their first and most important priorities. Many people living in communities affected by such behaviour have demanded that firm action be taken. The anti-social behaviour that takes place in our communities is not trivial and it cannot be ignored. It blights many people's lives and many communities. People want something to be done about it.

All hon. Members will know, from their postbags and their surgeries, about the quite appalling behaviour of a small minority of people. That bad behaviour is evident across all communities. It should be recognised that the problem is not confined to inner cities or rural areas. Unfortunately, the problem extends throughout all our communities. Examples of the sort of behaviour to which I am referring can be found in local parks, alleyways, open spaces and shop fronts.

The police and local authorities have for many years been demanding from Government new and greater powers with which to tackle anti-social behaviour. The police, local authorities and local communities had a feeling of helplessness when it came to dealing with such behaviour. It was as though nothing could be done. The Government responded to various calls and demands with the introduction of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, which is an important piece of legislation. It provides for partnership between the various responsible agencies and bodies—the police, local authorities, voluntary groups and schools, for example. The Act has encouraged partnership at a local level. There must be joined-up thinking if we are to tackle behavioural problems.

As well as its provision for partnership, the Crime and Disorder Act contained specific new powers, including parenting orders, child safety orders, anti-social behaviour orders and curfews, which were for children under 10. The Act enabled local authorities, where there was a specific problem in certain areas, to apply for a curfew order. Children up to the age of 10 could be barred from going into those areas.

Despite the demands from local communities, the police and various bodies to have new powers, there has been a disappointing take-up. Very few anti-social behaviour orders have been made, and not one child curfew order. What is happening with curfews and why is it that orders are not being used?

I believe that the answer is simple. The age at which curfew orders can be made is too young—it needs to be extended to 16. Most of the few young people who are causing problems in our communities are between the ages of 10 and 16, not younger than 10. The power that I propose would enable a local authority to ban young people for a limited period from an area where problems were arising so that order could be restored. What would that mean for many of our communities?

Problems are arising in parks, open spaces, alleyways and the front of shops, and we should respond to the demand from local communities that something be done. The imposition of a curfew in such areas would give the local authority, in liaison with the police, the opportunity to try to restore order.

We should understand the hell and sheer frustration that some people experience when living next door to people who engage in anti-social behaviour. It is not good enough to say that nothing can be done. People tell me that they understand some of the difficulties involved in dealing with law and order problems. In Nottingham, there have been some terrible examples of firearms offences on the streets. My constituents and many other people to whom I talk understand the difficulties that the police have in dealing with such offences, which are often drug-related. However, they do not understand the inability of the community, the police, local authorities and politicians to deal with gangs of young people who terrorise their neighbourhoods and cause problems. The Bill would enhance the power of local authorities to deal with those gangs. It would be welcomed by the people in our communities and would, indeed, be greatly welcomed by my constituents in Gedling.

We all accept the need to examine the facilities that are available and to do something about them, and of course there is a need for more community workers. I do not accept, however, that the poor behaviour of a small minority can be excused because of a lack of facilities. Indeed, the young people I speak to want something done about the anti-social behaviour that they experience in their communities. Let us not forget that young people make up the largest group of victims of crime. I spoke to a sixth form recently, whose pupils were as adamant as any of us that they wanted anti-social behaviour addressed so that they could more readily enjoy the open spaces and leisure centres that are sometimes not available to them because of the activities of a few. I believe that extending the age range for which the curfew could be used would make a real difference to the powers that are available to local authorities and the police.

It is often argued that such measures infringe an individual's human rights. There is a balance to be struck between the human rights of an individual and the human rights of a community. I am concerned about the human rights of the many people who live next door to a park, try to shop in a particular area or are abused when they walk down the street.

In conclusion, I believe that the Bill, in extending the age range from 10 to 16, will give local authorities a greater opportunity to tackle a blight on many of our communities. It will give us the opportunity to address those problems, to meet the needs of our communities and to tackle anti-social behaviour. That is not a trivial problem; it is a huge problem for many people in many communities.

I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

[Mr. Vernon Coaker]

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. Vernon Coaker, Mr. Lawrie Quin, Mr. Andrew Reed, Gillian Merron, Mr. John Heppell, Liz Blackman, Ms Rosie Winterton, Ms Ann Coffey, Mr. Neil Turner, Ms Joan Ryan and Caroline Flint.

Child Curfew (Specified Age)

Mr. Vernon Coaker accordingly presented a Bill to change the maximum specified age at which a child may be subject to a notice given under a local child curfew scheme: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 7 April, and to be printed [Bill 94].

Orders of the Day

WAYS AND MEANS

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [21 March].

AMENDMENT OF THE LAW

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That it is expedient to amend the law with respect to the National Debt and the public revenue and to make further provision in connection with finance; but this Resolution does not extend to the making of any amendment with respect to value added tax so as to provide—

(a) for zero-rating or exempting a supply, acquisition or importation;

(b) for refunding an amount of tax;

(c) for varying any rate at which that tax is at any time chargeable; or

(d) for any relief, other than a relief which—

(i) so far as it is applicable to goods, applies to goods of every description, and

(ii) so far as it is applicable to services, applies to services of every description.—[*Mr. Gordon Brown.*]

Question again proposed.

Budget Resolutions and Economic Situation

4.34 pm

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): I would like to begin by asking those on the Treasury Bench to clarify a point that the Prime Minister made in his statement to the House. The right hon. Gentleman said that by 2003–04, national health spending will have risen to 7.6 per cent. of gross domestic product. I hope that the Secretary of State for Health and his team will correct that figure, which relates to total health care spending, not NHS spending. The House of Commons Library and the King's Fund have both independently confirmed that the figure that the Prime Minister gave the House was wrong. I hope that a Member of the Treasury Bench will have that corrected as soon as possible.

I welcome the plans for increased expenditure on the national health service. I do so as the shadow Health Secretary, as a doctor and as a user of the NHS. When people who use the NHS and those who work in it opened their newspapers this morning, they will have felt that their prayers had been answered and that everything would be rosy from now on. No doubt people had the same feeling when they woke up on the morning after the Government were elected, saying that they would save the NHS within 24 hours. However, people found that their hopes were cruelly dashed in the following months.

Those people experienced the same euphoria when the Chancellor announced extra funding of £21 billion for the NHS in 1998, only to find their hopes dashed once again as the figure was constantly reduced. We have now been marched up the hill of raised expectations for the third time.

It is a sign of the panic in Downing Street at the Government's low poll ratings on health and the dissatisfaction expressed by the public that the Prime

Minister felt he had to come to the House to give us a statement of complete waffle, while the Secretary of State for Health sat, demoted, alongside. The Government now have a timetable of four months in which to think about how they ought to be running the NHS, even though Labour had 18 years in opposition to think about that, and they have now been in government for three years. It seems that the Treasury has come up with the money, so the rest of the Government are trying to work out how to spend it.

That is a sad indictment of how much effort the Government have devoted to the matter. Indeed, it is no more than justice after the sloganising in which they engaged before the general election. We are now told that the £21 billion was not £21 billion—it has come down quite a way. People could rightly be forgiven for asking what difference yesterday's £2 billion would make, if the £21 billion announced two years ago made no difference to the health care that they currently experience. They might wonder whether all was as it seems, given the fact that if one shakes hands with the Chancellor, one has to count one's fingers afterwards.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): My hon. Friend talks about the sad indictment of the Government. Is not the greatest indictment the fact that when I and others asked the Prime Minister at Question Time whether, with all that extra money, he would intervene to prevent closures, he said no? He said that he could not intervene; there was nothing he could do about the matter.

Dr. Fox: My hon. Friend should not expect too much. In his statement, the Prime Minister made it clear that when hospitals open, the Government have to take credit for our hospital building programme, but that when they close, Ministers must not micro-manage the system. It seems that it is all right for Ministers to take credit when things are going well, but when things go wrong it is nothing to do with them.

When we consider extra allocations to the NHS, we need to ask whether further costs will have to be met that would not have been covered otherwise. The answer is yes, there are. There is the non-funding of the pay award by the Government. That will now have to be met from any extra allocation made to the NHS. There is the working time directive. Prescription budgets in primary care are rising by about 11 per cent. this year. There are the structural deficits, of which I shall say more in a moment. There are superannuation costs; the cost of reducing the hours of junior doctors; and capital charges excess. All those costs put an extra burden on the service, but none of them are recognised when those headline allocations are announced. It is down to those who have to make the tough decisions to carry the can for those costs. Ministers should take direct responsibility for many of those decisions.

There is constant reannouncing. Yesterday, the Chancellor said that there was an extra £2 billion, but it was not immediately apparent to everybody that that amount included the £300 million from tobacco tax announced last year. Many people—including many commentators in today's media—thought that the £2 billion was on top of that amount.

The Government announced yesterday that they wanted 10,000 extra nurses. However, the Royal College of Nursing helpfully pointed out that the Government had previously said that they wanted to recruit 15,000 more nurses. Yesterday's announcement was not new; it continued the Government's existing intentions on nurse recruitment. When the Secretary of State replies, will he tell us over what time scale the new nurses will be recruited? Are they 10,000 whole-time equivalents—that is, full-time nurse posts—or are they 10,000 nurses in total with some working part-time? If the answer is 10,000 nurses in total, how many whole-time equivalent posts do the Government intend them to fill?

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): Is my hon. Friend able to throw any light on the £300 million to be raised from tobacco excise duties? When referring to further developments in tobacco excise duties, the Red Book states:

> Thereafter, excise duties fall slightly as a proportion of GDP largely reflecting the relatively slow growth in the demand for excise goods. The tobacco forecast takes into account the impact on revenues of the direct effects of additional anti-smuggling measures, including the deterrent effects of fiscal marks

that will be announced today. As we do not know whether the anti-smuggling measures will work, is that £300 million guaranteed for the health service or does it require the anti-smuggling measures to work?

Dr. Fox: My understanding is that the £300 million depends on the Government succeeding in raising the revenue and making it available to the NHS. I hope that the anti-smuggling measures will work, but if they do not, that money will not be available to the NHS. By a slight irony, if people decide to stop smoking as a result of the 25p-a-packet rise, less money will be available to the NHS. However, I am sure that the Secretary of State has already made the appropriate judgment on whether that would be advisable. I hope that people stop smoking and that the tax rises will dissuade them from smoking.

Mr. Peter Bradley (The Wrekin): In a sense, the hon. Gentleman has anticipated the point that I wanted to make. Would it not be extremely welcome and be a saving to the NHS if people gave up smoking? The £300 million that would otherwise go towards treating the many respiratory diseases that are brought on by smoking could be saved.

Dr. Fox: It would be nice if the world was as simple as some of the points raised in the House, but it is not quite like that. As the hon. Gentleman knows, those who require treatment for smoking-related illnesses are already out there. Although some may have a reduced morbidity as a result of giving up smoking, many will not and they will continue to cost the NHS large sums of money. Let us hope that, in the years to come, the people who give up smoking as a result of either price increases or better education will reduce the burden on the NHS and the far greater human cost that is associated with smoking-related illnesses.

If the Secretary of State is to provide answers to my questions about nurses, will he also tell us how many of the 10,000 nurses will be taken on to fill existing vacancies and how many will be taken on to fill new posts and new roles as part of whatever modernisation proposals

[Dr. Fox]

the Government intend to introduce? When the Government consider the priorities, they should consider an important point made by the Royal College of Nursing yesterday. The priorities must include long-term care, to which I shall refer shortly, primary care and improving the essentials of care—dignity, hygiene, nutrition and privacy. They are much more difficult to quantify when we do business, but they are extraordinarily important for patients.

I mentioned the fact that the Prime Minister had given us the wrong level of NHS funding as a proportion of GDP, and I wonder whether Ministers have had time to confirm that so that they will not allow him unintentionally to mislead the House. However, if we are moving towards the level of funding in the European Union, we have to move towards the level that our European partners spend. They currently spend about 9.1 per cent. of GDP on health compared with rather less in the United Kingdom. The figure for the EU comes down when the United Kingdom is added in, but the irony is that the figure will keep increasing as long as we increase the proportion of GDP that we spend on health. It becomes an ever more difficult target to chase.

I urge my right hon. and hon. Friends not to be churlish. If we are getting a large increase in funding over a period and if it is spent wisely, it will undoubtedly help to move the United Kingdom's health outcomes closer to those of the countries that we might expect to have similar outcomes. The Government's figure of 6.4 per cent. for the NHS by 2003-04 would require a 20 per cent. increase in the private sector's spend to bring it up to the figure of 7.6 per cent. that the Prime Minister used this afternoon. It would require the NHS and the private sector to work in partnership and both to expand if we are to approach European levels.

We are not fundamentally different from any other country. If we want our total expenditure on health to rise to the levels found in countries with similar economies to our own, we will require growth in both the state sector, over which the Government have control, and the independent sector, over which they have less control but which can, none the less, encourage those who can afford to do so to relieve pressure on the NHS. I think that people increasingly understand that. That is why 160,000 people bought care outside the NHS last year. I hope that we can find constructive ways of making it possible for those who wish to use more of their post-taxation income to buy care to do so more cheaply. In that way, choice in health care will be not only for those who have large savings, the wealthy or those who would pauperise themselves by using all their life savings.

Mr. Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central) *rose—*

Dr. Fox: I give way to the hon. Gentleman, as he always attends health debates.

Mr. Davies: Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that the Conservative party is committed to matching the expenditure forecast for health that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor laid out yesterday, and, by the sound of it, perhaps to doing even more? What rebalancing would take place between private sector and public sector health provision? The hon. Gentleman makes great play of the need for a partnership, and it sounds as if there would be at least some privatisation. How much? Would it be half?

Dr. Fox: I am extremely pleased to say that we welcome unambiguously the rise in health spending and it would be matched by an incoming Conservative Government. Private sector provision does not have to be instead of public sector provision. We are talking about additionality. We have agreed to match the expenditure that the Government propose and we want to see measures to encourage additional private sector care. That will help us bring our total expenditure up to the same limits as in other countries. Those measures would be on top of what the NHS spends.

We have a great opportunity in Britain. We have a well-developed state model in the NHS system—better than that in most other countries in Europe. We also have a creative private sector in financial services. One of the problems that we face is that many of the products available for personal private health care are too expensive and inflexible. We need a large change in the quantity and quality of many of the products that are available. Otherwise, individuals will not purchase them and we will not achieve an expansion in the number of individuals who purchase private sector care. That is an important point. Changes in the independent sector as radical as those in pensions in the early 1980s will be required if we are to achieve the growth that I should like to see to complement the growth in the state sector, which we have already announced we would match.

Mr. Davies: I seek clarification. The hon. Gentleman seems to be saying that he will match pound for pound all the public sector investment that we have promised and beat the global total by a significant amount through extra private provision. Is that his pledge for the election?

Dr. Fox: A member of the Labour party has understood that it is possible, by increasing private sector expenditure and state sector expenditure, to achieve a total increase in the health care that is available.

If we are to reach the European average for total health care spending, on the Government's figures for 2003–04, it would be necessary effectively to double the size of the private sector in the United Kingdom. That is a tall order, given what is currently available. I should therefore like to see dramatic and radical changes in what is offered by the private sector in Britain. I hope that it will rise to the challenge, as it has in many other sectors. There is a chance to combine the excellence of most of the NHS and the creativity of the financial services sector. That could give us the best of both worlds. I hope that that is a challenge to which the private sector can rise and which any changes in the NHS can help us to meet.

Mr. Ivan Lewis (Bury, South): Can the hon. Gentleman explain to the House the consequences of expansion of the private health care sector for the time of doctors, nurses and other essential professionals? We all acknowledge that there is a shortage of them. If there was a significant expansion in the private sector, less of those professionals' time would be available to the NHS.

Can the hon. Gentleman also explain, if we are so far behind the average expenditure of other European—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. The hon. Gentleman cannot make a speech at this stage—perhaps later.

Dr. Fox: None the less, the first part of the litany contained an important point. It is rather odd that Labour Members should say that it is possible to achieve a 6.1 per cent. increase in real terms in NHS provision without putting a strain on the supply of doctors and nurses, or that it would be possible to bring in more, while saying that it is not possible to achieve a 1.2 per cent. increase overall in the private sector without putting a strain on the supply. Both those assertions cannot be right. As the Government have acknowledged by their efforts to bring nurses back into nursing, there are many trained professionals who do not currently work in the system. A lot of GPs take early retirement, as do many consultants—indeed, the so-called leakage of consultants taking early retirement is greater than the increase in the number of medical students sought under the Government's recent plans.

Mr. Lewis: I seek clarification. Up until this week, Britain's spend on health care was considerably below the European average. What does it say about 18 years of Tory Government that we find ourselves so far down the league table of health expenditure? How can a tax guarantee that taxes will always fall under a Tory Government co-exist alongside a promise of massive expenditure on health care being honoured? The two pledges are contradictory.

Dr. Fox: That will teach me to be charitable. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that we have spent less than the European average. For his information, we were overtaken by the then Common Market average spend in 1963 and we have remained behind every year since—I am sure that I do not have to remind him that the Conservatives were not in office throughout that period.

I do not pretend that we are spending enough. I came to the House of Commons having spent all of my working life in the NHS. I want the NHS to be improved and I have no problem saying that it would have been nice if we had spent more over the years. I am keen to look to the future and to ensure that we achieve an improvement in this country's health care, in both the state and private sectors. To be frank, I do not care where health care comes from; I just want more health care. I want better and more health care for more patients more quickly and more treatments provided as they become available. That is a perfectly simple desire that is shared by most people in this country.

I have no problem saying that the Conservatives did not do everything perfectly, or that we got things wrong. However, it is entirely possible to achieve an overall reduction in taxation at the same time as an increase in expenditure on health—that is what happened in the 1980s. In the Red Book published yesterday, the Government say that the overall tax burden will fall slightly in the middle of the next Parliament, at the same time as they increase health expenditure by 6.1 per cent. in real terms. The Government cannot have it both ways: if it is possible for the tax burden to fall and expenditure to rise under a Labour Government, it is, by definition, possible. Let us have no more such distortions.

We have a great opportunity, but, when it comes to improving health care, it is not only money that counts but how that money is spent. Outside, there is growing disbelief and an unwillingness to listen when politicians throw around figures and the Government talk about £X billion extra being spent; people want to see how the spending affects them, their local hospital and their local health authority.

That point was today well put by the King's Fund, which describes the extra money provided by the Government as a "good sum", but warns the Government against frittering it away on centrally organised grant schemes. It says:

> The NHS needs to be able to spend this on the things that matter most.
>
> These are primary care, good medical care for the elderly and good mental health.
>
> While this is a nice amount of money, the question is how the NHS is allowed to use it.

That question is central.

The Secretary of State for Education and Employment appears to understand the need to get money directly to schools, and we welcome that; so why has the Prime Minister told us today that the Secretary of State for Health will announce only £660,000 of the £2 billion to be provided, and that there will be strings attached to the money? As the Prime Minister says, it is not up to the Government to micro-manage the service, because politicians cannot second-guess what happens at local level. I hope that the Government will not continue increasingly to centralise every possible decision and so remove from trusts, health authorities and, more important, doctors the power to take decisions. The result of imposing political priorities is the distortion of clinical priorities.

After financing and the trend towards centralisation, the next important issue to raise is the politicisation of the culture of running the service. The report from Dame Rennie Fritchie published today provides a damning indictment of the way in which the Government culture now runs throughout every part our public service, as they appoint every placeman possible. It will come as some disappointment, to say the very least, to many people that as a result of the placing of Labour party activists everywhere, a large proportion of the extra money being poured into the NHS will go into the pockets of Labour party activists who just happen to be lucky enough to have their noses in Labour's NHS trough.

Of appointees who were politically active in 1995, 8.9 per cent. were Conservative and 7.6 per cent. were Labour. By 1998, of those who were politically active, 77.7 per cent. were Labour party activists. That is a disgusting distortion of the system.

Dame Rennie Fritchie stated that appointments were being

> politicised in a systematic way.

She continued:

> The Secretary of State sets the tone for the process.

The principles in her code of practice have been or risk being breached in both their letter and their spirit. What counts is not what appointees do for the NHS, but what they have done for the Labour party.

[Dr. Fox]

It is interesting that in the Prime Minister's constituency, Sedgefield, there was an appointment to South Durham NHS trust. He was the bar manager at the local Labour club, but I suppose that unlike many other appointees, at least he had some business experience, and he probably would have been able to arrange the proverbial in a brewery.

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley (South-West Surrey): Is it not particularly deplorable that whereas the appointment process was essentially endorsed by the Nolan report with the establishment of independent scrutiny, Dame Rennie reports that recommendations from Members of Parliament and often from local authorities were allowed to bypass the independent scrutiny that had been established?

Dr. Fox: Indeed, my right hon. Friend is correct. That is one of the most worrying aspects of the culture of cronyism, which pervades not only central Government, but increasingly local government and every arm that Government touch. I hope that when the Secretary of State replies, he will give us specific assurances that that will stop, and that he will shortly meet Dame Rennie Fritchie to discuss the allegations and the solutions that she proposes.

Many of us in the Opposition were shocked at the way in which the Prime Minister brushed off serious allegations about probity and potential conflicts of interest that Dame Rennie Fritchie identified so well in her excellent report.

Mr. Giles Radice (North Durham): You did the same when you were in office.

Dr. Fox: As I have already shown, the previous survey carried out in 1995–96 demonstrated that that was not true. There is a culture of rottenness, corruptness and cronyism that pervades this Administration, which has never pervaded any previous British Administration. They attempt to manipulate and control at every level of public life, whether it be the law, the media, through Parliament or the quangos. The Government are obsessed with control and getting their people in place, irrespective of whether they are the best people or not.

Mr. Radice: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Fox: No, indeed not. The right hon. Gentleman made as good an intervention as he will, from a sedentary position.

The Prime Minister's statement this afternoon was trailed as very important. I have never heard a Prime Minister address the House with such a bunch of meaningless waffle as I heard this afternoon. It was a platitude from start to finish. He spoke of a partnership challenge, meaning why do not we all just work together? That is truly remarkable. He mentioned a performance challenge, suggesting that we should all do our best—as though those who work in the NHS would do anything else.

The Prime Minister spoke of a challenge for the professions, and called on staff to be flexible. What does he think they are being, in the face of the Government's hostility? He proposed a challenge on prevention and suggested that people should have a healthy life style—what a revolutionary thought. My right hon. Friend the Member for South-West Surrey (Mrs. Bottomley) espoused that some years ago, when we published "The Health of the Nation".

It was sheer gall for the Prime Minister to tell the House about a patient care challenge to treat the sickest patients quickly, when for three years the Government have presided over a waiting list initiative which every health care professional in the country says has distorted clinical priorities, to the extent that some of the sickest patients are waiting far longer than they need because health managers are being penalised financially if they do not meet their waiting list targets.

That was brass neck, even for the Prime Minister. What a cheek, when we hear that cardiology patients in Bristol have died on the waiting list. The Paymaster General, who used to make so much noise in opposition, was silent when patients in Bristol were dying, and when patients have been paying to get more treatment.

A gentleman who came to my constituency surgery last week had been clinically advised that if he did not have a coronary bypass operation within six weeks, his condition would become life-threatening, but he could not have the operation done in the NHS within a year. At the same time, we are still undertaking more minor procedures, resulting in a distortion of clinical priorities. What the Prime Minister said today is diametrically opposed to the effects of his own policy of the waiting list initiative, which needs to be ditched. If it were not for the Prime Minister's arrogance and his point-blank refusal to believe that he could ever be wrong, even in the face of advice from every part of the medical and nursing professions, people would not have died unnecessarily.

Mr. Nigel Beard (Bexleyheath and Crayford): Does not the hon. Gentleman recognise that at the heart of the Prime Minister's statement was the concept of medical audit, which is an attempt to overcome the gross disparities in treatment and cost in different regions, which have grown up over many years? Why, over so many years, did the previous Administration, whom the hon. Gentleman supported, tolerate such gross disparities?

Dr. Fox: The figures showing what was happening within the NHS were not always available. It was only the development of the internal market that showed up exactly what was happening, yet the Prime Minister now wants to abolish the source of the information about which he spoke today. The problem with the Prime Minister's statement, as with so many of his statements, is that his words are not the same as his or the Government's deeds. In this case, they are diametrically opposed. The British people will rightly judge the Prime Minister, who has now put himself at the centre of the Government's health policy, not by the words that he uses in the Chamber but by his actions and the effects that they have on patient care. He will be judged not by what he says at Prime Minister's Question Time, nor by his photo-opportunities or by his soundbites, but on whether

the sickest patients will now be treated more quickly. I hope that his words are right and that he will apologise for the fact that his policy has been entirely wrong.

Mr. Ivan Lewis: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Fox: No, I have already given way quite a lot.

There are several matters which any party in government has to bear in mind when considering budget allocation for the NHS, the most immediate of which are cost pressures, historic deficits and demand pressures. Let me outline for the Secretary of State one of the cost pressures.

The Government said that they wanted to attract another 10,000 nurses. What economic model has been used to decide what level of pay would be required to bring 10,000 extra nurses back into the system, and what would be the resulting additional cost for the nurses that we already employ? That cost pressure would be inevitable, given what the Chancellor said yesterday.

The NHS has large and growing historic deficits, so whenever new money is allocated, the first call on that is for the deficit that health authorities have built up, which may be as much as £1 billion. I notice that the Prime Minister did not deny that figure when it was put to him by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition.

In addition, there are the demand pressures of new pharmaceuticals and new treatments. We are moving towards gene therapy and stem cell transfer—new technologies in medicine which will be extremely expensive. We shall have demand pressures to an extent that we have never known before. All that needs to be considered when planning ahead. I hope that the Secretary of State will say something about that because it is a matter of real concern to health professionals.

It was disappointing to hear nothing in the Budget about long-term care and its funding. We have now been waiting 14 months for an adequate response to the royal commission. I imagine that the excuse is that there cannot be an announcement because we are waiting for the results of the comprehensive spending review, yet the Chancellor did not feel compelled to stick to that when announcing the spending totals for the NHS. As with anything else, if it suits the Government, they will break the rules, but if it does not, they will keep quiet. Each year, under this Government, 40,000 people lose their homes, yet when the Government took office they promised a quick solution to the problem of long-term care. The phrase "quick solution" is used in much the same way as the phrase "dealing with the early pledge", which means roughly the same in their language as "more" or "extra" in relation to the truth. I hope that we might hear something about that when the Secretary of State replies.

We welcome the increased spending on health, but we need to know how it will be spent. When the Secretary of State details today exactly what measures the Government will take to ensure that the money goes to patient care, not to Ministers' pet schemes, we will be able to judge whether it will result in better patient care. The Government must be judged by clinical outcomes, not by input or throughput. Where the Government make the right decisions, they will have the Opposition's wholehearted support; but if they get it wrong and waste this opportunity for the sake of quick progress or cheap headlines, they, and in particular the Prime Minister, will never be trusted again.

5.4 pm

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Alan Milburn): Yesterday, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer delivered a Budget for a stronger and fairer Britain; a Budget that continues to build steady economic growth, that will modernise our schools, transform our hospitals and support families and communities throughout the country. He announced the right measures at the right time to do what is right for Britain.

The Budget has been widely welcomed in the country. It was welcomed by the Institute of Directors as

confirmation of the Government's belief in creating an enterprise economy.

It was welcomed by the Trades Union Congress as

a generous and much needed boost,

and by the British Medical Association as a

major step in putting the health service on a firm, long term basis.

I have seen probably eight or nine Budgets in my time in this House; other hon. Friends will have witnessed many more. However, I have never before seen Opposition Members looking so mute and so glum during a Chancellor's statement. Nothing expresses more clearly the distance between today's Conservative party and the public than their respective reactions to the Budget. While nurses and teachers were described as being over the moon, the Leader of the Opposition—with his new, trendy, David Beckham haircut—looked as sick as a parrot. As well he might.

The Budget is for the whole nation, and because it does what is right for Britain, it also does right by the NHS. It demonstrates the Labour party's commitment to the NHS and our determination that it should succeed.

Mr. Blunt: I should like to bring the Secretary of State back to policy, if he can stop inventing Conservative party positions. Why was it satisfactory yesterday to passport money directly to head teachers, but impossible today for the £660 million of the £2 billion to be passported directly to health authorities? Why must it have strings attached by the Secretary of State and his hon. Friends?

Mr. Milburn: If the hon. Gentleman will wait a moment, I shall tackle that point. I hope that he will be satisfied when I have made my announcement.

Mr. Blunt: I doubt it.

Mr. Milburn: So do I, because, like the Liberal Democrats, the hon. Gentleman will never be satisfied. The more we give, the more he wants.

No one—not even the hon. Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt)—should underestimate the significance of the Budget announcement for the national health service. It constituted a key moment in the history of the NHS.

For more than 25 years, the NHS got by on an annual real-terms increase in funding of approximately 3.2 to 3.3 per cent. a year. The Conservative Government's record during their last two decades in power averaged

[Mr. Milburn]

less than that—approximately 2.9 per cent. Indeed, in their last full Parliament, it was even less: just 2.6 per cent.

Annual growth of 3 per cent. has landed the NHS in its current position. The system, by international standards, is efficient and fair but there are fewer beds, fewer doctors and fewer nurses than in comparable systems. The NHS is, as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development rightly says, a remarkably cost-effective institution.

In Britain, we rightly take pride in what the NHS does and in what its staff achieve, but we know that it is an institution, which, for too long, has been coping when it should have been thriving. It has been surviving, but it should have been modernising. Now, through this substantial new investment, we have the chance to give the NHS a new lease of life and to reinvent it for the new century.

That is what is now on offer. In our first two years in office, we had to stabilise the public finances. That required a tough approach to spending. I believe that it was the right thing to do. Today the country is reaping the benefit. There are 800,000 more jobs in the economy, a record number of people in work, and a record number of vacancies for work. Investment in manufacturing is growing, and youth and long-term unemployment is falling. A strong and growing economy is providing the foundations for strong and growing public services.

The NHS will now reap the benefit of our approach. Prudence has indeed been for a purpose. We increased NHS investment in our first two years by approximately £2 billion over and above the plans that we inherited. We spent what the country could afford. Yesterday's Budget means that the NHS will have grown by 50 per cent. in cash terms by 2003–04, and by 35 per cent. in real terms. For the next four years, the NHS in England will grow by an annual average of 6.3 per cent. above inflation. That is twice the long-term growth trend.

From today, we can draw a line not only under decades of underfunding, but decades of instability in health service finances. There has been too much boom and bust in the economy, but there has been too much boom and bust in NHS funding as well. We now have a platform of sustained increases in funding which provide a sure foundation for the sustained modernisation that the health service needs.

I do not pretend for a moment that the extra resources that we have provided for the NHS will solve every money problem. Like every other health care system in the world—whether public, private or a mixture of the two—the NHS will continue to have to make tough choices about how resources are best used. It will take time and effort as well as resources to give Britain the modern health service that it needs.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): Has the Secretary of State considered the fact that advances in gene technology mean that in a short time every citizen of this country will be able to give his general practitioner a profile of his family history and the likelihood of his dying from a hereditary disease? That will lead to an unprecedented demand for health services. How will they be provided?

Mr. Milburn: There is enormous potential in gene therapy and in genetic technology advances more generally. They will require changes in the way the NHS provides its services. I say one thing to the hon. Gentleman, as he is a signed-up advocate of the Conservative Front-Bench policy on private health insurance: that will not destroy the NHS, but it will destroy the private health insurance market, for a very simple market reason. Those with the advantage of access to genetic technology and genetic tests will find out whether they are predisposed to certain illnesses and diseases—perhaps cancer or coronary heart disease. What will be the private health insurance industry's reaction? It will fail to insure those people, which will be a logical and sensible market decision.

Those who pin all their hopes on the private health insurance sector as the future for health care improvement in our country have got it wrong, because that will not work. Advances in genetics, gene therapy and gene testing will, in my view, render the private health insurance market, which is already unstable, even more unstable in future.

Mr. Paterson *rose—*

Mr. Milburn: Let me continue. The resources provide the chance to address decades of neglect and give the NHS the means to modernise its services. I can tell the House that that process will begin at once. Last week, the NHS Confederation, which represents trusts and health authorities throughout the country, called for a £600 million increase for local health services. Today, I can tell the House that next week I shall make available £660 million direct to health authorities and on to primary care groups, NHS trusts and hospitals in England. They will be able to spend that cash to meet the service pressures that they face and to take forward local spending priorities.

Mr. Fabricant: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Milburn: In a moment. Let me finish what I have to say. Those bodies will be expected to show consistent progress and improvement. There will be incentives to encourage good performance and to eradicate bad performance. We shall ensure that the cash reaches front-line patient services, but it needs to be spent wisely and well.

The money will be paid at stages during the year. The bodies that deliver will receive their full allocation and be free to spend the funds in accordance with their agreed local priorities. Those that are unable to deliver will still receive the bulk of their allocation, but will have more support and, if necessary, intervention. They will have the opportunity to make up any lost allocation in one period by upping their performance in the next. That is about instilling a new performance culture in every part of the health service in every part of our country.

The new resources will help the NHS to run balanced budgets year after year. They will fund new drugs, improve services for cancer and coronary care and help

to speed up treatment for patients. There will be resources to help primary care groups to develop their services and resources to develop intermediate care services, building the bridge between hospital and home ahead of next winter.

I can also tell the House that in the weeks to come I shall make further allocations direct to health authorities, and then on to primary care groups and hospitals. I shall keep a clear eye on ensuring that those allocations help to address the very real health inequalities that scar our nation.

Mr. Fabricant *rose—*

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge) *rose—*

Mr. Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) *rose—*

Mr. Milburn: It appears I have a queue of Conservative Members who want to intervene.

Mr. Fabricant: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his usual courtesy in giving way. I am sure that he can guess what my question is, because he was present at Prime Minister's Question Time. On the face of it—before we have had a chance to read between the lines—what he says sounds remarkable. It is good news if it is to be believed. Does it mean that he can assure my constituents, let alone people throughout the country, that there will be no more hospital closures?

Mr. Milburn: It is good news. The hon. Gentleman and his hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) have been asking me all afternoon for an assurance that I will get the money out there. I shall get the money out there: that is what will happen. It will go to health authorities and then on to primary care groups. The primary care groups will decide. Local doctors and nurses are in the driving seat—not bureaucrats sitting in health authorities—and it will be up to them to decide where the money goes.

On the question of whether it is ever right to close a hospital, I do not want to go into the particular case that the hon. Gentleman has mentioned, because I do not know enough about it. If he wants to raise it with me in correspondence, I shall be happy to look into it. Tories have the idea that it is not right to change the nature of local health services—perhaps today's Conservative party is so out of touch that they are becoming modern-day Luddites. Sometimes we must change the make-up of local health services. For example, in Norwich right now we are closing hospitals. Why? To build a brand-new hospital. Why are we doing that? Because we cannot deliver 21st-century care in hospitals that were built before the 20th century.

Mr. Hammond: I understand that the Secretary of State cannot give an absolute assurance that he will never close or reconfigure hospitals, but will he give an assurance that he will not approve any further plans by health authorities that result in a net loss of beds in their areas?

Mr. Milburn: The hon. Gentleman wants to have his cake and eat it. First he does not want me to micro-manage or centralise the service, and then he does. Which is it? I shall give him a clear assurance on one point. For the first time in 30 or 40 years, the Government have bothered objectively to inquire into the number of beds in the system and how many we need. My own view, which accords with the result of the national beds inquiry, is that we do not have enough beds in the system. Indeed, the trend of a huge decline in the number of hospital beds, which the Conservative Government exacerbated, is not sustainable for the future, and we need to address that problem.

As the hon. Gentleman knows, we are consulting on the national beds inquiry, and I hope that he will submit a view. Let us hear what members of the Conservative Front-Bench team have to say about this issue. When the consultation is over, we will produce clear guidelines, which we will expect every health authority to adhere to, so that we can be assured that in all parts of the country we have the right number of beds, of the right sort and in the right places.

Mr. Kenneth Clarke: I was trying to intervene when the right hon. Gentleman was making what I think was an important announcement about how he proposes to distribute this money to health authorities over the next year. I hope that he will correct me if I have misunderstood him, but it sounded as though it was a completely new and highly centralised method of controlling the distribution of money to health authorities.

As I understood the right hon. Gentleman, health authorities will not be able to work on a set and certain budget for the year. The money will be distributed in tranches, according to the Secretary of State's and his Department's judgment of a health authority's performance. Does that mean that once a quarter the right hon. Gentleman and his Department will go through the process of judging the performance of each and every health authority in England, and give penalties or rewards? I do not think that his Department is competent to do that. The process will lend itself to attempts at central direction and political lobbying for the release of more or less money in different parts of the country, which will be one of the first problems that the Prime Minister's reforms in July will have to address.

Mr. Milburn: When the right hon. and learned Gentleman was Secretary of State for Health, and when he was Chancellor of the Exchequer, he was a toughie. He was a tough guy on value for money; he was a hard guy on poor performance. Now he is not. Is he for poor performance, or against it? Which is it?

Let me say something which, if the right hon. and learned Gentleman fully understands it, I think he will commend. Of course I want to get the money out, but I will not throw good money after bad. I want to ensure that the money reaches front-line patient services, in a way that is fair to both patients and taxpayers. As the right hon. and learned Gentleman well knows from his experience as Secretary of State for Health, it is not fair for some parts of the health care system to perform disproportionately better than others; and as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made clear today, we are not

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prepared to allow real differences in performance in some parts of the country to hold back performance in the country as a whole.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Milburn: It is nice to be popular. I give way to the right hon. Member for South-West Surrey (Mrs. Bottomley).

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: As I am sure the right hon. Gentleman recognises, part of the measurement of outcomes was made possible by the internal market: it was the purchaser-provider distinction that enabled people to measure.

Will the right hon. Gentleman be allocating the resources by means of the postcode lottery that gives people in his area £115 a year more than those in the costly home counties? Although there may be arguments for deprivation funding, the cost of care in areas such as mine is acute. As a result, one in 10 of my constituents waits for more than a year for treatment, while only one in 100 of the right hon. Gentleman's does.

Mr. Milburn: I thought that the right hon. Lady was against the north-south divide. She now seems to want to exacerbate it. As I understand it, she is calling for a transfer of resources from north to south. In the real world, greater equalisation means a transfer of resources around the system, does it not? If the right hon. Lady is calling for a transfer of resources from poorer parts of the country to more prosperous parts, I am afraid that I must sorely disappoint her: that will not be possible.

Mr. Brian Cotter (Weston-super-Mare): I welcome the extra funding, and also what the Secretary of State has just said. I hope that he will consider what I am going to say constructive.

Mrs. Greed, from Weston-super-Mare, has been denied treatment for hepatitis C by Avon health authority, one of only three authorities in the country that are denying treatment for the condition. Will the Secretary of State give that serious consideration? I think it extremely unfair that Mrs. Greed should be denied treatment.

Mr. Milburn: I am aware of the problems surrounding treatment for hepatitis C, and I think the hon. Gentleman is aware that we are taking action to deal with them. I have said many times from the Dispatch Box that I, unlike previous Secretaries of State, will not sweep the lottery of care under the carpet and pretend that it does not exist. It does exist, and we are taking action to deal with it. That is why, as the hon. Gentleman knows, we established the National Institute for Clinical Excellence. As he also knows, one of the first issues that it is examining is treatment for hepatitis C. It will produce its conclusions in due course, and I expect all parts of the NHS—including the part in the hon. Gentleman's constituency—to take account of its guidance.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Milburn: I shall give way to one or two of my hon. Friends; then I want to make some progress.

Dr. Howard Stoate (Dartford): My right hon. Friend, like me, will share the Prime Minister's real concern about the enormous variations in care across the country, which are clearly unacceptable in a national health service. What would he say to those in constituencies such as mine, where we are to have a brand-new state-of-the-art hospital, about which we are very pleased? Can he assure my constituents and me that he will examine the position relating to community beds and step-down beds? Could a facility be provided outside the general hospital, which will be dealing with acute cases, to give people convalescent step-down care, thus speeding them through the system and improving efficiency even further?

Mr. Milburn: I give that assurance. Part of the £660 million that I will allocate next week—more details will be available then—will be precisely to develop those intermediate care services. We know that there is a need to build capacity throughout the NHS. We do need more beds in the system, but it is glaringly obvious to anyone who goes to an acute sector hospital that the problem is not just the beds there, but the lack of available beds in the community.

One of the findings of the national beds inquiry is that perhaps 20 per cent. of acute beds in hospitals are occupied by elderly people, who would probably be well enough to leave, provided that they had a period of rehabilitation and recovery. We want that to happen consistently as part of a big national programme to build intermediate care.

Mr. Geraint Davies: Does my right hon. Friend think it strange that the Opposition now say that they will more than match the amount of money that we will put into health, yet have consistently voted against all the economic measures—the new deal, independence for the Bank of England, the end of boom and bust and making work pay—that have enabled us to get 800,000 people back into work and to have the wealth to put the money in now?

Mr. Milburn: My hon. Friend makes an extremely telling and accurate point, but I sound a note of caution. He should examine not just the Conservatives' record in the past, but their prospective record.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Milburn: May I make a little progress?

The extra resources that we are providing will add impetus to the modernisation that is already under way. In the past three years, we have been laying the foundations for modernisation. The internal market has gone, replaced instead by a system that puts local doctors and nurses in the driving seat to shape local health services. Co-operation between health and social care and other parts of the care system has replaced conflict.

The expansion of the NHS is under way. When we came to office, not a single PFI hospital had been built. Today, 38 new hospitals are under way—the biggest programme in the history of the NHS. When we came to office, accident and emergency services were neglected and rundown. Today, 190 A and E departments are being modernised—all that modernisation is about to start. Again, it is the biggest such programme that the NHS has ever seen.

When we came to office, the number of nurses in the NHS had fallen and the number of nurse training places had been cut. Today, both are rising. Large pay rises for nurses are helping us to begin to turn the corner on nurse shortages. Today, 4,500 more nurses are working in the NHS than a year ago. With the extra money, there will be more increases. The same is true of doctors. Today, there are 2,300 more doctors in the NHS than there were when we came to office.

The modernisation of NHS services is under way. When we came to office, waiting lists were at a record level and rising. Today, they are falling. When we came to office, cardiac and cancer services had suffered years of neglect. Today, those services are getting the investment and the priority that they need. When we came to office, there were no means of setting or policing standards. Today, we have new standards set by one new organisation—NICE—and inspected by another: the Commission for Health Improvement.

All those changes have laid the foundation for a modern NHS. The new resources that we have provided will mean a springboard for improvement in patient care.

Mr. Jack: The Secretary of State used the word "fair" to describe the mechanism by which he would allocate the money. He has just described some of the sectors where he might want to spend that money. I am still unclear as to how what is fair will be adjudicated on. I wonder whether he could give an example of how, under his proposed plan, he would adjudicate nationwide on who received money for, say, cardiothoracic treatment.

Mr. Milburn: Cardiac services are a good example and an important test bed for fairness. The great irony is that this country has a lower number of heart surgery interventions than comparable developed countries. That is the sad truth. It is a consequence of decades of neglect. We are trying to put that right, but there is another unfortunate internal national problem, if the right hon. Gentleman likes: often, precisely those areas that have the highest incidence of coronary heart disease have the lowest number of heart surgery interventions. As he knows, very often, the poorer parts of the country need cardiac services most, but receive them least. That is what we have to put right.

In all candour, I tell the right hon. Gentleman that the consequence of those facts is that we shall be targeting our investment in the areas that most need help. It is unfair that, in this day and age, a working-class, unskilled man has three times the chance of a professional man of developing coronary heart disease. We have to start addressing those big health inequality issues if we are honestly to say that we have a modern health service that is meeting the United Kingdom's fundamental health needs. That is a test bed for fairness, and that is something that we are determined to do.

The national health service needs not only cash, but reform. It does not require one at the expense of the other; it requires the two working together. Big real-terms funding increases must now be matched by big real-terms improvements in services. The Government have met the call for increased funding with a step change in resources. Now we need a step change in results. I believe that, for too long, lack of cash in the health service has masked a lack of consistency. There is too much variation in both practice and performance across the NHS. That is unfair both to patients and to taxpayers.

As the Prime Minister told the House earlier today, there should no longer be any excuses for poor performance. Patients want not excuses, but excellence in their local health services. Hence, in the next few months my right hon. Friend and I will be working to ensure that those new resources are properly used to deliver better health care right across the country. We shall be doing so in discussion with the professions and staff of the health service, with patients and with NHS managers.

Yesterday, when my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer finished his Budget statement, I met leaders of the professions in my office in the Department to kick-start that process. Tomorrow, I will be publishing our proposals on how we intend to take forward the dialogue on developing a new performance culture in the NHS. Over the next few months, we will be working with the professions and meeting NHS staff and patients to determine how we can use those extra resources as a catalyst for change throughout the NHS.

We will construct a national plan for the national health service. The plan will embrace all who share a commitment to the traditional principles of the NHS, and who have an equal determination to modernise its practices. However, it is now glaringly obvious that not everyone shares that commitment. The Budget has exposed the isolation of Conservative Members as the privatisers of the NHS, just as it has demonstrated Labour's commitment as the moderniser of the NHS. That is the divide on health today.

Yesterday, the Government renewed our historic pledge to an NHS that is free, fair and funded from general taxation. The investment that we are making will not only sustain the NHS, but modernise it, so that it meets the challenges of the new century.

The contrast with Conservative Members could not be clearer. The party that voted against the NHS now seeks to turn people against the NHS. Barely a day goes by without Conservative Front Benchers—we have heard them at it today—singing the praises of private insurance simply to bad-mouth the NHS. Last summer, a Conservative Front Bencher, the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman)—who has disappeared from the Chamber—said that she tries

> to use the NHS . . . to see what it is like for people who do not have the privilege of private health care.

By the autumn, the Conservatives were describing their policy as a "Trojan horse" for private medical insurance. By the winter, the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) was admitting that Conservative health policy meant that

> hip and knee replacements, hernia and cataracts

would no longer be available on the NHS.

As winter turned to spring, Conservative Members' policy turned from tragedy to farce, as the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge declared that

> people would look to the NHS to provide them with a service when they had serious life-threatening conditions and would look to private insurance

for the rest.

Conservative Members do not have a national plan for the NHS—they have a secret plan for the NHS. While we want to expand NHS services, they plan to shrink them. While we plan to improve care services, they plan to reduce the NHS to a core service. While we are building

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a 21st-century health service to meet the needs and expectations of the public, they want to force the public to go private.

Mr. Blunt: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I hope that it is a point of order.

Mr. Blunt: It is indeed. I have sat here through debate after debate on the health service and other matters, hearing direct lies about Conservative party policy being put by Ministers from the Treasury Bench. It does nothing for the credibility of the House when deliberate untruths are repeatedly told by—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I had an idea that the point that the hon. Gentleman wished to make was not a point of order. Those are matters for debate, not a point of order.

Mr. Milburn: The hon. Gentleman's agitation and concern are not so much directed at me as at his Front Benchers and, perhaps, the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major), the former Prime Minister, with whom he had a former association. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh."] I did not mean anything bad by that, because I know that they were just the best of friends. While the Budget provides historic real-terms increases year on year in the health service's budget, the Conservatives' tax guarantee is, as their former leader said, "mad", and could only mean

> swingeing cuts in the health service.

The Conservatives have made their choice and it is tax cuts for the privileged few, not investment in public services for the whole nation. Just 10 days ago, the shadow Chancellor said of the Chancellor's Budget choices that

> he can either reduce taxes or he can increase public spending.

He continued:

> What I would recommend is that he use that money to reduce taxes.

The Conservatives have made their choice. They have already promised billions in tax allowances, tax reliefs and tax cuts for a privileged few. Like a half-witted Houdini, the Leader of the Opposition has put on a straitjacket on tax and spending. He can twist and turn but he cannot now escape. It is the straitjacket of the tax guarantee—*[Interruption.]* It is no use the hon. Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) getting agitated. As surely as night follows day, cuts in health service spending would follow the tax guarantee. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I cannot have the hon. Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) shouting across the Floor from a seated position. He has raised points of order, but this is a point of order about which I am informing him: he should not do it.

Mr. Milburn: I am grateful for your protection, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The Conservatives' "mad" economic policy dictates a crazy health policy.

Mr. Paterson: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Milburn: No, because I am finishing my speech. The Conservatives cannot commit to the health service because they are already committed to tax cuts for the privileged few. They could not sustain the NHS so they would have to reduce the NHS. They cannot afford to modernise it so they have to commit to privatising it. That is the logic of their position, and the Budget has made it all too clear.

This is a Budget that has sharpened the great divide in British politics. It is a Budget for economic stability, not for Tory boom and bust. It is a Budget for hard-working families—to help them, not harm them. It is a Budget for fairness—to tackle poverty, not create it. It is a Budget for prudence with a purpose, not perks for the privileged. It is a Budget for those who work in the health service and those who rely on the health service. It is a Budget that no Tory Chancellor could ever have delivered: a strong economy and strong public services; an enterprise economy and a fair society. It is a Budget that the Conservatives cannot even hope to match. It is genuinely a Budget for all of Britain.

Dr. Fox: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I asked at the outset of my remarks whether the Prime Minister had inadvertently misled the House at the beginning of his statement and whether a Treasury Minister could let the House know whether that was so. I noticed that there were exchanges with officials, and I wondered whether a Minister could clarify that point before the debate continues.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The Minister has finished his speech and I have no control over what he does.

5.39 pm

Mr. Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe): Until yesterday, I thought that I would remain unique among Chancellors in having given a combined Budget dealing with tax and public spending. I presented four Budgets, all of which were in November, under an arrangement introduced by my predecessor, Norman Lamont. We announced the tax changes for the year and the public spending commitments after an annual review which examined carefully the needs of each and every Department. We looked at the consequences for public borrowing or public repayment of debt and all those factors were judged with a view to serving the real purpose of a Budget—trying to create the right climate for a successful macro-economy so that we could continue creating wealth and secure jobs while providing sufficient resources to pay for public services.

I thought that the new Government had gone back to the traditional Budget, in which tax measures were settled in the first part of the year. Every three years there was a comprehensive spending review which considered public spending. For that reason, when I was asked, as previous Chancellors often are, for my predictions for yesterday's Budget I said that I could not think why the Chancellor had given the impression that he had a vast war chest to give away and that he would be most unwise to do anything of any consequence by way of giving away on taxation. I said that if he had a bit to spare—as he has—he should save it for the comprehensive spending review in June or July when the real announcements will be made.

Yesterday's was an extraordinary Budget. It was not a traditional Budget or the sort of Budget that I presented; it was a strange cross between a tax Budget and a spending review, dominated above all by political ambitions for the next election and beyond and a political settlement between the Chancellor and the Prime Minister which led to today's debate.

I shall turn to the Budget in a moment, but the tax measures were, as I had predicted, fairly inconsequential. There were some interesting ideas on welfare to work and the working families tax credit, which we shall no doubt debate on another occasion. There was some interesting but modest stimulus to e-commerce and the dot.com economy. The rest was a bit here and a bit there. I do not think that anyone will look back on this year's Budget and remember anything about it. It was pretty dull, although that may have been wise.

The last few moments of the Budget were dominated by the issue that has taken over today's debate. Suddenly, part of the comprehensive spending review—the part devoted to the health service—was pulled out and spun to the headlines. It has completely dominated the Budget.

Clearly, the Prime Minister, who we saw in a panic on the Frost programme, insisted that something was done on a big scale to try to match up to his promises on the national health service. The Chancellor said that he was not giving all that money to one Department unless he could be sure that something would come of it. So the Prime Minister has personally taken charge, when he can think of what he wishes to do. The result has been a complete U-turn on the Government's policy on health for the past two or three years and the first day of the Budget debate has the Secretary of State for Health coming out with all that wide blue yonder stuff, along with some worrying detail, in order to try to turn the debate back to the health service.

Let me go into a little more detail as it is an extraordinary political operation. Let me turn to the Budget first, as we ought to be concerned with the real economy. Why has the Chancellor been so unbelievably cautious? It is because of his one fear about the current economic prospects, the one fear that he did not mention in his speech yesterday—the consequences of an overvalued pound on key sectors of the economy. The pound's value in the present market is far too high—DM3.20 plus. For most of my time as Chancellor it was DM2.50. The pound's value has been largely driven by the monetary policy of the Bank of England and the Bank's continuing fears of inflationary pressures coming back, and perhaps fiscal indiscipline on the part of the Chancellor. Although until now both the Chancellor and the Governor of the Bank of England have denied responsibility for the pound—my view is that neither of them should have control over it or target it—they each have a responsibility to act together in paying heed to the currency's value.

Yesterday, the Chancellor was anxious to say that he was going in for even greater fiscal tightening, for this year and next, than he promised last November. The elements of economic policy include taxation, spending, borrowing and debt, but it was debt that dominated the Chancellor's mind.

The figures for the health service that we heard today have to be put alongside the fact that we are repaying £12 billion of debt this year. Next year, we will repay £6.5 billion of debt, and £5 billion the year after that. The surpluses currently planned by the Chancellor are absolutely enormous. I do not know why he is obsessed with paying back debt on such a scale—it is a good thing up to a point, as borrowing is tax-deferred—but he inherited perfectly healthy public finances.

I cannot decide whether the present inspiration comes from Pitt the Younger or from President Clinton, but the Chancellor appears to be dedicated to eliminating our national debt. However, as a percentage of gross domestic product, our debt is miles below the Maastricht criterion, and is at a perfectly healthy level, compared with our competitors.

The tight repayment of debt dominated the Budget. That is why tax continues to rise, as I shall explain in a moment. The Chancellor has done nothing about that. It is also why spending remains an even greater mystery, although I hope that the amazing promises about health service investment over the next four years, which I welcome, come to pass. However, I think that they were ill planned, and that they were driven more by the "Breakfast with Frost" programme than by any careful consideration of what that investment in one Department might mean for the Government's economic and spending policies, or for their political priorities.

If the Chancellor's tight policy were to have the effect of persuading the Bank of England to make a rate of 6 per cent. the possible peak for interest rates it might remove from the markets the impression that British interest rates are going to go higher. That in turn might eventually help to create a climate in which the pound could decline. If that were to happen, I would be glad for British manufacturing—and for British agriculture, which at the moment is being ruined.

I would be glad also for the sake of the prospects of inward investment into this country. For various reasons, BMW is not the best example to cite, as the strength of the pound was only one factor—the others involved all sorts of behaviour by that company—in the Longbridge plant decision. However, when one talks to the president of Sony or to any major inward investor into this country—even to any sensible British investor in a British company that wants to trade in Europe—it becomes clear that the high pound is the biggest problem that anyone is facing.

Dr. Stoate: The right hon. and learned Gentleman is right to point out the problem posed by the strength of the pound to many sectors of the British economy, but does he not agree that the only real mechanism to reduce that strength is to cut interest rates? Would not that lead to inflation and a return to the boom and bust of the 1980s?

Mr. Clarke: I do not think that that is necessarily what will happen. I have debated this matter before. I, too, am a hawk on inflation, but I disagree with the judgment of the Monetary Policy Committee of the Bank of England. There is intense competition in today's global markets, with price-averse consumers and a high rate of technological change. As a result, the inflationary pressures are not as great as the MPC claims.

A true comparison of inflation across Europe, using the only comparative method available, shows that Britain has the lowest rate of any member state of the European Union—so much for the claims that I was profligate, and

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for the claims that we faced crisis on inflation in the past. I think that our monetary authorities are too hawkish. We need a better and a more genuinely independent Monetary Policy Committee, with a membership drawn from a wider range of people.

However, instead of going further into the question of debt, I shall move on to the public finances. Inflation has remained stable for most of the past four or five years. The Government have created the myth that they had to sort out the public finances. That is used as the excuse for the Government's complete U-turn on health. It is their apology for starving the health service of funds for their first two years in office, when in fact they had no reason at all to do that.

It is true that the previous Conservative Government, at the time that we left office, would have returned to balance and surplus somewhat more slowly than this Government have achieved. Nothing in the economic outlook has really changed. The borrowing requirement inherited by this Government was well on the way down, and all our assumptions have been justified.

Mr. David Ruffley (Bury St. Edmunds): Will my right hon. and learned Friend give way?

Mr. Clarke: In a moment.

We were setting a target of the public sector current balance being in surplus by 1999–00. The public sector borrowing requirement was going to go into repayment in 2000-01. We left healthy public finances and there was no need for some of the desperate measures that were taken.

Mr. Ruffley: Will my right hon. and learned Friend confirm that as a result of the policies that he put in place as Chancellor of the Exchequer, the last Red Book that he published in November 1996 demonstrated that the public sector current balance would be in surplus this fiscal year? Does he agree that when the Labour party claims that its policies have brought public finances into surplus, that is yet another example of a great new Labour lie?

Mr. Clarke: I agree. My hon. Friend was working for me in the Treasury. It was no doubt partly because of his advice that we had public finances sorted out. We spent four years doing so. We handed on a healthy economy and healthy public finances to a very fortunate Labour Chancellor, who then found that the global economy began to improve when he first took office.

The Chancellor has remained with tough policies because he has not known what to do about the strong pound. He does not know what to do now, and it is becoming a crisis for farmers and manufacturers. His policy has been too tough on tax. I do not understand why the Prime Minister and the Chancellor think that there is any profit in trying to deny that the tax burden is continuing to rise. It has risen substantially since Labour took office. The Government increased taxes quite sharply initially, using the mythology that they faced a public debt crisis. Actually, they were raising money for a political war chest. However, the Government are continuing to increase tax, certainly on business and on the average taxpayer.

I refer to page 200 of the Red Book, because tax is now defined rather peculiarly by the Government sometimes. It is necessary to choose the right tables because they cleverly use the working families tax credit and the integrated child tax credit, for example, to try to reduce any ordinary, old-fashioned definition of the tax burden. On page 200, there is a current receipts line in table C7. On that basis, it is plain that compared with 37.6 per cent. of gross domestic product that the Government inherited from the Conservative Government, they are anticipating 39.2, 39.6, 39.7, 39.9, and 39.8 per cent. Who knows, the figure might be less in the year 2003. Right now, however, the tax burden is increasing, and that part of the Budget yesterday provided for a continuing burden on middle England, Mr. and Mrs. Average and, in particular, motorists and a great deal of British business.

My main complaint about the tax burden is not only that the Government increased it and continue to increase it, but that much of it involves the wrong taxes. There is too much tax on business. There are taxes on pensions and the tightening of tax relief on savings, with the result that the savings ratio is declining. The tax burden is increasing and a large part of it is economically damaging taxation.

Yesterday, the Chancellor sought to get away from what is in some ways a difficult picture. I accept that the economy will see 3 per cent. growth this year and that we are running exactly in parallel with the Germans and the Italians. However, we just missed a recession 18 months ago. The Chancellor now takes pleasure in that, but boy was he lucky. We had two quarters of flat economic activity. Like the Italians, we were left bewildered as to quite why we had not gone into recession. We are now recovering and we will get what the Germans will get this year, which is about 3 per cent. growth. There might be a steady strengthening, but the Chancellor did not have much to say. He left the tax burden high and the fiscal policy tough.

The Chancellor then went into spending. I thought that he would say, "Leave all this to June and July, when I shall have a comprehensive spending review." Not at all. He announced the parameters of the spending review for three whole years from 2001 onwards. There will be a 2.5 per cent. limit on public spending in real terms each year for three years. That will be somewhat less than the growth of the economy, and not very generous for Departments as a whole or for local government and other public spending. There will be a pretty tight three years after 2001, except—remember "Breakfast with Frost"—for a bonanza for health.

It will not be quite the bonanza that it has been made to appear, but the Government have always oversold their figures. However, there will be a large increase in spending on the health service. It will not take us to the Prime Minister's target of getting up to the European average, but he is lucky because no one knows what his target means. That is because nobody can remotely know now what the GDP of any European country will be in 2004, or the levels of European spending. The proposed increase in spending would not get the right hon. Gentleman to the present levels of European spending by 2004, but there will be a big spending spree.

The Secretary of State suddenly has substantial sums, which I welcome, that will go to the health service. His inheritance is dreadful. I like his predecessor personally, but I shall not vote for him to become mayor of London.

I am extremely glad to see him removed from the position of Secretary of State for Health. The first two and a half years of the Government's stewardship of health were a catastrophe, not least because they starved the NHS of money. They pretended that they were imposing the previous Government's figures, but no Secretary of State or Chancellor in the Conservative Government ever avoided having an annual public spending round.

My right hon. Friend the Member for South-West Surrey (Mrs. Bottomley), who succeeded me as Secretary of State for Health, is in her place. If I had gone to her as Chancellor of the Exchequer and said, "We will not have a spending round this year, and the figure that we pencilled in last year is the figure," she would have resigned. Her officials would most likely have taken her through the door and made her resign. They would have said, "This is madness."

The right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) had not been shadowing the Department, and presumably ignored his officials. He found himself let in for a two-year nightmare while a financial crisis crept over the whole system. Let us not dwell on the past, but after that he did many silly things by tampering with the reforms that he had inherited. Most of that tampering made things worse, including adhering to a ridiculous slogan on waiting list numbers, which has been distorting priorities, sometimes with criminal effect, inside our finance-starved health service.

We need a completely changed approach. The Prime Minister seems not to realise that collaboration with the private sector was banned under his first Secretary of State for Health, and he is now encouraging it. That is helping to ease some of the pressures. However, we are now told we shall have great reforms and a new policy. I, too, have taken through great health reforms, and it is not an easy process. I remember Labour's ferocious indignation when I put forward a diagnosis of the problems of the health service, which I and every Conservative Secretary of State talked about, including the difference in performance from one place to another. Labour opposed the entire diagnosis.

It is no good producing, as the Prime Minister did, a few worthy slogans, thinking that he will have everything sorted out by July. His great friend President Clinton thought that his wife would have sorted things out in America in 18 months on that basis. I think that Hillary Clinton got further when she started than the Prime Minister got this afternoon when he produced a few worthy management school clichés and said that he would have everything sorted out by July.

Various things are needed. The Government must get rid of their obsession with numbers on waiting lists. I agree, however, that there must be the right stimulus for good performance and the discouragement of bad performance. Fortunately for the right hon. Gentleman, he has all the results of the NHS reforms that I and my right hon. Friend the Member for South-West Surrey and other hon. Friends put through. He has management information, a purchaser-provider divide and clinical audit, which we introduced. We used that locally. We gave incentives to fundholding general practitioners and to health authorities so that they could move the money with the patients, choose quality and determine value for money in making the best provision in their areas. They could determine the best way of controlling the process. The contract system may have needed sorting out, but it did not need movement, as the Government have introduced, to a totally centralised health service.

I was appalled when I heard the Secretary of State's description of how he will hand out the money. He has gone one step further from the past practice of having an initiative for this and one for that, a priority there and pots of money out in the middle. It seems that Richmond Terrace, the headquarters of the Department, is now to keep its hands on all the money that is going out throughout the country. It will supervise day-by-day performance and use carrots and sticks according to performance. If the right hon. Gentleman tries to run it all from the centre, he will go back to the worst of the health service 20 years ago. I wish him well. He must give up this policy of centralisation.

There is no disagreement about the need for a better health service. I am totally committed to the principles of a better national health service. All attempts at reform have been to improve it. However, the Secretary of State's reforms go back to the ability to control everything from the centre—politically. Whatever the right hon. Gentleman's management abilities, I assure him that there is not in the centre the ability to reach the right decisions for the largest organisation of its kind in western Europe. The health service will go back to being a bureaucratic and political shambles.

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: Does my right hon. and learned Friend, who understood how important it was to delegate, appreciate the comment of Nye Bevan? He said:

the Minister of Health will be the whipping-boy for the Health Service in Parliament. Every time a maid kicks over a bucket of slops in a ward an agonised wail will go through Whitehall.

My right hon. and learned Friend's reforms tried to counteract that state of affairs and ensure that power remained at the local level.

Mr. Clarke: When I first came to the Department of Health in the early 1980s, that is the way it was.

I hear that the Secretary of State is trying to take responsibility for community hospitals here and programmes there. He will be completely mad if he does that, and he will be completely mad if he issues the money according to his judgment of their performance over the last quarter. He will not be able to manage that.

Mr. Geraint Davies: Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Mr. Clarke: No, I must get on.

What does this money for the health service mean for the other Departments? My complaint about the Government's policy on the health service, until now, has been that nobody has assessed annually its needs and how it is getting on. That is how the crisis has built up. Now there is provision for the health service, and every other Department has been ignored. The Home Office and transport get peanuts, while the provision for education, which is no longer the No. 1 priority, although not bad, is not enough.

What about local government? What about defence? What about agriculture? Ministers in those Departments are presumably listening to the money being dispensed, with no idea of what it means for them except that they

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have to fight for what is left within 2.5 per cent. of gross domestic product. It is spread over three years, so we do not know what the GDP is going to be. A cautious view will be taken, so any other political priority will presumably be squeezed into what is left. I presume that the health provisions are in cash terms, so that if the economy slows down, the health service will still get its share. The whale will get bigger, and the bath water will get less for all the minnows who sit around the Cabinet table. That is no way to control priorities in future.

When I was Chancellor of the Exchequer and when I was a Cabinet Minister, my highest priority, in terms of public resources, was always health. My second priority was always education. It was not difficult—that was the position of the Conservative Government during almost the entirety of our 18 years in office. So I do not complain about the health provision. However, we need annual spending rounds. We need to see how the economy is actually performing—the outturn in terms of patient delivery and quality, the outturn in defence, the pressures on Departments. This three-year grandstanding is a bizarre way of deciding political priorities that are now cast in stone. It has been done because the health service is in a mess and the public realise that it has deteriorated since Labour took over. They have to be promised jam tomorrow, so all the talk is about 2003 and 2004—the other side of the election, when the Government will make everything better. That approach has distorted public spending.

We talk about the percentage of GDP in 2003 and 2004, and whether the surplus will last. Of course, if we look clearly at this vision, it is all predicated on forecast. It is all illusion. We have to have forecasts; we always produced them. The likely development of growth, inflation and unemployment are worked out—I used to publish forecasts for unemployment by the end. The public sector borrowing requirement, or cash requirement, as it now is, and public spending are taken into account. But it never works out as expected. Anybody here who knows what the economy will be like in 2002 should make himself a very large amount of money and order the first of his yachts. The fact is that none of us has the first idea what pressures will face the Chancellor of the Exchequer in 2002.

The Prime Minister and the Chancellor are constructing castles in the air. It all depends on what happens to the global economy. Is there another south-east Asian crisis? Are there problems in Latin America? The Chancellor has had such a lucky run that he thinks that he has abolished economic cycles. He thinks that he is going ever onward and upward, running more and more of the government as he disperses the results of his control of the economy. That is illusion; it is as bad as Midas. He will come to disillusion.

We do not know when the economy will next turn down. I think that it is on course for recovery for a year or two more. However, I would like to think that next year, when we see what happens, we might have back a responsible Chancellor who presents a Budget with real figures and tells us why he is tightening or loosening policy. We want a Chancellor who brings back a genuine public spending round that addresses priorities, compares Departments and does not give us fancy, management-school descriptions of how great reforms and great money will give us a health service of a kind that we have not seen before in three or four years' time if only we will re-elect him and give him the time to do it.

This is the strangest Budget I have ever known. The measures are dull; the economic outcome is uncertain. I wish the Secretary of State well in improving the health service, but I do not think that he knows yet how he will do it. Meanwhile, I trust that the British economy thrives, despite the Government's peculiar, political method of running it.

6.6 pm

Mr. Giles Radice (North Durham): It is always a pleasure to follow the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke). Frankly, we can see the difference between his performance and that of his Front Bench. The Conservatives really should have him on the Front Bench, but that is a matter for them.

I warmly welcome the Budget. I welcome the development of welfare to work, which has provided considerable help for my constituency. I welcome the increase in the working families tax credit, the increase in child benefit—which was of course announced in the previous Budget—and the useful help for pensioners, especially the raising of the savings exemption and the increase in the winter allowance. The new regional fund of £1 billion for economic development is very helpful and will certainly be welcomed in the north-east. I welcome the £1 billion for education, on top of the £3 billion that had already been planned. It is good that that money is going direct to schools. Then there is the £2 billion extra for health, on top of the £2.9 billion that was already announced in the previous comprehensive spending review.

The Government have made a commitment to very large increases in health spending over a number of years. Those increases will be ring-fenced because the Government say that this is a major priority. I have to tell the right hon. and learned Gentleman that if we believe two areas to be particularly important, it is not so strange to ring-fence them in this way. We have not done it in the past; we have not given priority to the areas that we think important in public spending. As a result, when things have gone wrong, budgets in those areas have been cut. There is a case for doing what the Government are doing. This is a very large increase, and the Government are right to want value for money. I am pleased that the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Secretary of State for Health are putting in place mechanisms for ensuring that the money goes where it should and is properly spent.

As for whether these spending increases can be afforded, the Chancellor is noted for his caution. I think that that is a virtue in Chancellors—those who are not cautious usually come to a sticky end. My right hon. Friend has approached the matter with his natural caution, but there is of course a history. We have only to look at 1987 and 1988 and the horrid example of what happened to Nigel Lawson's strategy: spending increases, tax cuts, overheated economy, increased inflation, and then raised interest rates which plunged the economy into recession. That example is in front of every potential Chancellor, and is certainly in front of this Chancellor. Nobody wants that to happen again.

We had a golden scenario and we threw it away. We do not want to do that again. That is why the Chancellor has locked in his fiscal tightening—paying off £12 billion

of the national debt. The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe knows better than anyone how quickly the figure can go from a large surplus to a large debt, so it is right for the Chancellor to be cautious. Of course, by paying off debt and reducing it, my right hon. Friend will release extra resources for public spending. An extra £4 billion will be released this year because we shall pay less in debt.

Table 2.7 on page 32 shows that the overall fiscal impact of the Budget is either a minus figure or only 0.6—that is the only plus figure, which appears for 2003–04. If that table is correct, the Budget is cautious. The Monetary Policy Committee considered the Budget. Today, its minutes stated:

> Overall, the broad fiscal picture looks somewhat tighter than had seemed probable a month ago. The impact on future activity and inflation seemed to be fairly small, although that would, in part, depend on whether the Budget had any lasting effect on sterling's exchange rate. More analysis would be needed once the full details of the Budget were known.

The Budget has not received a thumbs down from the MPC. That is important, because if we want to get interest rates down, the fiscal stance must not be over-expansionary, otherwise the MPC will compensate by putting up interest rates, so the Chancellor did something useful in that regard.

In our report on last year's Budget, the Select Committee on the Treasury explained the tax burden for the benefit of the House. As the right hon. and learned Gentleman, the former Chancellor pointed out, it is true that the figures can be considered in different ways, for example by including the working families tax credit. Incidentally, it is not strange to do that; we used to count in tax credits until 1995 or 1996 when the conventions were changed. The figures show that the tax burden rises and then begins to fall. As the former Chancellor said, it is true that if we remove the WFTC, the tax burden rises. If we include the receipts figure that he cited, the tax burden is rising. However, he is not really in a position to criticise the Government on that matter.

I thought that the right hon. and learned Gentleman might attend today's debate, so I looked at his last Red Book—his projection was that the tax burden would rise. The plan was that it would rise in every year between 1997 and 2002. Of course, he might not have stuck to those figures—just as he would not have kept to the figures on public spending. However, I hope that he would have done so. It is true that, under the former Chancellor, the public debt—the public sector deficit—began to be reduced. I applaud him for taking the tough actions that were required, but the job was not completed.

The problem is that while there is a large public sector deficit, there will always be a problem with interest rates. That is a constant danger. If one can reduce the public sector deficit, it is almost certain that interest rates will go down, too. The Government were right to take action to bring down the debt.

It is no good the Conservatives complaining about the rising tax burden when they were, rightly, planning for it themselves. Then they were in the real world, but now they are not. The only thing they can gripe about from the Opposition Benches is the tax burden.

Mr. Kenneth Clarke: The right hon. Gentleman will recall that I was arguing about the type of taxes that were raised—on pensions, savings and so on. However, my main complaint was that I cannot understand why the Government keep denying the obvious fact that the tax burden is rising and that it will continue to rise after the Budget. The right hon. Gentleman seems to be agreeing that, on any definition we care to choose, the tax burden is rising.

Mr. Radice: The tax burden is not rising if we include the working families tax credit. That is a new wheeze—one that I wholly support—to bring down the tax burden for low-paid workers. The Government are entitled to include that figure as long as they also include the other figures—as they do, to give them credit. The Select Committee on the Treasury will produce a report to give a definitive answer on the matter, I hope by the time the Finance Bill receives its Second Reading.

Mr. Andrew Love (Edmonton): It will include the right figures.

Mr. Radice: Indeed.

I do not think that the former Chancellor argued for large tax cuts in the Budget, but the shadow Chancellor did. When asked whether there should be increased public spending or tax cuts, the shadow Chancellor was in favour of tax cuts. It is irresponsible to call for large tax cuts, especially when the economy shows signs of operating at the top of output and there are some indicators of overheating. If big tax cuts had been made, the MPC would have had to respond and interest rates would have risen. That is not a sensible policy. I am amazed that the shadow Chancellor argued for it. Perhaps he had to do so because of the commitments that had already been made by the Leader of the Opposition.

Another absurd Opposition commitment that was not mentioned by the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe was the guarantee to reduce the tax burden, irrespective of economic circumstances. If the tax burden is to be reduced, cuts have to be made in public spending. As the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major), pointed out, one would have to make cuts in health spending. The Opposition have put themselves in an odd position: it may be a striking policy, but it is a stupid one.

The Opposition's alternative would be to privatise the health service. Their Front-Bench spokesmen say that they will not do that. However, if that is true, the figures do not add up. That is phantom politics. I shall know that the Opposition are serious when they abandon such approaches.

Mr. Richard Ottaway (Croydon, South): My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) referred to table C7 on page 200. That shows the tax burden falling until 2005, under the proposed levels of public expenditure announced yesterday.

Mr. Radice: Is the hon. Gentleman saying that the tax burden is falling? The Opposition have just been arguing that the tax burden is rising. I said that if we add in the

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working families tax credit, the tax burden begins to fall at the end of the period. On other indicators, the tax burden actually rises.

Mr. Ottaway: The working families tax credit is an even £500 million throughout, so the trend is exactly the same whether or not it is added in—by 2005, we end up with a lower burden of taxation.

Mr. Radice: What might happen in 2005 is interesting but, as the former Chancellor said, it is not very germane. Treasury officials must make forecasts, but we do not know what will happen in 2005—we may all be dead.

Mr. Ottaway: Does the right hon. Gentleman trust the figures?

Mr. Radice: We can trust the figures for two years ahead; they are genuine. However, the world is uncertain; I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman has learned that in his political life. We do not know what will happen in 2004-05 and the figures are, in any case, a little matter of just 0.1 or 0.2 per cent. They are not very germane, so we should not detain the House any more on this point.

Mr. Ottaway: The point about future uncertainty is exactly the point that my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe made. The important point is that, yesterday, the Chancellor of the Exchequer said that there would be growth in the economy for several years to come. Is the right hon. Gentleman casting doubt or aspersions on that statement?

Mr. Radice: Even my right hon. Friend, who is a very great Chancellor, does not know what will happen in 2004-05. He hopes for growth, but we cannot be certain that we shall get it. I hope that this will not be the standard of the Opposition's arguments throughout this Parliament because, if it is, we shall not get very far in our debates.

I want to discuss the risks associated with the Budget, because there are always risks with any Budget. I agree with the former Chancellor that the inflation target in the Red Book looks achievable. We have low inflation and the MPC thinks that, on present interest rate policy, the inflation target that has been announced is achievable. However, like him, I hope that the MPC brings interest rates down soon. Inflation may not be such a risk.

There may, however, be a threat to output. We cannot be certain what will happen to world trade, but it is looking okay. What will happen in the United States? Will there be a fallout from shares losing value and from a stock market readjustment? We have been waiting for that for a couple of years at least, but it has not happened yet.

The strong pound is another issue. There is no doubt that it is hurting British trade. The contribution of net trade is negative to national output, and we have seen examples of that and heard what big manufacturers have said about the problem. I am more sceptical than the right hon. and learned Gentleman about what can be done because the answers are largely outside our control. It is true that a reduction in interest rates could have an impact, but we reduced them considerably last year and the pound remained very strong.

The pound's relationship with the euro is the key. I take the same position on the euro as the right hon. and learned Gentleman; I wish that we had joined at the start. I hope that we shall join as soon as possible after the next general election, provided that the circumstances are right. However, there is not a great deal that we can do now, because the pound's relationship with the euro—and not so much with the dollar or the yen—is a problem. We are waiting for the euro to rise because it is in the interests of British manufacturers that it does so. We hope that it will rise as soon as possible and, on any rational ground, it should do so because of what is happening in the European economies. Growth in France is strong and Germany and Italy are now recovering, so the euro should rise. Until it does, we shall continue to have a strong pound, which will not be in the long-term interests of our manufacturing industry. I do not have any answers on when it will, and I am surprised that the former Chancellor thinks that he does.

I do not believe in economic miracles. "Events, dear boy," Harold Macmillan once said, change things a lot, and especially in economics. I do not believe that Chancellors of the Exchequer are perfect. I even believe that Chancellors from parties other than my own can sometimes make a good contribution. The right hon. and learned Gentleman was a good Chancellor. However, a big change has taken place. In the 1980s, public opinion polls showed that the Labour party was not trusted to run the economy. However, similar public opinion polls today show that twice as many people think that we are better at running the economy than the Conservative party than vice versa. There has been a big shift in public opinion. I congratulate my right hon. and hon. Friends on what they have achieved. Over three years, by prudent and sensible management of the economy, by giving the MPC control over interest rates, and by having a tight fiscal policy, they have brought about a low-inflation, low-unemployment, steady-growth economy. That is a big achievement.

The fruits of that good and prudent management are coming through in sensible cuts in income tax. We have a 10p starting rate and the standard rate has been cut from 23p to 22p, but the fruits are even more apparent in the increased public spending on vital national services, particularly health. I congratulate the Government on their management of the economy and I look forward to next year's Budget.

6.26 pm

Dr. Peter Brand (Isle of Wight): We clearly welcome the £2 billion in the Budget for the national health service, if only because the Government have recognised that the health service was desperately in need of an injection of resources and funds. The Government have abandoned their argument that it was no good throwing money at the NHS until they had completed restructuring and had trained expensive specialists at some point in the next 10 years. The Chancellor of the Exchequer has taken a welcome step. I also welcome the assurance that we shall have extra funding over the next four years, even though it will not take us to the Prime Minister's promise—later translated into an aspiration—of reaching parity with the average level of spending in the European Community.

An infusion of resources is important because it may allow the NHS to achieve something that it has not been able to achieve for several years. We have heard claims that the NHS provides a comprehensive service, free at

the point of need and paid for out of general taxation. That has not been true for 10 years at least. It is true that any medical intervention that one cares to name is done somewhere in the NHS, but a comprehensive service is not available everywhere.

From his Olympian heights, the Prime Minister issued challenges this afternoon to the NHS. He said, "These are the five challenges that I set for the health service." The NHS is not just an organisation, but an arm of government. The Prime Minister is the Head of Government, so he, the Secretary of State for Health and all the minions in government have a joint responsibility for the people who work in the health service.

A long list was announced this afternoon of disparities in the health service and of the quality targets for which we should aim. None of that comes as a surprise to those who work in the health service. It is surprising that the Government have only just realised that these things are going on. Often, lack of resources or the pressure of work that staff at all levels in the NHS suffer stand in the way of meaningful change.

I should like to go through the five challenges that were set. I believe that they are challenges not only for people who work in the NHS but for the Government. The partnership challenge is vital, but it does not go far enough. The Prime Minister talked about GPs, hospitals, their consultants, primary care groups, social services and community health services. An important contribution is also made by the private sector, especially in long-term care, the care of the mentally ill and the care of people with learning difficulties. It was a terrible omission that the right hon. Gentleman missed out the voluntary sector. Whether the partnership is formal, through contracting, or informal, through advocacy services or carers, the voluntary sector is a partner within the delivery of the health service.

I hope that in the discussions that we are about to have, both the private and voluntary sectors will be involved. We will not get right the services for people with learning difficulties, the elderly, the disabled and the mentally ill unless we involve the whole gamut of people who are currently involved in them. I am afraid that there are still significant organisational and budgetary barriers to joint working. A great deal was said by a previous Secretary of State about breaking down the Berlin wall—

Mr. Geraint Davies: Is the Liberal position on private nursing homes that no additional subsidy should be given to the private sector, above and beyond what is given to council nursing homes for elderly people?

Dr. Brand: We believe in co-ordinated commissioning of care through the NHS jointly with social services. In fact, we would go further and combine the two functions. We also believe that there is a place for a mixed provider of care. We certainly would not treat providers differently. One of the real problems is that the NHS has locked itself away from the community. It is in the interests of the NHS trusts that provide hospital services to decant people, put them under the care of social services, and hope that some form of community service will pick up the more expert input that is required.

Speaking as a GP working in the community, I know how difficult it is to get specialists to go out to nursing homes, or to have someone admitted to hospital from a nursing home when they need more specialist care, because they are no longer a priority for that hospital trust. Those barriers need to be broken down. The care teams working with patients are keen to break them down, but we have structures that get in the way.

The second challenge is the performance challenge. That is absolutely brilliant. It is a bit like "Challenge Anneka". It is right that we should all strive to do our best, but I hope that the Government, especially when they talk about incentive payments and non-incentive penalties, recognise that different parts of the country are at different stages of development in the modern agenda of team health care, and that often what people need is help rather than to be penalised. I would not want to see patients disadvantaged because a set of consultants or managers or a local authority was not prepared to make the proper contribution to patient care.

The flagship of the Government's changes has been the setting up of primary care groups and trusts working jointly with the local authority and the voluntary sector through a health improvement programme. That sounds splendid and fine. That is how it ought to be. Health care is best delivered by the smallest possible unit that is most sensitive to a community's needs. That is why I am so anxious about some of the central Government initiatives that seem to be the flavour of the month.

A framework has been set up to deliver local health care. National and regional services should interact with primary care groups and health improvement programmes, but often they bear no relation to what is being done by the people on the ground. I am not against NHS Direct, but why should it not be integrated with the out-of-hours co-operative services already provided by GPs in most parts of the country? Why should it not be integrated with the ambulance service and social services out-of-hours emergency services? There are structural issues in the way. It would be much better to give the agenda for delivering a service, and the resources, to the people on the ground and say, "This is what we want made available to your population. How are you going to do it?" Instead, we have a system imposed from the top.

The same argument can be used in relation to walk-in clinics. I am sure that they are appropriate to cities or suburbs with mobile populations. They do not sit easily with the traditional primary care in the rest of the country. If the Government are keen to make primary care walk-in services available throughout the country, I am sure that they can be provided, but there are enormous resource implications. The Government should be honest about how that is to be delivered.

The next aspect of performance is again one of the flagships mentioned by the Secretary of State. We supported the establishment of the National Institute for Clinical Excellence. I hope that it will work closely with systems such as Prodigy, which give best clinical advice to practitioners. I am extraordinarily disappointed that NICE has so far accepted only 13 references and reported on only one case. It is committed to doing only 30 investigations in a year. That will not keep up with new developments and will make it extremely difficult for NICE to have a valid role in looking at clinical effectiveness and cost-effectiveness. That is an important issue.

It is no good Ministers hiding behind NICE, which has a long reporting time on urgent issues on which decisions have to be made, such as the treatment of multiple

[Dr. Brand]

sclerosis and hepatitis C—so well illustrated by the case of the constituent of my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (Mr. Cotter)—and the scandal that up-to-date anti-cancer treatments are available in one place and not in another. Most of those things are not in clinical dispute. It is a question of establishing a national framework, and it is taking too long to deliver that. NICE will also make an enormous difference when up-to-date anti-psychotic drugs can be delivered so that the mentally ill in the community can have a reasonable quality of life rather than just be knocked out so that they are quiet.

The Prime Minister's third challenge is a challenge for the professions, which he asks to strip out unnecessary demarcations, introduce more flexible training and working practices and ensure that doctors do not use time dealing with patients who could be treated safely by other health care staff. Where has the Prime Minister been? Modern medicine has been a matter of teamwork for the past 10 or 15 years. Doctors do not have the expertise to take on things that are best done by other people. In practice, we have moved on a lot further than the regulations have allowed. The Government are dragging their feet on issues such as nurse prescribing, nurse practitioners and allowing nurses to make referrals to consultants. Why should I have to countersign a referral letter from a nurse practitioner who is more expert than I am in the care of people with chronic asthma? We made local arrangements, but I would be officially in breach of my terms of service if I did not sign the letter saying that I would make all the necessary arrangements. We must move on.

Another aspect that challenges not only professionals but the whole team is the recognition of the value of the wider NHS family. We tend to forget that people such as auxiliaries, cleaners and porters make an enormous contribution to people's sense of well-being. Cleaners also make an enormous contribution to health. It is disgraceful how filthy hospitals now are, and the Audit Commission report on hospital infections came as no surprise to me. We need to get away from the compulsory competitive tendering process, which results in a firm cleaning in the morning and the evening, while in the intervening period bed bottles sit there making the place not only unpleasant but unhygienic. I am pleased that Ministers appear to agree with me on that point. I shall continue in the hope of further agreement.

The fourth challenge is the patient care challenge for hospitals and primary care groups to ensure that they all adopt best practice. No one is arguing with that; what is important is that we have the resources to measure outcomes so that we can establish best practice. One of the changes introduced by the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) gave us the resources to do that. It is important that the modernisation fund, which appears to have been used as often as our mythical extra 1p on income tax—

Mr. Love: It certainly is mythical.

Dr. Brand: If we were in power, it would not be mythical; it would be real.

It is sad that, in many health authority areas, the modernisation fund has had to be used for the waiting list initiative rather than for its proper purpose, which is to ensure that electronic communications between hospital departments and between hospitals and local communities get on stream.

The fifth challenge is prevention. We all, at times, pay lip service to the concept of prevention. I am beginning to conclude that some of the public health measures that would do much to prevent illness and improve health are better organised through local authorities than through the NHS. Housing, transport and education measures do much to tackle social exclusion and improve health. Let us take for our example the aim of ensuring that people live in warm homes. This country has an extraordinarily high winter mortality rate: it is the highest in Europe and higher than the rates recorded in Finland and Sweden; I am told that it is even higher than Siberia's, although I do not trust those statistics.

There is no reason why, with better integration, we could not arrive at a cost-effective means of addressing those issues. For example, primary care teams could identify homes that would benefit from better insulation and better heating, and issue a prescription to that effect. That was the subject of a private Member's Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Sir R. Smith).

Many interventions that prevent further disease are now possible, but they carry resource implications. It was interesting to hear the Prime Minister refer to lipid-lowering drugs. We are the lowest users of such drugs in the European Community, and we have the highest rate of heart disease; I am sure that there is a link between those two facts. However, lipid-lowering drugs are extraordinarily expensive; capped drug budgets mean that priorities have to be assigned; and priority is often given to the treatment of heart disease rather than its prevention.

Finally, on prevention, the Government take great pride and put huge resources into the prevention of cervical cancer, which is a worthwhile endeavour; but I cannot understand why they will not give people free access to dental checks, given that as many people die of oral cancers as women die of cervical cancer. The simple act of going to the dentist enables people to receive advice and treatment that might prevent oral cancers from developing.

Jackie Ballard (Taunton): My hon. Friend will have noticed that neither the Prime Minister nor the Secretary of State for Health mentioned dentistry in their speeches today, yet that is the element of the NHS that has been privatised to the greatest extent over the past 10 years. In my constituency, it is not possible to find an NHS dentist as a new patient and, if one is not already registered, one has to travel up to 20 miles to get emergency dental treatment. Does my hon. Friend believe that the Government are committed to restoring access to NHS dentistry?

Dr. Brand: I am not sure: it depends on one's definition of national health dentistry. The Government have some centralised initiatives, such as the phone-and-go clinics, and they have assured us that everyone will have access to treatment for dental pain and emergency measures, but that is not the same as national health dentistry as I would like it to be provided: that is, through mixed-practice general dental practitioners who

offer both NHS and private sector dentistry. The expertise and advice that can be offered by such practitioners could be made available to all their patients. Dentistry has changed massively over the past few years. Far more can be done in preventive dentistry—through the use of hygienists and appropriately qualified staff. Such arrangements free dentists up to carry out the more intricate work that we have all needed on occasion.

I have gone through the five challenges. Now, I shall suggest two further challenges, which I hope the Prime Minister or the Secretary of State for Health will take into consideration. The first is resource allocation: the current system is not sufficiently sensitive to enable everyone to move to benchmarks. If those benchmarks are not well established, such a change is unduly harsh and creates great distortion in health services. Many examples have been cited of health authorities that do not now provide the service that they should provide, but which are having to make cuts in significant areas of their budget just to keep up.

My last challenge—which the Secretary of State for Health should tackle jointly with health authorities—is doing more about the welfare of people who work in the NHS. People leave the NHS not necessarily because of money but because they cannot cope with the stress, with the inflexibility and, occasionally, with the unreasonable behaviour of others working in the current system.

It is ridiculous that nurses leave inner-city NHS institutions because they are not offered safe housing or a safe means of transport between the hospital and their home in the early morning. It is ridiculous that people who work irregular shifts at irregular hours are faced with hospital canteens that are closed at all but the most regular hours. It is extraordinary how penny-pinching can destroy staff morale. We all want NHS staff to be paid better, but a small increase in resources can make staff feel far more valued and make their lives far easier.

We clearly support the extra funding for the national health service. I was somewhat sceptical about it being directed from the press room at No. 10 Downing street, but I am prepared to wait to see what happens. We want a clear national framework for the national health service, as well as a locally sensitive health service, locally delivered.

I hope that the Government will not wait until the end of their consultations to release the money for this year. It may be better to take a little longer over the consultations, but provide support for an extremely stressed service for the next 12 months. We do not want little dollops. One can die the death of 1,000 cuts, but having 1,000 plasters does not necessarily help when what one really needs is a blood transfusion.

6.50 pm

Mr. Jon Trickett (Hemsworth): I am delighted to speak on the Budget today, when we are discussing the national health service. Like all hon. Members, I welcome the large increase in funding for the NHS which was announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor. The statement by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister today helps us to understand better how that money is to be spent.

I welcome the emphasis on a twin-track approach, combining clinical excellence with equality of access. It is important that clinical excellence in hospitals, acute centres and so on should be accessible to the entire population, which is clearly not the case at present. I shall return to that when I discuss the situation in my area, Wakefield.

I do not find the official Opposition's fiscal stance credible, particularly in combination with their undertaking today to honour the spending commitments that we have entered into in the Budget. The Opposition outlined the fiscal stance that they would adopt, were they to be re-elected, which in itself is implausible. They would reduce the overall tax burden, whatever the economic circumstances. It is arguable that the tax burden may decrease as a proportion of gross domestic product in an economy that is growing. However, we heard the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), the former Chancellor, say that he envisages that the cyclical process will continue, and so do I.

At the moment at which the cycle moves into recession and GDP fails to grow, public expenditure inevitably rises in the welfare budget. That is almost a truism. In those circumstances, when GDP is falling or static or barely growing, and welfare expenditure is increasing, the commitment to reduce the burden of tax is wholly implausible, unless the Opposition are willing to argue that they intend to decouple the link between taxation and expenditure. The public sector borrowing requirement would then grow rapidly and possibly spiral out of control.

I have not heard the Opposition argue that case, and I do not believe that they will argue it. It is therefore not plausible for them to argue that public expenditure will be maintained at the level at which it would historically have been, if the tax burden is to fall. Savage cuts in public expenditure would no doubt be imposed, which would inevitably fall on the health service, as on other parts of the public expenditure budget.

I listened carefully to the arguments advanced by the Opposition today. An alternative strategy is possible. Public expenditure on the health service could be reduced and private expenditure substituted for it, but that was not argued, either. It was argued that the official Opposition would match the increase that we proposed in the NHS through public spending, and in addition they would enlarge the private sector.

Even if the taxation and the fiscal implications could be squared—which I doubt, for the reasons that I have given—and additional expenditure could be provided in times of downturn, it is extraordinary to argue that it would be possible both to expand the public sector to the extent that we are proposing—for example, 10,000 nurses—and simultaneously to expand the private sector.

We know that at present there are insufficient trained medical workers capable of being employed in the health service. One is daunted by the amount of training that will have to be undertaken quickly if we are to spend the money wisely, without incurring a form of health service inflation. The required training can be provided, but a great deal of work needs to be done. To argue that the private sector will expand at the same time is not plausible.

[Mr. Jon Trickett]

If a Government were committed to expanding the private sector, that would inevitably drain resources out of the NHS—the public sector—thereby bringing about what we have been alleging for some time: a de facto privatisation of the health service.

Mr. Geraint Davies: Does my hon. Friend agree that the simultaneous expansion of both sectors could occur only if the Opposition abolished the provision of minor surgery and the like in the NHS, so that people were forced to take out private health insurance?

Mr. Trickett: It is possible that that is being proposed. We have read press statements, which as far as I know have not been denied, suggesting that certain procedures—not necessarily minor ones—would be transferred to the private sector.

If the NHS is to carry out fewer procedures but is to spend the amount of money to which the Government are committing themselves, and which the official Opposition said that they would support, the corollary is health service cost inflation. The cost of procedures will simply increase. If fewer procedures are undertaken but more money is spent on the health service, that is inevitable.

I do not find the Opposition's position credible. I am not convinced, either, by the rosy picture that was painted of the health service under the previous Administration. In Wakefield, we had the greatest extent of fundholding opt-outs in the country. Fundholding GPs were given financial incentives to seek procedures for their patients outwith Wakefield health authority. That coincided with the lack of investment in the two hospitals in Wakefield. The GPs accepted the financial imperative and looked elsewhere.

Neighbouring health authorities came in to provide health services, resulting in the diminution of health care by one hospital in particular in our area, Pontefract hospital. That, together with lack of investment as a result of inadequate funding through the resource allocation working party, led to a hospital at the east end of the district which provides services to my constituency becoming impoverished. We are living with the consequences to this day.

The competitive regime was not effective in providing the strategic approach to health care in the district of Wakefield. A more strategic approach is developing as a consequence of the abolition of fundholding and the ending of the competitive regime.

I shall deal briefly with the current position in Wakefield. We have two hospitals, as I mentioned, one of which has suffered as a result of fundholding. The other, Pinderfields, suffered as a result of lack of capital investment. The new Labour Government have made it clear that they are prepared to make available capital to invest in the district. The problem is that the district is dispersed, with two population centres, and to provide a new acute hospital for one area will result in a poorer service for the other.

Agreement has now been reached on the provision of services in the district, although it has caused me much trouble and soul searching. Certain commitments were made about the level of health care, cancer care and accident and emergency services in my area, the eastern part. But that agreement was made before the Budget and the national beds inquiry, and I am concerned that, although the debate has moved on, with new, welcome commitments from the Government, Wakefield has been left stranded with a decision that was taken in all good faith just before Christmas.

The district will be submitting a case for fresh investment, which I know the Government will ensure we receive, but I have reservations about our bid and I would like an assurance that we will have time to adjust it in the light of the Budget statement, the national beds inquiry and the on-going debate under the Prime Minister's leadership which he announced today. Without such an assurance, I would find it difficult to support the current bid, and it is only right and fair that I say so publicly.

I want to highlight the situation facing two industries in my constituency. My constituency was almost exclusively based on the coal mining industry. Sadly, that industry was destroyed for reasons which most of us well understand and which I do not need to go into now, but, as a result, my constituents are now largely unemployed ex-coal miners.

The Budget builds on previous Budgets in creating a stable macro-economic framework in which businesses can prosper. The corporation tax changes and others introduced yesterday were welcome in the private sector in my constituency as elsewhere. Hon. Members have already mentioned the strength of the pound and the problems that it is causing some industries, to which I shall refer in relation to the textile industry.

The coal mining industry is now at a critical point. Decisions will have to be made within the next 10 to 14 days if we are not to see the end of the industry altogether, a matter on which I spoke recently in a European Standing Committee. Our colleagues in Europe invest huge subsidies in their mining industries, particularly Germany, France and Spain. In Germany, coal costs five times more to produce than in Britain, and other European partners are producing coal which is substantially more expensive than the coal mined in the United Kingdom; yet our coal is more expensive because, while other EU members subsidise their coal mining industries, Britain has not done so in recent years. I would argue strongly that it is in the national interests, as well as in the interests of the community that I represent, that state aid for the coal mining industry should be considered carefully. The UK Government's position that other European Governments should simply stop subsidising their industries is not entirely plausible. I do not for one moment think that they will.

If Britain is to have stable economic growth in the years to come, we will need indigenous energy supplies to ensure that other energy suppliers do not take advantage of an increasingly monopolistic position. I hope that Ministers, and the Chancellor in particular, will have listened carefully to the voices of those in the coal industry, to me and to other hon. Members, and that the Chancellor will consider whether it is possible within his budgetary strategy to assist the mining industry.

The position is slightly different in the textile industry. Many hon. Members will have excellent companies in their constituencies. Berwin and Berwin in South Kirkby in my constituency provides good employment and high-quality tailoring. I have persuaded many of my hon. Friends to buy its suits from the local factory shop, and I

have often worn them myself, although, sadly, I am not doing so today. But, like the textile industry generally, it is being affected by the pound, and by other circumstances which hon. Members will know well.

The Chancellor will want to ensure that indigenous industries, such as coal and textiles, are preserved for the future, and I hope that he, like the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, will consider carefully the recent report on the development of a strategy for the textile industry.

The Chancellor often tells us proudly—rightly so, and I share his pride—that unemployment in Britain is much improved, with 800,000 jobs having been created and about 1 million jobs currently available. That is true in my region as elsewhere, but unemployment black spots still exist. Some communities are isolated and find it difficult to avoid becoming ghettos, certainly in inner cities, but in many pit villages as well. Regeneration requires attention at a macro-economic level, but we must not forget the local community and neighbourhood.

Many people in communities that I represent lack the self-confidence to seek work elsewhere. The Government have created institutional structures, such as the regional development agencies and the learning and skills councils, to address local needs, but those structures are too far removed from the neighbourhoods where the problems lie. It is regrettable that the Government have decided to abolish the training and enterprise councils, of which I am not a great advocate but which at least had a presence at the district level, and to replace them with countywide bodies. That is a lamentable step. I hope that the Government will put something in place locally to tackle problems such as those in the former pit villages that I represent.

Finally, with regard to the micro-economy, money has been set aside for transport in rural areas, and I hope that communities suffering from severe unemployment and crime black spots will be able to access that fund. South Kirkby, a rural community and former pit village which I represent, has a 100-acre pit site which could bring new and much-needed employment to the area, but the private sector will not provide such jobs without a road link to the A1. It is important that the regenerative potential of such new highways or bypasses should be examined in detail.

With those reflections, I am delighted to welcome the Chancellor's Budget.

7.9 pm

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): I listened with care to the speech of the hon. Member for Hemsworth (Mr. Trickett). I have heard him wax lyrical about the coal industry in European Standing Committee C. The way he argues the case for that industry does his constituents no disservice.

I was however intrigued by the hon. Gentleman's claim that he was sure his district would receive new investment because of the Chancellor's announcements and the subsequent remarks of the Secretary of State for Health about the amount of money available for the health service. When my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) pressed the Secretary of State about the precise way in which the allocation mechanism would work, the Government were short on detail. The exact way in which the money will be spread around the health authorities, trusts and primary care groups in the United Kingdom is not clear.

When Alan Langlands, the chief executive of the health service, tendered his resignation, newspaper reports suggested that the Secretary of State was totally fed up with the way the health service was being run. They also commented that the Secretary of State would take over the running of the health service—that he would assemble a tightly knit group of super-advisers and run it. Perhaps today's statement is the first sign that the Secretary of State is in charge.

We are still not clear about whether the money will be genuinely upfront to tackle current pressures or whether it will have to be earned through even harder work—from existing resources—to try to get the carrots that the Secretary of State has thinly sprinkled around. Someone on the Treasury Bench is nodding—

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ms Gisela Stuart) *indicated dissent.*

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Miss Melanie Johnson) *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Jack: As when one attends an auction, body language must be kept under control; otherwise, perceptive Opposition Members will assume that a signal has been given of new Government policy. I see that the Whip on duty is now giving the appropriate instructions.

Although the money is welcome, I add my voice to those of my hon. Friends who expressed the Conservative party's solid commitment to the health service. When my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe was in charge, he pointed out at a Conservative party conference that until we started reforming the national health service, it did not know how many people it employed, it had no idea of its capital, and so on. We started the process to ensure, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe said, that we had proper information on which to run the health service. We were gearing our reforms to improving patient care. Waiting lists were reduced under the last Conservative Government, especially for those who had waited a year or more for treatment.

It is a travesty of the truth for the Government to claim that we are not committed to the national health service. My family has no private health care; I depend on the national health service for my family's health care needs. I therefore have a vested interest in the NHS and I shall continue to fight for it in every possible way.

Mr. Ivan Lewis: Does the right hon. Gentleman believe that the credible solution to the problems in the structure of the health service is either its modernisation and progress or the massive expansion of private health care? Which of those options does the right hon. Gentleman believe constitutes the way forward for health care?

Mr. Jack: I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman asks that question, because a mixed economy of care exists under the health care system that the Government run. Health authorities already use public money to purchase surplus capacity in the private sector so that NHS patients may enjoy faster treatment. The Conservative party

[Mr. Jack]

believes that there is a place for both. We recognise that the bulk of health care in this country will continue to be funded from public sources and that many companies—

Mr. Love: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Jack: Before I give way to the hon. Member for Edmonton (Mr. Love), I should like to deal with the point made by the hon. Member for Bury, South (Mr. Lewis), who may be in danger of upsetting his Front Bench by attacking the private sector, which is being used under the current purchasing arrangements. Many companies, and indeed trade unions, have provided private health care for their employees or members. People can thus choose. There is nothing wrong with ensuring a diversity of opportunity for health care in this country while acknowledging that, for the majority of people, including me, the national health service remains the primary source of such care.

Mr. Love: In the light of the Conservative party's commitment to its tax pledge, can the right hon. Gentleman understand why the public remain sceptical about any commitment by the Opposition to an increase in resources for the national health service?

Mr. Jack: The public are naturally sceptical when any politician, even the current Chancellor or Secretary of State for Health, starts talking big numbers. It does not mean a great deal to them. However, they want to know whether the Chancellor's largesse means that, for example, the cardiothoracic unit at the Blackpool Victoria hospital will be safe. I receive letters from people who require triple bypass operations but have to wait a long time for them. Does the Chancellor's announcement mean that they will be treated sooner? That will be the acid test of whether the money will benefit people in a way they understand.

I welcome the Secretary of State's comments on performance criteria for the health service. It is important that they deliver. I agreed with his analysis when he pointed out that there were considerable differences in performance between the best and the worst in the NHS. It is important that lean, mean machines such as the Blackpool Victoria hospital trust, whose output is high on lower funding than many other hospital trusts in the north-west enjoy, receive their just deserts. I will judge the Secretary of State's words when we receive details of the workings of the funding and allocation mechanism, and on whether good hospitals such as the Blackpool Victoria get extra money.

I want to refer to other items in the Budget. The Chancellor gave the impression that he was tackling personal tax burdens. However, if we cost the burden out in standard rate income tax terms, we realise that it has increased by 9p but decreased yesterday by 1p. That is a net increase of 8p.

Much has been said about the tax burden. Let us consider table C7, which shows total Government receipts, on page 200 of the Red Book. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe rightly spoke in global terms. The table shows that income tax in the current financial year is 10.6 per cent. of gross domestic product, and that, by the end of the Parliament, it will increase to 10.8 per cent. Corporation tax—the largest tax paid by business—will increase in the same period from 3.8 per cent. to 3.9 per cent. of GDP. Excise duties will also increase from 3.8 per cent. to 3.9 per cent. Current receipts, excluding the windfall tax, are set to increase from 39.6 per cent. to 39.9 per cent.

An interesting feature of the Government's approach to taxation lies behind that. They hide the fact that a parallel development with the Chancellor's activity at the centre is the increases in charges and taxes that people pay locally. In Lancashire, the council tax will increase by approximately 6.5 per cent.—approximately three times the rate of inflation. That is because the Chancellor has decided to squeeze the amount of money that goes to local authorities and he expects the council taxpayer to pay more tax locally for services.

That is not restricted to council taxpayers. One of the most interesting charts in a recent Audit Commission report on the cost of local authority social services showed the rate at which charges had increased. I continually receive letters from elderly people who complain about the rising cost of their home help services. It is a little known topic of debate, but it means that elderly people of modest means effectively have to pay an extra tax because they pay more for their home help services.

On charging, one can go right through the whole piece. On the implementation of the integrated pollution and prevention control directive, for example, industrialists and farmers in England and Wales will pay double the rate of their Scottish counterparts. Why? Because the Environment Agency here has been squeezed by the Government as they pass their costs—taxes—back to another paying unit. That is another example of stealth at work and it is a great pity—

Mr. Ivan Lewis *rose—*

Mr. Jack: I should like to make a little progress, if I may. It is a great pity that the Chancellor, in his gabble, did not—

Mr. Lewis: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Jack: In a moment. It is a great pity that the Chancellor did not have the courage to outline his strategy. It seems to be, "I want to appear virtuous at the centre, but I shall continue to squeeze people out there in the sticks."

Mr. Lewis: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. Is he aware that under the standard spending assessment system introduced by the Conservative Government, it was assumed, and continues to be assumed, that the local authority would collect a particular percentage of its social services budget by charging for the use of services? In terms of the percentage of money going to local government from council tax payers as opposed to from central Government, is he also aware that his Government estimated that the amount taken from local taxpayers would increase and the contribution from the centre would diminish? Has the Conservative party suddenly changed its policy?

Mr. Jack: I did not say that my party was wrong to recognise that some form of charging regime might be

appropriate. Before the hon. Gentleman nods, thinking he has scored some great point, I recommend that he read the Audit Commission report and acquaint himself with the chart to which I referred. I have done so. With respect, I do not think that he has made such an exploration. I apologise if he has, but he would find it a great education.

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole): The advance corporation tax changes in the Government's first Budget hit pension arrangements, particularly for local authorities. Many of them have to face up to paying more to their pension funds, which in turn is hitting services.

Mr. Jack: My hon. Friend takes me to a point that I was coming to, and I shall alight here for a moment. People in local authorities are not the only ones affected; Tesco pensioners have to pay more into their pension funds because of the ACT changes. Putting the emphasis on the individual, not the centre, is another way of changing the tax relationship. The Chancellor made much of the help that he is giving to charities, but they will lose £400 million as a result of the ACT changes and, over a phased period, that money will come out of the charitable pot. There were some fiddly little changes on value added tax for charities, too. They have advocated an end to VAT, or a lower rate, on certain of their purchases, but there was no word from the Chancellor. My hon. Friend has triggered an interesting thought on the Budget's failure to address some important issues.

I have mentioned pensions, which take me on to savings. Intriguingly, the Red Book says that the savings ratio continues to be very low. If individual saving is low, it looks to me as though the Chancellor, because of the high tax burden, is doing the saving on behalf of the individual. Is that good economically? I would say not. Individuals probably have a better idea of where to deploy private capital than the Chancellor, and he should reconsider his savings policy. We have heard nothing about his strategy, apart from individual savings accounts. The Economic Secretary says that ISAs are wonderful, but the industry points to their complexity and people's difficulties understanding them. A sad element of the Budget is that no effort whatever has been made to address the problems with ISAs to make them less complex, and the Government need to outline a long-term savings strategy.

Another sadness is that the Chancellor made no mention whatever of the need to reform and simplify our tax system, although an Inland Revenue press release referred to the work of the tax law rewrite committee, of which I am a member. I was glad that it also mentioned the capital allowances Bill, which is being prepared, but I am blowed if I can see when there will be parliamentary time to present that important step in simplifying our tax system to the House of Commons. More importantly, the Chancellor made no mention either of the committee's work or of the number of extremely good ideas on reforming our tax system and on wider reform. He did not show himself to be a genuinely tax-reforming Chancellor. Were he such a Chancellor, he would have commissioned work to ensure that some of the good ideas coming out of the tax rewrite exercise are used to improve the overall simplicity of the tax system. I understand that the Finance Bill will run to more than 500 pages, and that is not a record of which the Government should be proud. For example, I know for a fact that the Inland Revenue would dearly love to get at some complex pay-as-you-earn rules and simplify them.

The Budget mentioned the Government's environmental credentials and I want briefly to consider a number of the proposed measures. Changes in the climate change levy were discussed and I welcome two concessions—one on horticulture and the other on liquified petroleum gas, to stop fuel switching—but I challenge the Government to tell me why on earth they need the levy. I apologise to the hon. Member for Hemsworth for what I am about to say, but the Government's carbon dioxide targets could be met by adopting the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry's suggestions on changing the gas moratorium, by increasing electricity generation from burning gas by 14 per cent. and by decreasing electricity generation from burning coal by 13 per cent. That would save the requisite 2 million tonnes of carbon dioxide at a stroke. That information has come from parliamentary answers. We could get rid of the climate change levy's complexity and still achieve our environmental objectives.

I do not understand why the Government use the stick approach in their environmental activities—there is never a carrot. For example, why did not they introduce double corporation tax relief on the money added to a company's bottom line by the energy it has saved? That would have been a positive encouragement. Instead, they have introduced the incredible complexity of the climate change levy.

Mr. Geraint Davies: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Jack: For the last time, yes.

Mr. Davies: The previous Conservative Government closed down 90 per cent. of British coal mines. Is the right hon. Gentleman proposing that the rest should be abolished on environmental grounds? That is what he seems to be saying.

Mr. Jack: No. If the hon. Gentleman had done his homework, he would realise that my suggestion is the equivalent of diminishing the output—25 per cent.—of the Drax power station. That would still leave considerable coal-fired capacity for the United Kingdom. I make that point because the Government have taken a complicated view, as they have on the banded vehicle excise duty proposal, which is supposedly designed to encourage more environmentally friendly cars. If anyone wants to see an example of sheer complexity, I recommend to them page 147 of the Red Book. There are four VED bands, umpteen different recommendations for carbon dioxide emissions, and references to the petrol car, the diesel car and cars using cleaner fuels. The difference between the top and bottom rates in this great chart is between £90 and £160. Will that have any serious impact on what cars people purchase? The answer is absolutely and indisputably no. I support the objective of getting cleaner cars on our streets, but the work that car manufacturers are undertaking to improve the technology of their cars will have more impact.

Why have not the Government given manufacturers a carrot for achieving environmental targets? Why do they continue to beat people with complicated sticks that will

[Mr. Jack]

have no economic impact whatever? The aggregates tax—£370 million—is another example. What will happen? Lorries carrying reprocessed aggregates will tour the country simply to try to miss paying the tax. How much CO_2 and other pollutants will result from that? We do not know, because the Government have not told us.

The Government's "fiddle me here and fiddle me there" approach to the economy goes on. One of the Chancellor's advisers must have been Martha Lane Fox, because part of the Budget was seriously dot.com. One of the measures was to provide tax relief for people who want to go online. If the Government had known anything about running business in this country, they would have realised that small businesses do not buy their computers, they lease them. Leasing does not come under the terms of that proposal, so it is just more meaningless gesture politics.

The most successful company in the world of software, Microsoft, did not get where it is with barmy proposals such as the Government have introduced to stimulate small businesses. Small businesses want less bureaucracy, less red tape, less interference from government and continuing lower interest rates. Good ideas will find their way forward without the Government's interference.

The other oddity in the Budget was work permits. It will be "open sesame" for any IT expert to come to the United Kingdom. The *Financial Times* tells me that the Chancellor is to undertake a recruitment exercise. As he is scouring the world for those people, what is he doing to the indigenous IT experts? Last year, innovative, one-person businesses were going to be taken to the cleaners because of tax changes as a result of IR35. I wrote to one of the major suppliers of IT personnel to the Department of Social Security and to BAe Systems in my constituency. It told me that it would lose these people, who were going abroad because it was easier for them to ply their trade in a better tax environment than that created by the Government. It is odd that the Chancellor is now trying to redress the balance of his own economic policy on IR35 by going on an overseas recruitment exercise. If that is not the politics of the madhouse, I do not know what is.

Mr. Ottaway: Is my right hon. Friend aware that the Red Book shows that, as a result of IR35, the burden has this year leapt from £475 million to £900 million? That is one heck of a chunk to take from the self-employed.

Mr. Jack: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend, and I am grateful to him for making that point. I had a meeting in my constituency with 60 people from all over the country who will be affected by IR35. They are the very entrepreneurs whom the Government want to encourage. The Government create a tax system whereby those people can reward themselves by a combination of salary and dividend, and then they decide that they do not like the dividend bit, so they clobber them. Those people are risk takers: they cover their own sickness, their own pensions, their own training and their own investment. What greater characteristic of a one-person business could there be? Yet the Government's answer to IR35 is to recruit from overseas. It is, as I say, the politics of the madhouse.

In my constituency, manufacturing, agriculture and education have also been affected by the Budget. Manufacturers have not been helped one iota. I am old-fashioned enough to believe that manufacturing still has a part to play in this country. The Engineering Employers Federation said that the Chancellor had

> done nothing to reassure manufacturing industry.

The Machine Tool Technologies Association said that the Budget had

> totally failed to address the serious problems faced by the industry.

Mr. John Edmonds of the GMB said:

> The most serious problem for the British economy at the moment is the value of sterling and its impact on the manufacturing sector. The Government have loaded the manufacturing sector with the climate change levy, the working time directive, the minimum wage and a raft of other measures that have cost the sector dear. The Budget has done nothing for manufacturing.

The most the agricultural industry got out of the Budget was a reference to the herd scheme of taxation in an Inland Revenue press release on capital allowances.

On education, the big headline was £1 billion for education. Strip it out, and we find that it is £300 million for schools. That will not help the biggest comprehensive school in Lancashire. I welcome more money, but that school needs four or five more teachers to deliver the new A-level syllabus that the Secretary of State for Education and Employment has outlined. If that school receives the maximum amount of £50,000, it will, at best, buy two teachers. The head teacher is still short of people to deliver the Government's education policy. There is no capital to expand the school's dining facilities: it can accommodate only one sixth of the pupils for school dinners. The school has grown like Topsy: there are lots more pupils, but no expansion of the infrastructure. The Budget was silent on that.

Families facing a £16,000 bill to send their children to university received no help from the Budget. I suggest to the Government and to members of my Front-Bench team that we should get rid of student fees. We are supposed to be getting more doctors, but parents who want to put their children through medical school face a £5,000 bill. What an inducement! How will that give the Secretary of State his extra supply of doctors? The time has come to end student fees.

Regional investment was trumpeted as the next great solution to economic disparity. When I got down to reading about that, I discovered that what was proclaimed as a £1 billion investment turned out to be discussions between the Government, the European investment bank and other regional development quangos on various priorities. It is not real money: it is targets that they would like to see spent in the regions. It is officialdom interfering and trying to pick industrial winners. The Government have gone full circle. They have shown what they want to do, which is to interfere with the wealth-creating process while lacking any understanding of the real way in which business works.

The Budget was like one of those Chinese meals: quite a lot to digest, but rather quickly forgotten, except perhaps for one thing—the bill. The tax bill remains rather large. The Government have done nothing to rescue their reputation in that respect.

7.36 pm

Mr. Bob Blizzard (Waveney): The obvious question for a Back Bencher to ask about any Budget is, "What's in it for my constituency?" In doing so, we must recognise that the overall state of the national economy is the most

important factor in influencing the fortunes of people in my constituency and elsewhere, in terms of the performance of the local economy, employment levels, and public expenditure on local services. What I found most impressive in what the Chancellor said yesterday was his sound management of the economy, because that underpins everything else the Government do. For too long, too many people thought that they had to put up with the Conservative party because the Labour party could not run the economy. We have now firmly set the record straight and will continue to do so.

When we came to power, we were faced with a huge national debt that had doubled under the Tories and there was a £28 billion deficit in the public finances. That had built up over the years when Lord Howe and Lady Thatcher were, in their famous phrase, stretching the meaning of words beyond what was credible, and when the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) and Norman Lamont were tearing each other to pieces over the Maastricht treaty and the exchange rate mechanism. While all that was going on, our economy was going down hill.

To be fair to him, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) did his best to sort out the mess, and I thought that he made a reasonable job of it, but we were left with a £28 billion deficit when we came to power. We have turned that round and repaid debt, so we now have a surplus on the current account, and because inflation is under control we can rebuild the national health service and the education service, put more money into crime reduction and transport, and cut income tax by 1p.

The key to all that has been the welfare to work policy. We have record numbers of people in employment and paying tax, unlike all those years under the previous Government when we had high levels of unemployment and huge social security bills. The Tories always said that they would cut social security: they cut the rates, but they never cut the overall bill.

What history will remember about yesterday's Budget are the huge additional resources to rebuild the national health service and to put into education.

I remember the days—I was a teacher then—when the increase in the education budget for a year was 1 per cent. It was not 1 per cent. above inflation; it was simply 1 per cent. We were asked to put up with that. There were years when the increase for the health service was not much more: when I led a local authority, we had to put up with years in which the increase was 0 per cent, and we were told that that was a virtue. Now, when Opposition Members complain that the increase is only 6 per cent.—or 7 per cent., or 5 per cent.—we ought to remember those dark days.

It is because of those days that it is taking such a long time to rebuild our public services, but they are already being rebuilt in my constituency. Waiting lists at my local hospital are on course to meet their reduction target. The winter so-called crisis was not a crisis; it was managed extremely well. As I speak, £700,000 is being spent on upgrading the hospital's accident and emergency unit, and the first 20 nurses provided by the Government's new recruitment drive have gone into the hospital. Since May 1997, Lowestoft community hospital has been completely renovated. This year's health authority budget has been set at three times the rate of inflation—and all that was happening before yesterday's announcement.

Nevertheless, people at my hospital—which always heads any league table that anyone might care to construct—have told me that, notwithstanding their gratitude and support for all that we have done, they feel that they need more money in their base budget because some health service costs are rising at a higher rate than that of inflation. We have heard about that, both yesterday and today. We heard today that the new money would go directly to trusts and primary care groups, and they will be very pleased. We are talking not just about the £2 billion for the immediate year, but about the four-year programme—a huge rise from £45 billion to £69 billion. We are on the way to reaching European levels, whatever they are. These are massive amounts. The real question is this: why is so much needed to take us to the level that we would like to reach? The answer is that the national health service was not funded properly for so long.

As for education, I have lost count of the number of schools in my constituency that have received money from the buildings fund to repair leaking roofs, add classrooms and improve facilities generally. This year, both Kirkley and Sir John Leman high schools are receiving six-figure sums for capital works, and Lowestoft college received £900,000 to create a centre of excellence for training in maritime and offshore skills. That is real money—but what we shall see now is real and direct money going into our schools. I taught in schools for many years, and I cannot remember seeing an extra £30,000, £40,000 or £50,000 going straight to a school for a head teacher to spend on the things that mattered. That was unheard of, but now it is happening. Primary schools are also receiving good sums: up to £9,000.

The other priority for my constituency is help for pensioners. It contains 21,000 of them, and they will be helped by the £150 winter fuel allowance. I am particularly pleased about the rise in capital allowances. Many pensioners with small savings have not yet been able to claim the minimum income guarantee, but they will now be able to do so. They will find the guarantee a great help, because it represents a significant weekly increase in what they can claim as a pension through income support. Pensioners will also be pleased that more of them are taken out of tax. The 10p tax rate will help, and that is on top of what we knew before about television licences and eye tests. It all adds up to more than 75p a week.

Nevertheless, pensioners still ask me why the Government cannot simply spend the money on increasing pensions across the board. The answer is this: there are wealthy pensioners who, frankly, do not need the money, and, more important, the poorest pensioners would lose the money pound for pound as they lost their income support. If we adopted that course, we would not reach our target.

I approve of the policy of increasing the pension by at least the rate of inflation, and then using the minimum income guarantee to help more and more people. However, I believe that we do—or did—need to consider pensioners with a small second pension, who are not wealthy, who did not receive the minimum income guarantee and who, in their terms, were only receiving the 75p. I am delighted that the Government intend to introduce a pensions credit system enabling such people to obtain more money through a pension entitlement guarantee. I hope that the Government will act quickly, because those people are impatient.

[Mr. Bob Blizzard]

Given that we are raising pensions annually by at least the rate of inflation, I wonder whether we can improve the way in which we calculate the rate of inflation. It is quite hard to give an answer to a pensioner who says, "I have my 75p, but my council tax has gone up by this much, and my rent has gone up by that much". The problem is that the month in which we assessed this year's index gave us a figure of 1.1 per cent. Perhaps a way could be found of producing a figure reflecting the actual increases that such people experience.

For many years, the main issue in my constituency has been the distress caused by unemployment coupled with low pay—and the two tend to go together. Since May 1997, unemployment has fallen by a third in my constituency, owing to a general improvement in the national economy along with the significant effect of the new deal. However, the unemployment rate is still 7 per cent., which is much higher than the rate in the rest of East Anglia and puts us pretty high up on the national league table. We have generally been in the top 20 travel-to-work areas in unemployment terms.

I was pleased to hear yesterday that the Budget would extend the new deal, enabling it to focus in particular on unemployed people over 25. Many of my constituents who were made redundant from the traditional industries of shipbuilding, food processing and engineering, and have found it very difficult to find other jobs, have asked whether they can have a bit more of the new deal. They like it, but they feel that it is young people who are being helped. They ask, "Can you turn to us?". We have been turning to them, and now we are going to focus on them even more.

The idea of spending £40 million on action teams to try to match the vacancies to the unemployed strikes me as very worthwhile. Notwithstanding the unemployment that I have described, in the last couple of weeks three employers in my constituency have said that they cannot obtain the labour that they want.

People have come to my surgeries—and, I am sure, to those of other hon. Members—and said, "I think I have found a job, but I will struggle until I receive my first pay slip." I also like the idea of the £100 job grant to tide them over.

During my early months as a Member of Parliament, after May 1997, many people came to see me, perhaps because I was a new Member or perhaps because they had problems that had built up over the years. The main issue was the number of people for whom work would not pay—who remained on benefits, and did not look for work as hard as they would have wished to if they had not known that they would be worse off as a result. The working families tax credit represents a major step forward in my constituency, and is very helpful to the 2,500 or so families receiving it. The increase of at least £4 a week in the child-related element will not only help people who want to get into work, but reduce poverty.

What with the minimum wage, and the increase in child benefit to £15 a week—I think that about 12,500 families will benefit from that—the Budget has given people much more hope, and improved their lives. Those people, many of whom are traditional Labour supporters—core supporters—will also be pleased with the 1p reduction in income tax. However, if we are to have the jobs, businesses must succeed. Most employers in my constituency run small businesses, so they will appreciate some of yesterday's measures, including the reductions in capital gains tax. Despite what the right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) said, those businesses will appreciate the capital allowances on information technology equipment. Not everyone in my constituency leases the equipment; some buy it. The measure will encourage them to do that, which they have not always done before.

When we talk about employment throughout the country, the big issue is disparity. There is not just a north-south divide, but an east-west divide and a coastal-inland divide. Coastal towns, particularly those on the east coast, have high unemployment. There is a disparity within the regions. My constituency is in the same region as Cambridge. Too often, Cambridge is seen to typify the region.

Therefore, I welcome the regional venture capital fund. I hope that it will be used to support enterprise in places that can most benefit from it. I am sure that the regional development agency will have a role in that, but I am concerned about the East of England regional development agency budget, which is the same as it has been historically. When we put together all the money, it showed how little money the East of England received under the previous Government. I hope that the present Government will review the amount urgently, put that right and ensure that the money is directed to unemployment black spots. My constituency is called an unemployment black spot. It is not a pleasant name, but I hope that we will not have to put up with it for too much longer.

I am glad that my hon. Friend the Paymaster General is in the Chamber. I have spoken to her about the construction industry scheme. I was pleased with the Budget's measures to simplify the paperwork on the scheme and to make it easier for companies to get a CIS5 certificate.

I am pleased that there will be an investigation into the system whereby people who run small businesses must travel around personally presenting a plastic card to people to obtain their money. We should use the information technology that we ask those small businesses to use. We need to clamp down on fraud, but some decent businesses in the construction industry are trying to get work in other parts of the country. They have been held back. I welcome yesterday's measure to tackle that.

As energy policy has been raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Hemsworth (Mr. Trickett) and by the right hon. Member for Fylde, I should say a word about that. I admire what my hon. Friend is doing for the coal industry, but I remind him and Ministers that an awful lot of people are employed in the off-shore oil and gas industries, particularly the off-shore gas industry.

Many fabrication yards are becoming more idle. Thousands of jobs are threatened. We will have the capacity to have off-shore gas and oil industries—although gas will last longer than oil—for about 30 years to come, if we get the taxation regime right.

I know that oil costs $30 a barrel at the moment, so the idea of cutting tax is not politically acceptable, but we must look to the long term and ensure that we can sustain that industry, and not just in a fiscal sense. It becomes progressively more difficult to extract the oil and gas from the marginal fields. We do not want to lose the main infrastructure that supports that.

There is no longer a case for a moratorium, or for stricter consents policies on gas-fired power stations. Many more jobs would be created through building those power stations than would be put at risk by reducing—not obliterating, but reducing—some of the coal use. It meets the Government's environmental policy on CO_2 emissions. Building those power stations could make an important contribution to meeting our Kyoto targets.

Again, many of the places where the power stations would be built need to be regenerated. Such places around the coast suffer from unemployment. Such building would provide a big input to those communities, as well as sending a positive signal to the off-shore gas industry that this country is committed to the cleanest of the fossil fuels—it is second only to renewables, probably, in terms of environmental acceptability—and is going in that direction.

My constituency is in East Anglia, which is characteristically rural—in fact, my constituency contains a large tract of rural north Suffolk. People have asked what the Budget contains for rural areas. What is in it for those areas? [HON. MEMBERS: "Nothing."]

That is the response from members of the Conservative party in East Anglia. I find that puzzling. Their approach seems to suggest that people who live in rural areas are a different race, a different set of people, but they use the health service and send their children to state schools. Many are pensioners. They pay income tax and will benefit from the 1p off. They claim the working families tax credit and take up child benefit. People do all those things in rural areas, as they do in towns, so to try to pretend that there is some basic difference is ridiculous.

In one particular respect, the Budget was good for rural areas: the measures regarding transport. Before the Budget, I felt that the Government had a choice. They could either continue with a small fuel tax escalator and hypothecate the money, as promised, into transport, or they could have no fuel escalator. We had both. There is no fuel tax escalator—I was pleased about that—but £280 million will go towards transport, so we have the best of both worlds.

Mr. Syms: Is the hon. Gentleman aware of today's announcement that £250 million of that has gone into the Manchester Metrolink? Therefore, for the rest of the country, there is £30 million.

Mr. Blizzard: The hon. Gentleman assumes that the £250 million is out of the £280 million. I am prepared to accept what the Chancellor said yesterday, which is that that £280 million will go towards road improvements and public transport. My plea to the Chancellor and to the Deputy Prime Minister is that a good deal of that money be spent on improve the road infrastructure in some parts of the country.

Anyone who has been to East Anglia will know it still has inadequate roads. Regions in the far end of East Anglia, such as my constituency, which is based around Lowestoft, suffer from that. The economy suffers from it, too. Therefore, there are plenty of possibilities to use some of the transport fund in East Anglia. I hope that it will be used there.

I hope that money will continue to be used for the rural bus initiative because many people in rural areas have no car. The initiative has helped them to gain some mobility. However, I ask that the terms of the funding be drawn fairly broadly, so that transport authorities, county councils or whatever, can use it in the best way for their communities.

In Suffolk, we are told that the money can be used only for new bus routes. I would like the money to be used to protect existing bus routes. We could move more people for our money if we put it into community buses and taxi schemes. All too often, we have empty single-decker large buses rumbling around country lanes. We could do better for the money that we are putting in. However, we must recognise that a serious modal shift will not happen in rural areas. Thousands of buses would have to roam around the villages at regular intervals to offer access that is in any way comparable with that offered by a car. That is important when looking at future policy.

I have already mentioned some of my constituency's employment problems. The Government are making efforts seriously to regenerate my area. We are in receipt of single regeneration budget money, and, in one particular area of Lowestoft, much good work is being done. We are, therefore, not at all pleased that the area's last bank—Barclays bank—is walking away. As the Government are putting in millions of pounds, Barclays is walking away—undermining confidence in the area and making life more difficult for shopkeepers, who have to take their money further to bank. We are also not pleased that Barclays seems to have an uncompromising attitude. However, I am very pleased that, yesterday, the Chancellor said that, in the Budget, he would take the banks to task in a number of ways.

It seems to me that large companies, such as banks, should be working with Governments and for communities. When a programme such as the single regeneration budget is in progress, banks should stick in there and have some faith in that programme. Ultimately, they may reap the rewards of that.

Mr. Fabricant: Does the hon. Gentleman seriously believe that Barclays will reopen its Lowestoft branch because the Chancellor of the Exchequer has taken it to task?

Mr. Blizzard: The debate gives me a very good opportunity to put on the record, in *Hansard*, what I think of Barclays—so that, next week, when I meet people from Barclays, I will already have made my point.

Yesterday's Budget was a good Budget for my constituency. I believe that it was a good Budget for most of the country. There were winners all round. Yesterday, I was asked on local radio who was a loser in the Budget. Although I can think of people who have to pay more stamp duty on a home worth more than £250,000, I do not think that that change will affect too many people in my constituency.

I remember the days when Budgets were feared—when people braced themselves for two weeks before a Budget, wondering what dreadful things could happen. I remember when people prepared to wince on Budget day, and when Budgets were measured only by the degree of badness and pain that they inflicted. Yesterday's Budget was an occasion of joy, and an occasion when we could see that public services are being rebuilt. We are rebuilding the welfare system for our young and our old. We are rebuilding prosperity for hard-working people not only in my constituency but across the country, so that we end up with a country that we can be pleased to live in.

8.2 pm

Mr. Ian Taylor (Esher and Walton): The hon. Member for Waveney (Mr. Blizzard), in his peroration, reached almost evangelical tones, and he did an extremely good job at defending his Chancellor's Budget. Indeed, there were times during yesterday's Budget speech when I was quite excited. There were several measures in there—which I shall return to later—that I rather liked the sound of; they sounded exactly like the sort of measures that would be welcomed by certain aspects of the business economy and by those of us who would like a lessening of dependency in our society.

My suspicions were aroused, however, in casting an eye at the now healthy hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner), who was beginning to smile at the bits of the statement that I was smiling at. This is a very worrying state of affairs. It was clear to me that the hon. Gentleman had got the full feel of the Budget: it is capitalism with a socialist face. To that extent, the process of the Chancellor's speech led us to his own peroration, which was the huge growth in expenditure on the national health service.

Conservative Members, including me, are not prepared to be categorised as anti-NHS. The NHS is a crucial part of the fabric of our society and has had a remarkable impact on the creation of the self-confidence within families and communities to face up to illnesses. In times of stress, it is very important to know that there is a health care service that can look after us. I hope that that is common ground between both parties. Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack), I resent the accusation that we are not prepared to defend a national health service.

The problem is that, over many years, the national health service has not been delivering the quality of service on which people depend. Therefore, there are concerns in communities right across the country that, when they need it, the national health service—albeit funded by taxation—will not give the quality of service that their families require. It is a matter not of whether the NHS might ultimately be able to deliver the service, but whether it is able to deliver it when the family needs it. In my own constituency, the current situation has caused people who are certainly not wealthy to decide to opt for private practice—they would not normally have thought of doing so—because they want the security of knowing that they can quickly receive treatment for their particular illnesses.

Mr. Ivan Lewis: Is the solution to that problem more money and the reform and modernisation of the delivery structures in the health service, or is it massive expansion of the private health care sector? Conservative Front Benchers repeatedly articulate the view that the solution to the problem that the hon. Gentleman has outlined is massive expansion of the private health care sector. Does he support that view?

Mr. Taylor: Expansion of the private health care sector is not a matter of whether the Government or the Opposition support it. I believe that the sectors can co-exist and, in a moment, I shall come back to a point about how they might help each other. However, I tell the hon. Gentleman—who has made two interventions on this point—that one of the periods of fastest growth of the private health sector was under the previous Labour Government, in the latter part the 1970s, when care in the NHS had reached such an abysmal state that people, including trade unionists, were being driven to take out private health insurance policies. Currently, there is a danger that concern about the quality of care in the health service is again encouraging people to move across into the private sector. A week or two ago, I had a constituency case on precisely that issue.

Therefore, I do not believe that any policy that seems to drive people out of the health service into the private sector is acceptable. I certainly do not support that. What I do say is that, in the long run, if the United Kingdom is ever to reach the types of health care levels achieved in other countries, more resources, both public and private, need to be devoted to health care.

Mr. Lewis: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way again on this point. The Government have a choice: they can either make tax relief available to stimulate use of the private sector, or they can use tax revenue and public expenditure to improve and expand the national health service. Which of those two choices does he believe a responsible Government would make?

Mr. Taylor: I do not think that that is the dichotomy at all. In a free society, people are free to take out private health insurance. That is not something that we should be disputing. My point is that more resources have to go into the national health service. I welcome the Government's figures yesterday, and I am delighted that the economy is sufficiently healthy for those types of figures, over four years, to be committed. I also hope that the economy justifies that degree of confidence by the Chancellor. However, ultimately, whatever amount of money one puts into the health service, there will be problems.

It was not that many years ago that I was parliamentary private secretary to the then Health Secretary, William Waldegrave, now Lord Waldegrave, and we were implementing the reforms that had been started by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), William Waldegrave's predecessor. There were a huge number of issues that we knew we had to tackle, because it was self-evident that the publicly funded, tax-based health care system was simply not capable of proper management. It did not have the management tools. We had the same problem that the Prime Minister mentioned today—disparity of treatment across the country.

Reforms are necessary, and I welcome the Prime Minister's statement today—but with one big caveat. I wrote a speech for William Waldegrave that sounded very similar to that statement, but, as he was an intelligent man, he rejected it as waffle. I hope that the Prime Minister has understood that warm phrases and lots of concepts such as preventive care, partnership and performance are not themselves substitutes for the tough reforms that will have to be put into practice if the money that has been promised by the Chancellor is to deliver the improvement in outputs across the country that all of us require from a nationally funded health service.

I also wonder whether the options that the Prime Minister is considering should not have additional to them the types of concepts that Lord Winston articulated only

a few weeks ago. In my view, this is Lord Winston's Budget. I suspect that, if Lord Winston had not articulated those views, the Chancellor's generosity may have been slightly less in this Budget. However, I shall leave that aside as I cannot prove the point. Lord Winston clearly said that additional private sector resources will need to be brought into the health service for the benefit of all, and new ways of improving the management of the allocation of resources in the health sector will also be needed. I did not hear that from the Prime Minister today, and that was one of the great omissions from his statement. I hope that in the next four months he will learn the lesson that tough choices are not just about warm words. The health service has some difficult management issues that must be addressed if we are ever to have the quality of care that all our constituents expect.

Mr. Fabricant: Does my hon. Friend appreciate—because clearly Labour Members do not—that we are already seeing a large expansion in private health care? Is he aware that BUPA has announced that four times as many private operations were performed in the past 12 months as in 1997? That is because of the state of the NHS under the Labour Government.

Mr. Taylor: My hon. Friend is correct to say that the current state of the health service after two and a half years of a Labour Government is worrying, and that that is forcing people into the private sector. However, I do not want to see a conflict between the two. The purchasing criteria in the health service may, from time to time, require the purchase of operations and procedures from the private sector. We need to see the totality of resources devoted to health care, rather than people in the private sector being regarded as renegades, or people being forced out of the NHS because it is not good enough.

I received a letter from the Ember centre, in association with Age Concern Elmbridge, which covers my constituency, listing several people who have received worryingly poor treatment by the NHS. It states:

> It saddens us to have to make these representations to you but we hope that you will agree that these experiences show that conditions in our Area need to be vastly improved and what is hard to understand is why the Health Authority is not more vigilant and making inspections—or following up complaints—to ensure that this state of affairs does not continue or ever arise again.

We do not point the finger and say that the health service is awful because there is a Labour Government, because I know that we faced the same problems when we were in government. What I do say to the Minister is that money alone will not cure the problem. Considerable reform is needed if health authorities are to perform their jobs and the trusts and the primary care groups are to be enabled to provide a proper quality of care. I welcome NHS Direct, for example, because it is a good initiative. However, all the changes must be carefully considered if, in four years' time, after vast amounts of money have gone into the health service, we are not still to have the problems that constituents have experienced with quality of care. That really would be a crisis, and the Government would have proved that money from the state was not sufficient to deliver the quality of service now expected by the public.

During those four years, there will be terrific pressures on the drugs budgets, as new procedures arrive and people expect them. Only one drug, Relenza, has been held back by NICE, but in the future several drugs may be resisted on value grounds and the Government will get into difficulties, especially once the genome project has been realised and the pharmaceutical and biotechnology industries start to produce treatments that arise from understanding our genetic structures.

The welcome news on the NHS is almost a challenge to the Government. They have to prove that their approach will deliver better quality of care. Ultimately, the public worry less about where the money comes from and more, and increasingly, about the quality of care they receive. I would like the NHS to be a service that is broadly free at the point of need, but that service is no longer sufficient if it does not deliver the quality of care.

I said earlier that I welcomed one or two points in the Budget, and that is true. The Chancellor is right to try to stimulate e-commerce, and I disagree with the comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) on that subject. On occasions, a stimulus in certain aspects of economic development is important. It might be temporary, but it could be crucial. The trouble is that more and more people are now aware of the dynamism of e-commerce and the importance of getting online, but very few have the strategies to do so or the investment plans to enable them to do so. We cannot afford to slip behind—and in internet time, one year is a very long time. Action this day is crucial if we are ever to meet the Government's target of making this country the best place in the world for e-commerce.

Mr. Jack: One of the characteristics of many of the enterprises my hon. Friend describes is that they are yet to make a profit. Therefore, offering them a tax allowance is not perhaps the most relevant approach.

Mr. Taylor: I agree, in terms of the newest dot.coms. Indeed, it is widely understood that their value will go down once they make a profit. At that point, they will be valued in more traditional terms, instead of the multiplication of the number of customers. I am less interested in the dot.coms, which will make a sensational impact for a while, than in companies that are more established moving into a position to offer their services online. The adaptation of offline companies into the online world is one of the biggest challenges we face. Numerically, that includes the bulk of companies in this country.

If we are to achieve the real dynamism that anyone who goes to silicon valley on the west coast of the USA instantly observes, we will have to stimulate entrepreneurs. I do not know whether it is fashionable to say so, but the Chancellor is right to understand that entrepreneurs should not be ridiculed as rich people who, because they have made money, should be regarded as social pariahs. That was old Labour. If new Labour's attitude is that somebody who has generated ideas and made money should be held up as a virtuous example, because they have created wealth in society and the Chancellor has then been able to spend that wealth on other matters such as health, that is a dramatic change and I welcome it.

The Government's moves to encourage wider share ownership and stock options for employees and to improve the treatment of capital gains tax are profoundly to be welcomed. My only caveat to the Minister is, "Don't let the Inland Revenue get at those proposals." I remember

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the brainwaves of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe and my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde that were designed to stimulate aspects of the economy, but once the tentacles of the Inland Revenue had got them, the details in the Finance Bill showed that the idea had been crucified—so I give the Minister a little bit of friendly advice to be alert. It is good to encourage stock options, but they should not be crucified by a continuing burden of national insurance charges. It is good to have lower capital gains tax, but Ministers should allow it to be exercised instead of wrapped up in red tape and exemptions. In many cases, it is the detail that frustrates businesses. The idea is good, but its application does not make sense.

The new ability to reward up to 15 key people in a company with options is a good scheme and will be much welcomed. If I understood the proposal, and I have not yet read all the small print, the fact that the schemes are over a four-year period, instead of the much longer times that used to apply, indicates that the Government are up to speed with some of the aspects of the new economy. I welcome all those proposals.

Some of the incentives for pensioners, especially those who have been thrifty, are overdue, and the Government have hit the nail on the head. I welcome those proposals. In my constituency of Esher and Walton, pensioners who are not blessed with generous multiple pensions have experienced difficulties and will welcome the incentive in the Budget.

Let me take a slightly wider view of the macro-economic judgment and the fiscal balance. There is some confusion as to whether or not the Government are being virtuous and tightening the fiscal balance, as the Chancellor claimed to be doing. That judgment has yet to be made. There are genuine questions, particularly about public expenditure. They arise from the fact that the Chancellor locked in real annual growth in public expenditure of 2.75 per cent. against assumed economic growth of 2.25 per cent. There are worries about how generous the Chancellor has been. One headline in the *Financial Times* reads "Prudence or Profligacy?".

I hope that the Monetary Policy Committee genuinely believes, as the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr. Radice) said, that the Government have been responsible and maintained a fairly tight fiscal balance. If not, there may well have to be interest rate rises and that could create problems. If the Chancellor wants to give Britain the opportunity of joining the euro in the next Parliament, as is his professed aim, our interest rates will need to converge with those within the eurozone. I consider that to be a necessity for other reasons.

It is not sustainable for our short-term interest rates to be at such variance with those on the continent. However, it is likely that short-term interest rates on the continent will rise as the German and French economies are growing at 3 per cent. and there appears to be a positive outlook. That is important for our export markets, given that approximately 50 per cent. of our exports go to the eurozone. The Chancellor must recognise that interest rates will have to converge, and that brings me to the real problem—fortunately, the Opposition do not have to face it now—that there will be more active adjustments to the fiscal balance.

The Government do not control monetary policy and interest rates—they are set by an independent Bank of England and I approve of that. However, the Chancellor has to take that into account and give signals to the Monetary Policy Committee that if the economy does not perform as he expects, he will need to make upward as well as downward adjustments in taxation or spending or vary the savings ratio. That is why the debate about the tax burden has become so sterile. There will be occasions when it is virtuous in the wider economic interest to increase the burden of taxation so that the pressure of anti-inflationary policy does not impact only on monetary policy.

I hope that no party—I cannot think which—pledges to reduce the burden of taxation over the lifetime of a Parliament without taking into account the fact that the Government will be unable to control certain elements in the equation. I direct that warning to Ministers and anyone else who cares to listen.

We are still suffering from the high value of the pound, which is having a serious impact on UK manufacturing. Let us be quite clear that our failure to be part of the eurozone has political and economic costs. That is why I am keen for the Government to organise the economy so that we have at least the chance to join early in the next Parliament.

As my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe said, it is no accident that one reason for BMW's decision on Rover is the high value of the pound and the lack of clarity about the time scale of the Government's policy for joining the euro. Ford and other car companies are making similar noises. My argument has always been not that we should join the euro today, as we are not in a position to do so, but that we should do our best to make that a possibility. We must also make it clear that such a timetable exists, as any indication that we were likely to remain outside for a protracted period would have considerable negative implications for investment decisions. Those are the key criteria.

Our exclusion from the eurozone is impacting on jobs and unless the Government follow through their warm but vague words about entry, the problems will continue. They could prove to be one of the biggest risks to the Chancellor's confidence in the four-year view that is set out in the Red Book in respect of the way in which the economy will grow, the effect on unemployment and ultimately the balance of public expenditure.

Although the Budget represents good news for the national health service, it is not good news for other Departments. One of the glummest people on the Government Front Bench yesterday was the Deputy Prime Minister, who got only £280 million for all his huffing and puffing. As the hon. Member for Waveney said, transport is a crucial factor in economic growth, as well as enabling individuals to get around. It is vital that the Government realise that, relatively speaking, this year's Budget has starved transport, and that the public will suddenly wake up to the fact that in order to give a Lord Winston settlement to the national health service, other Departments have not done so well. Unless there is a public expenditure review in the autumn, there will be some squealing in the shires and elsewhere—and certainly among business—about the settlement for transport.

It would be intriguing if the Financial Secretary, in her reply to the debate, let us know what is happening to the £3 billion that has been raised so far through the auction

of the third-generation Universal Mobile Telephone System—an auction that I devised back in 1996–97. It was in our election manifesto and the incoming Labour Government shrewdly picked it up. I am all in favour of the auction, but as the figure is £3 billion and rising, it would be interesting to know what the Government intend to do with it. Is it to go into e-commerce to stimulate further improvements in the allocation and utilisation of radio frequency? Is it to go into the national pot as a way of bailing out the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions for the Deputy Prime Minister? I do not know, but I am sure that the Financial Secretary has it at her fingertips.

Finally, as a south-east Member, I am concerned about property. The Government were absolutely right to phase out mortgage interest tax relief. I have always thought that it had long outstayed its welcome. Of course it will hit people, but it is the right thing to do. I also agree with increasing stamp duty. However, I should like to know how else the Government intend to take the steam out of the property market. Do they intend to increase stamp duty further? If I advocate that, I certainly will not be popular in my constituency, but property prices there have reached such a level that people who have not benefited from previous price increases are finding it difficult to buy. I am not looking for a property crash, but if interest rates come down further, there could be a further push to property prices as mortgages become cheaper.

The Government will have to think of some way to take the steam out of the problem. Raising stamp duty may be one way to do that, but I had hoped that there would be some evidence in the Budget of a change in the value added tax rules on property refurbishment and extensions. New building is VAT exempt, but improving a home still attracts VAT at 17.5 per cent. I hope that the Government will offer more explanation of their true intentions for managing a property market in which there is a possibility that inflation will go off the rails.

8.30 pm

Mr. Ivan Lewis (Bury, South): I have sat and listened to most of the debate this evening, and one thing has struck me above all—no political party can have a greater opportunity to change the nature of a country's economy and public services—indeed, its whole social and economic policy environment—than one that is afforded 18 successive years in power. The previous Conservative Government's legacy in public services, welfare reform and social exclusion is there for all to see.

In recent weeks, we have been told that we spend much less than other European countries on our health service. What does that say about the underinvestment in health care over 18 years of Conservative Government? We have heard too that the previous Government tried to reform and modernise the health service and other public services, but that the outcome was unsuccessful. The present Government inherited a monumental task when it comes to the reform, modernisation and improvement of public services.

I support the Budget. It is probably the most graphic illustration yet of the Government's belief that fairness and enterprise are inextricably linked in the attempt to create a truly successful and civilised nation. No longer are British people asked to believe that economic prosperity for the few will trickle down to benefit the many. No longer do the Government promote the false belief that individuals have to choose between personal ambition for themselves and their families, and their responsibilities towards each other and the society in which they live. No longer do we tolerate a Britain in which millions of families are excluded from the opportunities that many hon. Members take for granted.

The Government's capacity to reverse the economic and social policy orthodoxies of the Tory years is clearly due to their economic management. One of the frustrations for the Opposition, now and in the medium and long-term, is that this Government have shattered the myth that Labour Governments are incapable of competent economic management.

The facts bear examination. We have tackled the national debt. Inflation averages 2.5 per cent, and 800,000 new jobs have been created. More people are in work today than at any time in the history of our country. Direct inward investment has risen by more than 45 per cent. since the Government came to power.

Conservative Members have expressed two reservations about the Government's economic record so far. The first is connected to the strength of the pound—and there is no doubt that that is causing difficulties, especially for manufacturing industry. However, no Conservative Member has come up with a credible solution to the problem. No Conservative Member has seriously advocated devaluation, or a significant reduction in interest rates, or—unless something has changed radically overnight—that we should join the single European currency now.

Although it is ironic that we should have to worry about it, hon. Members of all parties acknowledge that the strength of the pound is a problem, but no Conservative Member has advocated a credible alternative economic strategy to deal with it.

Then there is the debate about the tax burden. Earlier, the hon. Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway) referred to the Red Book. He seemed to imply that there was evidence that the tax burden was falling. That contradicts the suggestion by other Conservative Members that the tax burden under this Government is rising.

The point that needs to be made is that the Government went into the last general election with a very clear commitment on taxation. That was that there would be no increase in the basic and top rates of tax, and that a fair regime would be created for the rest of the taxation system. Conservative Members may shake their heads at that, but that commitment was made crystal clear on the Labour party pledge cards and, as everyone can see, we have honoured it.

Mr. Hammond: Perhaps our problem is that we remember the Prime Minister saying on radio that there were no plans at all to raise taxes.

Mr. Lewis: The vast majority of British people who voted at the last general election understood the Government's clear and explicit commitment that there would be no increase in the basic or top rates of income tax. One of the frustrations for Conservative Members is that they can no longer credibly portray the Labour party as the party of high taxation. That is one of the reasons why opinion polls show that people continue to support

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the Government's policies. People recognise that we have achieved economic stability without at the same time increasing the tax burden on the average family. That is an important development in the Labour Government's relationship with the electorate.

Competent economic management by itself is a hollow achievement. What matters is what a Government do with the resulting dividend. In that respect, the differences between the Conservative party and the Labour Government could not be starker.

First, let us consider the health service. We usually judge political success and progress by outcomes, rather than inputs. At the last general election, the vast majority of British people made the judgment that the health service was underfunded, that there was low morale among staff, and that there were shortages of beds, doctors, nurses and essential equipment.

Moreover, the Conservative Government had created a culture in the health service of competition, rather than co-operation and partnership. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister spoke this afternoon about the reform of the health service. He put at the top of his list of priorities the creation of a partnership culture and the need to work together. I was somewhat amused when the Leader of Opposition scoffed at that. The right hon. Gentleman failed to understand that one of the major problems in changing the culture in the health service is that hospitals and doctors are not used to co-operating and collaborating. The health service culture engendered by the Conservatives was based on the internal market and competition.

That is why the difficult task of changing the culture of the health service is important.

Mr. Ian Taylor: It is a point of interest that, when the reforms were being put through by William Waldegrave, there were several comments to the effect that they were the sort of reforms that would bring people together. For the first time, hospital consultants were prepared to send Christmas cards to GPs. They needed to be friendly with one another.

Mr. Lewis: General practitioner fundholding would certainly encourage consultants to send GPs Christmas cards. However, fundholding created a two-tier health service. It was an iniquitous service. If Members speak to professionals within the health service, and to trust board and health authority board members, they will hear them talk about a significant culture shift within the NHS since the general election: people work together, seek to make best use of resources and adopt a collaborative and partnership approach. We need to build on that. These people condemn what happened, certainly towards the end of the Tory years, when a culture of competition was introduced that was entirely inappropriate for a national health service.

That was the health service that we inherited. It does not matter whether we have debates or arguments about whether some of the health reforms that the Conservatives introduced were positive; whether the internal market was a good thing; whether the perpetual ideological experimentation with the health service was helpful; or whether the then Government were embarking on right-wing ideological experiments. The judgment that we make on the success of political intervention is based on the outcome. The outcome was as I have described, and the health service was one of the major reasons why so many people voted for the Labour party at the general election.

Dr. Brand: Will the hon. Gentleman accept that the perception of outputs after almost three years of Labour Government is even worse, and that is why we are happily blessed with the Budget infusion of £2 billion?

Mr. Lewis: No, I do not accept that. That may come as a major shock to the hon. Gentleman.

We all have discussions with and work with professionals in the health service. They have said consistently that more money is going into the service and that modernisation is moving in the right direction. They have said also that more money is needed to deliver the modernisation that is required to take the service into the 21st century. That is why the Budget was so significant. The increases in spending year on year in the health service over the next four years will be 6.1 per cent.—the greatest ever sustained growth in its history. That is in response to the concerns that have been expressed and the desire of professionals and managers within the service to match the commitment and the energy of modernisation with additional resources.

There is no commitment within the Liberal Democrat manifesto that ever demonstrated that that party was committed to putting the extra resources into the health service that the Government are now committed to investing.

Dr. Brand: No doubt the hon. Gentleman is aware of our shadow Budget, which put extra funding for the NHS at £2 billion.

Mr. Lewis: It may come as another tremendous shock to the hon. Gentleman, but I have not studied your shadow Budget too seriously. One of the benefits of being a Liberal Democrat is that there is never any prospect of you having to make these decisions or to take responsibility in government.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. The hon. Gentleman must use correct parliamentary language.

Mr. Lewis: I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I move on—

Mr. Hammond: The hon. Gentleman has told the House how well he communicates with local health service professionals. Perhaps he will answer my question, which the hon. Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) was unable to answer last night: by how much have out-patient waiting lists in Bury risen since the Government took office?

Mr. Lewis: I do not have that information to hand. However, I am sure that I can make it available to the hon. Gentleman, if he will find it helpful. As a result of my discussions in Bury, I am aware of the welcome that has been given to the Budget by the health authority and the health trust. They will be able to demonstrate that it will make a significant difference to the quality of health care that is provided to the people of Bury.

I move on to the Prime Minister's announcement today that there will be significant extra resources for the health service, and a strategic effort to modernise and reform it. There is no question but that there are tremendous disparities of performance in different parts of the country—whether they be in terms of best use of resources or of the number of patients treated.

I shall give two tangible examples. By most accounts, the health care trust in Bury is one of the most efficiently managed in Britain. Health care trusts not a million miles away are considerably less efficient. That gives rise to the question why things are different in Bury. During the Christmas period I was fortunate enough to visit the Greater Manchester ambulance service. When I arrived, I found that there were senior officers from each of the health authorities in the Greater Manchester area at a meeting. I inquired what the meeting was all about and I found that a senior representative from each of the health authorities in Greater Manchester met each week to monitor the availability of beds across that geographical area. That is why health authorities in Greater Manchester did not have some of the difficulties experienced by authorities elsewhere.

This is not simply a question of additional resources. Also important are quality of management, co-operation and collaboration, and spreading and sharing good practice within the national health service. We must also be willing, if necessary, to take on the vested interests in the health service that like to maintain and perpetuate the status quo. Self-regulation among doctors should be seen as a privilege, not a right. That is not a veiled threat. We need the professionals to work in partnership with us, but they have to be prepared to change their working practices if we are to develop the quality health care and patient care that people deserve.

Education is also one of the Government's key priorities. We inherited a situation in which too many of our children were leaving school without the basic literacy and numeracy skills that we take for granted. Morale in the teaching profession was low and schools were crumbling. What sort of legacy is that from a Government who were in power for 18 years?

Yesterday's announcement of an additional £1 billion will make a significant difference. It will give between £3,000 and £9,000 to head teachers of primary schools and between £30,000 and £50,000 to head teachers of secondary schools to spend on books and equipment. That will make a tangible, immediate difference to the quality of education that is available to children up and down the country. If, in the past 10 years, head teachers had been told that they would be given a lump sum to spend so directly, they would not have believed it. When it comes to the resources made available to schools, this is a cultural shift.

We are already seeing an increase in the basic literacy and numeracy standards in our schools. Class sizes are coming down for five, six and seven-year-olds. By next September, we will have achieved our goal to reduce class sizes for five, six and seven-year-olds to less than 30. Tangible and significant improvements are being seen in our education system through a combination of additional resources, modernisation, an improvement of the way in which teachers teach, improvements in the curriculum and the introduction of literacy and numeracy hours. Those factors are changing the way in which we provide public services.

Today, the Deputy Prime Minister was in Manchester and announced a £280 million Government investment in the Metrolink system. That will make a massive difference to the transport infrastructure in Greater Manchester. It will expand the Metrolink system to most parts of the sub-region. It is important in reducing road congestion and is a demonstrable commitment to public transport. It is also vital to the economy of the Greater Manchester area, as it will attract businesses to the area and allow existing businesses to grow. Greater Manchester has the potential to be the first model in the country of an integrated public transport system, and the people there welcome that.

We remember the days under the Conservative Government when 3 million people were out of work, even using fiddled figures. We were told that modern economics meant that that was the price we had to pay. We were told that it was impossible to create an economy with both low inflation and low unemployment. That was the conventional wisdom promoted by the Conservative party. We were told that 3 million people out of work—it was probably 4 or 5 million—was a price worth paying.

Welfare dependency had become the norm in far too many communities. It was believed to be better for a family's quality of life if people chose not to work. At the time, Conservatives used the term "welfare dependency" in a derogatory way—saying that people were skiving and cheating, and abusing the system. There was never a serious strategy to provide people with choices—alternative attitudes or role models. In some families, three generations had never experienced what it was like to work. The conventional wisdom was that it had to be like that. There had to be communities and parts of the country where that was the cultural norm.

Let us consider what has happened in only two and a half years. There is the new deal, which has now been extended to the over-25s, to lone parents and to disabled people. That gets hundreds of thousands of people off the dole and into work. This week, new action teams were announced; they will match the unemployed with vacancies in areas of high unemployment.

That personal service is important, because one of the problems we face is that some of the bureaucracies in our Government agencies have not always provided such an individual, flexible service to support people who are struggling for some reason. Those action teams are another step forward—together with the personal advisers introduced under the new deal—to enable people to maximise their potential and to become a reconnected part of society.

We have increased the working families tax credit. There will be a new employment tax credit that guarantees a minimum income to those without children. That is real welfare reform; it really will end welfare dependency—not by scapegoating those who, for years, have found themselves dependent on welfare, but by extending opportunities so that people see some light at the end of the tunnel.

We must not forget that we inherited a situation in which, by any objective measure, one in three children were growing up living in poverty. That was a scandal, when this country was not poor—it was never a poor country during the 18 years of Conservative government. However, the Conservatives chose to cut the taxes of the

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very rich rather than to make institutional or structural changes to enable people to see that there was a way out of poverty.

We have increased the children's tax credit and the under-16 child credit in the working families tax credit. The figures are significant. As a consequence of the measures taken over two and a half years, and the Budget statement this week, the poorest two-child family on income support will be £1,500 better off since the last general election. That is an important increase in the standard of living of families on low incomes.

We have increased child benefit by 26 per cent. in real terms over the life of this Parliament. The rate for the eldest child is the highest ever in real terms. On average, families with children will be £850 a year better off as a consequence of the Budget.

We are talking about different priorities. There were times when the Conservative Government could have been objectively judged to be managing the economy relatively successfully. However, during those years, they chose to cut taxes for the very rich rather than spend money for the overall good of society. They took political decisions on economic management that rescued them in the short term, but created the boom-and-bust instability that did so much damage to families and businesses.

One of the scandals of our country was that too many pensioners ended up living in poverty. We do not have a proud record on our treatment of pensioners compared to that of most other civilised European countries. However, the Government have made a real start on raising the standard of living of pensioners—especially those on the lowest incomes. We cannot escape from the fact that there has been a change in the pensions system; certain people receive occupational or private pensions, while others do not. It is important to target help at the pensioners on the lowest incomes.

We have increased the winter fuel allowance from £100 to £150, and we have introduced free television licences for those over 75. An important step forward in the Budget was the extension of the minimum income guarantee to those pensioners who have relatively small savings. We all accept that it is a challenge for the Government—a challenge that the previous Government failed to address—to target support at those pensioners who have just enough that they do not receive income support. They tend to be clobbered. They do not receive benefit and have all sorts of charges imposed on them. This Budget is the first step to targeting help at those pensioners.

The Budget contains measures to support business, and there has been a cultural shift in people's perceptions. The business community no longer believes that the Conservative party has any credibility when it claims to be the party of business. That is another source of great frustration to Conservative Members. The business community not only believes that business is safe in this Labour Government's hands, but that we have modern policies that will enable businesses to develop, to thrive and to grow.

The Budget contains further cuts in capital gains tax. That will create the most favourable environment that the United Kingdom has ever seen to encourage entrepreneurs and to reward risk-takers. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced that he was permanently extending capital allowances to small and medium-sized firms to encourage investment. The new all employee share ownership plan is the most tax-advantaged employee share ownership scheme ever introduced in the United Kingdom. We will ensure that share ownership is available not just to the few in British society, but to the many.

An announcement was made on capital allowances for small firms purchasing information technology equipment. That is significant. We know that many small businesses are not preparing for e-commerce and for the future by considering the implications of the internet and technology generally. The 100 per cent. capital allowance for purchasing IT equipment will be important in encouraging such businesses to prepare. A new 10p starting rate of corporation tax will be introduced from April. Corporation tax generally is at its lowest ever rate.

There are disparities within regions and some regions are doing less well than others. All the evidence supports that view. That is why the Government are determined to have an active regional policy. A new umbrella fund will help to finance enterprise across the regions and it will support venture capital. It is important that we target regional assistance in a way that reflects the issues that affect particular regions. An announcement was also made on the new clusters fund, which will enable regional development agencies to encourage innovation and support the growth stars of the future.

In conclusion—I am sure that Conservative Members will be relieved to hear those words—this is not merely a competent Government. It is a Government who are on a crusade to build a new Britain on the foundations of social justice and economic prosperity. This Budget is another landmark on the journey to the achievement of that goal.

8.58 pm

Sir Richard Body (Boston and Skegness): The hon. Member for Bury, South (Mr. Lewis) has covered a huge number of issues, and I am sure that he will understand if I do not follow up all his remarks.

The hon. Gentleman said that the Budget proved that the Government had a record of economic competence. If the economy is in such a healthy state, I hope that he will accept that there is a two-year time lag between the date of a Budget and its effects fully coming through into the economy. Therefore, when he gives praise, I hope that he will not leave out my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) who left behind such a bountiful legacy.

I heard the hon Gentleman make a comment to the effect that no Opposition Member had advanced any strategy as an alternative to moving towards a single currency. I think that that was the essence of what he said.

Mr. Ivan Lewis: I said that no hon. Member had advocated a solution to the problem of the strength of the pound. I was not referring to the single European currency.

Sir Richard Body: The pound is no stronger than it was previously compared with the dollar, the yen or any other currency. It is the weakness of the euro that is at fault. If the hon. Gentleman thinks that we should have an alternative to the single currency, I should say that the alternative to committing suicide is simply not to commit

suicide. There is not much point in committing suicide if one is having have a rather congenial life. If the hon. Gentleman is right in his praise of his Government and believes that we have such a healthy economy, surely it would be unwise to spoil it now.

I want to home in on what the Chancellor would call a mere detail in his Budget—the beer duty. I am sorry to come down from the great expanse of canvas that the hon. Member for Bury, South has covered to deal with such a minor issue, but it is not a minor issue to those of us who have breweries in our constituencies. I have an extremely good brewery. It makes good real ale and I am glad that it is able to stand up to the competition that is now faced by so many people in the brewing industry.

I noticed that the Chancellor decided that there need be no increase in the duty on spirits in the Budget because there was competition, but there is also competition for the brewers. It seems that the message has not come through yet to the Treasury about the vast quantity of beer that is now being smuggled into this country. Judges have famously said to young barristers that a good argument does not get any better by repetition, but I fear that it has to be repeated. The scale of smuggling is increasing year on year.

It is dispiriting in a constituency such as mine to find not only members of the licensed trade, who are trying to be honest, but cafés, restaurants and other outlets where beer can lawfully be sold, buying smuggled beer at a price far below the equivalent for beer imported legally. The more the Chancellor fails to recognise the problem, the more he tempts cafés, restaurants and other outlets to do deals with smugglers. I am sure that the Paymaster General realises that many hundreds of lorries are coming in. I understand that we are to hear a statement about smuggling and that we shall hear that tough measures will be introduced. I hope that that is so because, unless it is, the loss of revenue will increase.

I hope that the Paymaster General and the Chancellor have digested the memorandum that has been sent by the interested parties not once but several times. It sets out the hard facts about the scale of smuggling and the fact that millions upon millions of pounds are being lost to the Revenue. It seems only sensible that we should tighten up customs checks and recruit more customs officials. It is surely within the influence of the Chancellor to ensure that there is an increase in the number of officials. Their numbers have declined considerably in recent years. Might I add that if we had more customs officials searching lorries, we might not have so many illegal immigrants entering the country in them.

I allude to illegal immigrants because the hon. Member for Waveney (Mr. Blizzard), whose constituency experiences similar problems to mine, mentioned low pay in his constituency. I am pleased that the Government are making it easier for people to work than for them to be enticed on to state benefits, as happened in the past. However, far too many illegal immigrants are coming in to my constituency and working for as little as £1.90 an hour—far less than the minimum wage. The exploitation of such people in the black economy is an evil business, because it depresses wages for our own people. It is appallingly difficult to compete with such practices.

That is an additional reason why the Paymaster General should announce tough new means of tackling smuggling. The evil has to be ended. Beer smuggling is bad enough, but the smuggling of illegal immigrants must be stopped. The Paymaster General must announce the toughest possible measures against both sorts of smuggling.

9.6 pm

Mr. Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): It is my great pleasure to join in the chorus of praise for the fourth new Labour Budget.

I am aghast at the brass-necked cheek displayed by the Tories. When our spending on health and education was at the lower £19 billion and £21 billion levels, they told us that such spending was irresponsible and reckless. The right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo) said that there was a straight choice to be made between tax cuts and expenditure, but, after our announcements of record spending, he turned up on Radio 4 this morning saying that the Conservatives would match all our extra expenditure—the real-terms increases of 6 per cent. year on year. How would he do that?

During this Parliament, the Government have introduced measures to get more people back to work—for example, the new deal, which the Opposition voted against. We made the Bank of England independent, to provide macro-economic stability and to promote investment and employment, but that, too, was opposed by the Opposition; and we have introduced the working families tax credit to make work pay. Every measure that we have introduced to provide the economic platform needed to fund good investment in health and education for the future has been opposed by the party of boom and bust, economic irresponsibility and social division. Now, the Tories turn around and say that they would match our spending. That is ridiculous. We know their real agenda: Trojan horse privatisation, especially in the health service.

It was interesting to hear the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke). He is very much an old Tory and he came out with some very old ideas. He harked back to the old days, when the exchange rate was DM2.50 to the pound, and he appeared to have the idea that the Conservatives would take back control of the Bank of England. He said that they would set interest rates at 6 per cent., as the remedy to high exchange rates and to revive manufacturing. What a load of codswallop—*[Interruption.]* If any hon. Member doubts that the right hon. and learned Gentleman said that, he should read *Hansard*.

Those with a rudimentary grasp of exchange rates realise that sterling is at an eight-month low against the dollar, and the yen is appreciating. The problem is the euro: it is not appreciating at the level one would expect, given the economic growth in the eurozone. My point is that only those living in cloud cuckoo land think that it is possible, in a global marketplace, to retake control of the Bank of England and artificially set interest rates at a level that will automatically bring about equilibrium for manufacturing. That was proved when a former Tory Chancellor said that he would hold down interest rates and, the next day, they were 15 per cent.—Black Wednesday, as I am sure the House remembers.

The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe said that it was all very well for the new Government when they came in, because global economic conditions were good. Does he not remember that a quarter of the world was in recession within a year of our coming to power, and forecasts of global growth rates were halved?

[Mr. Geraint Davies]

Those were not good, harmonious conditions for economic success as a platform for investment in public services. They were difficult conditions, but we have an extra 800,000 people in jobs, contributing taxes, in sharp contrast to a Conservative Administration who oversaw two recessions when the global economic conditions were relatively benign.

I am picking on the right hon. and learned Gentleman as a former Chancellor, and I am sorry that he is not present. He also said that debt is okay. The repayment on the debts that we inherited was more than we spent on education overall. He said that debt is all right, because it is deferred tax—in other words, someone else must put the tax up. Indeed, the Tories put up taxes 22 times.

We inherited the problem, but we balanced the books, we rebuilt employment, and we provided a sound infrastructure on which to build the health service and other services. The health service is a tough challenge. The demography of Britain is changing. The population are getting older and health demands are increasing. Technology is increasing and expectations are rising.

People expect a hip operation, a heart bypass or a cataract operation. Ten or 20 years ago, no one expected those things—they did not exist. Now, everyone demands such treatment, and if they do not get it, the health service has failed. That is why we are investing 6 per cent. per year in real terms, which the Tories could never have promised and will never deliver. We are introducing innovations and investing for reform. For example, we have introduced walk-in centres and NHS Direct.

As a member of the Public Accounts Committee, I am aware that there are regional variations in unit cost and performance delivery, which the Government intend to sort out. That is one of the reasons why we introduced the Commission for Health Improvement and the National Institute for Clinical Excellence. The health service under the Tories, with the internal market system, became fragmented and heterogenous, with no coherence, no national standards, no benchmarking and no best value. All those have been introduced, with the support of first-class funding growth.

That is the main focus of the Budget. In addition, to support the economic vibrancy in which those public investments are rooted, we have introduced yet more incentives for business to succeed. Capital gains tax is be reformed, and we had already brought down corporation tax to 10p. As regards the consumer and incentives to work, we have the 10p rate, another reduction in income tax to the 22p rate, and the working families tax credit, which provides up to £214. There is a minimum income for working families, so working pays. We are providing jobs and pay, and that is why people are making a contribution.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury, South (Mr. Lewis) mentioned what we are doing for pensioners. That is a difficult issue. We are giving them an extra £50, in addition to the £150 that they are getting in fuel benefit. That alone adds £3 a week to their pension.

Jackie Ballard: Does the hon. Gentleman think that most pensioners in his constituency would rather have £3 a week on their pensions to spend as they like, or have fuel vouchers?

Mr. Davies: I shall not be distracted by that. I must draw my remarks to a conclusion.

We are giving more money for all pensioners. We are giving various benefits in VAT reductions, in eye tests and in the investment in the health service—65 per cent. of beds are occupied by people over the age of 70. We are putting in investment. We are building a better Britain for pensioners and others. I am happy to commend this great Budget for Britain as we enter the new millennium. We should all be proud of it.

9.14 pm

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): I give full marks to the hon. Members for Bury, South (Mr. Lewis) and for Croydon, Central (Mr. Davies) for coming up with every new Labour cliché in the book. It is pretty clear that both boys will go far. The hon. Member for Bury, South talked about social exclusion, but I remind him that the Rowntree Trust has said that the past two and a half years have seen a greater divide between rich and poor in Britain than ever occurred in the 18 years of Conservative Government. What price social exclusion?

The Government have at least admitted, or some in the Government have admitted, that taxes have gone up during the past three years, and that is confirmed by the BBC website. You, Mr. Deputy Speaker, may not know this, but the BBC has a website where one can fill in one's personal details and be told in a flash how much one's tax has increased or decreased. I filled it in, lying only about my name, which I said was Mr. Jones, and I was told that my personal tax would rise by £10 a week as a result of the Budget—and I can believe it.

What does the Budget offer? The hon. Member for Waveney (Mr. Blizzard) said that in rural areas its effect would be extensive, but I think not. It offers agriculture nothing. Dairy farmers receive 10p a pint for milk at the farm gate, but it costs them 11p a pint to produce. Pig farmers get nothing either. We all know that people in rural areas depend on their cars. A gallon of petrol now costs £3.64 in Britain, compared with just £2.82 in Germany. Motorists will have to pay £274 more for their petrol this year than they did three years ago. That is not even counting workplace parking taxes and congestion charges. Those costs have gone up in rural areas, just as they have in urban areas.

We have already heard about the tax on e-commerce, in the form of IR35, so given the lack of time I shall not go into that. However, I do have a question regarding profit-related share schemes, which I would ask the Minister to address when she replies; if she cannot do so, perhaps she will write to me. The Chancellor claimed that the profit-related share schemes would be extended. What will the position be regarding genuine, bona fide schemes such as that offered by the John Lewis partnership, which has 40,000 employees who, owing to the nature of the partnership, cannot buy shares? The Minister will know, however, that the partners have a fair system of sharing in the company's profits.

Hon. Members have talked about private health care, but whether services are provided by the NHS or by private organisations is irrelevant as long as they are free at the point of delivery. That is the acid test. I simply make the point that private health care organisations have done particularly well in the past two or three years. We have seen a fourfold increase in the number of private operations during the past year compared with 1997, because people are just not prepared to wait as they have to at present under this Labour Administration.

What about the great announcement on health? In the past few hours the NHS Confederation has warned that Ministers should not try to browbeat NHS workers. In answer to the Prime Minister's so-called statement this afternoon, Stephen Thornton, its chief executive, said:

> Each of the Prime Minister's five challenges relies on changing clinical practice, which will need a style of working which wins hearts and minds, not naming and shaming—

which is precisely what the Government have tried to do.

What of the marvellous £2 billion that the Government have announced? Of that, £200 million will have to pay for the unfunded pay award and £300 million will come from tobacco tax. That leaves just £600 million to £650 million out of the £2 billion to be released to NHS trusts and primary care practices.

Where does that leave authorities such as the South Staffordshire health authority, which are badly in debt? Throughout the United Kingdom, area health authorities owe approximately £1 billion. That figure has accumulated in the past two and a half years; it will not be paid off.

How are those problems reflected in the microcosm—South Staffordshire—that I represent? At Prime Minister's questions, I made the point that South Staffordshire health authority has announced that Hammerwich hospital and Barton hospital are to close and that services at the Lichfield Victoria hospital will be severely curtailed. The maternity wing and the dialysis unit at that hospital will close, while the services provided by the minor injuries unit will be greatly reduced.

We also experience postcode differentiation in my area. Why do people in Lichfield have to wait three times as long as people in Birmingham for an operation at the Good Hope hospital? I wrote to a Health Minister about that more than a year ago. The Minister replied swiftly and said that it was unacceptable. I was pleased with that reply. The Minister promised to direct full attention to the matter. It now appears that nothing can be done. These dilemmas have occurred since the Labour Government were elected.

The public have been unable to trust past spending announcements by the Government. We find that the £2 billion has been reduced to £650 million. The money will not reach patients; it will be swallowed up by ever-increasing NHS costs. In Staffordshire, we have 83 more police officers, but we have already lost 250. It has been claimed that the NHS will receive an extra £2 billion, but we will lose two and a half hospitals in Lichfield. Tax is down by 1p but has risen by 9p. The Budget is entirely characteristic of the Government's performance: they have taken three steps backward and only one step forward.

9.22 pm

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole): We are considering the 9p up, 1p down Budget. To return to our position in 1997, the Government would have to reduce taxes by £15 billion. The tax ratio continues to increase; that is a burden on all parts of the community. We need only consider the allowances that have gone: the married couples allowance and mortgage tax relief have been abolished. IR35 makes a great difference to high-tech and engineering. The construction industry scheme has been messed up. It is good that the Government are reconsidering it, but it was ridiculous that people had to drive hundreds of miles around the country to show their certificates. The Government were warned about that; they received many letters. It caused great problems.

The first Budget about which I spoke was in 1997. The Government then changed the advance corporation tax rules and took £5 billion a year off pensions. That is regrettable. We are starting to experience its effects. For example, Tesco announced that its employees would have to contribute more. There has been a big impact on local councils.

Poole borough council in my constituency is suffering because it has to contribute hundreds of thousands of pounds more to pension funds. This year, the council tax increase is 12.3 per cent. Many pensioners tell me, "I had a 75p increase, yet I had to pay a 12.3 per cent. increase. That is not fair." I agree with them.

Poole local authority receives the lowest level of support for education. Although I am sure that it welcomes the increase in the amount of money that will go to schools, that does not alter the fact that, year on year, far fewer resources go to schools in Poole than in many other areas.

I regret that the savings ratio, which was 10.6 per cent. when we were in office is now down to 5.5 per cent., and, according to the Red Book, falling. That does not bode well for the future.

The average British motorist pays £274 more than when the Labour party came to power. Overall, pre-Budget, the Government were taking £36 billion a year from road users, but spending only £6 billion on roads. In the Budget, they increased that amount by £715 million through tax and £60 million through vehicle excise duty; yet they have put only £280 million back. They announced today that they had spent £250 million on the Manchester metro.

Although we pay a heavy price for road congestion—£20 billion a year, the Confederation of British Industry estimates—many road and important bypass schemes across the country have been cancelled. The hon. Member for Waveney (Mr. Blizzard) mentioned problems with the condition of the roads that take people to his constituency, and many of us appreciate that without investment in roads we will not get the country moving and business will not be able to make a better job of employing people.

The Government's record on transport is disgraceful, as they are milking the motorist and not putting the money back. People would feel a little happier if public transport were an alternative in most places. That may be a prospect in London, certainly in north London, but not in Dorset or Poole. The car is a necessity for most people and hitting motorists means hitting some of the poorest people with marginal incomes who need a car for the necessities of life. The Government must rethink what they are doing. The fact that they are not continuing with the escalator was trailed a great deal. There has been less of an increase this year, but the increase, on top of previous increases, has made the burden on the motorist heavy.

I have a further point to make on advance corporation tax, which has hit charities to the tune of £400 million. People tend to consider charities as a group, but there are different sorts—those that can raise lots of money and those with lots of investments as a result of bequests. After making the ACT changes, the Government have tried to make the regime for giving a bit easier. I welcome that—it helps the newer, more fashionable charities—but

[Mr. Robert Syms]

some older charities with big investments, such as the most respected medical charities, have still been hit hard. Great disquiet has been caused among the charities and the Government need to reconsider.

We are all pleased that the economy, which started to grow in 1992, has continued to expand, and the public sector surplus which is largely due to that continued growth, represents the difference between two large figures. Although we hope that that expansion will continue, we cannot be complacent. I welcome the fact that we shall continue to run a surplus, which is the right thing to do at this stage of the cycle, but I have worries.

The Government were very meddlesome in yesterday's Budget. Simple taxes are best, but there was a great deal of fiddling about with capital gains tax and, when we look into that, we see that it will not give an awful lot back to businesses and will make the system more complicated. It would have been better if the Chancellor had gone for much simpler solutions that people could understand.

I welcome the additional money for the health service, but there was a whiff of panic about the Government's announcement today. They have been in office for nearly three years, but what is happening in our hospitals is of great concern to us all. Our postbags inform us of constituents who are exasperated by the service they are receiving. It has deteriorated, but money is not the only factor; management and the way our hospitals are run have also to be considered.

I make a special plea. Many of my constituents work at Poole hospital as technical staff—they are members of the Manufacturing, Science and Finance union—and they have not been treated as well as some other national health service staff. Patients see a doctor when they need a test, but those tests are carried out by the technical staff. They receive a great deal of criticism when they get a test for cancer wrong or some scandal blows up, and many are not paid terribly well, even though they have degrees. They need a better reward and a better career structure if we are to achieve the back-up in our hospitals that will allow doctors, nurses and consultants to do their jobs properly.

Overall, I am glad that the economy has continued to grow, but it is a pity that the Government are still raising taxes, as many of my constituents will find them hard to pay. I look forward to hearing what my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway) has to say from the Front Bench.

9.29 pm

Mr. Richard Ottaway (Croydon, South): One needed to do no more than listen to today's opening speeches to get some feel for the contrasting approaches to the Budget. My hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) opened with flair and imagination. He repeated our party's full commitment to the national health service and said that we would match spending and expand the private sector. He drew attention to the scandalous report by Dame Rennie Fritchie, and he pointed out that the Government have said nothing on long-term care.

In complete contrast, the Secretary of State for Health continued where the Prime Minister had left off, with nothing but waffle and spin. They tried to reinvent the wheel. The Secretary of State was completely floored by the intervention of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), who asked him about performance and how the extra funding would be reallocated to health authorities. As my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) has just said, it is clear that this pledge has been introduced out of panic. The Secretary of State failed to recognise that it is not the amount that is being spent on the health service that is important, but how it is spent.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe, in his excellent speech, said that this was the strangest Budget that he had ever known. Many of us agree with him on that. He rightly drew attention to the fact that the Budget emanated from the "Breakfast with Frost" programme, when the Prime Minister blurted out that he was going to increase expenditure on the national health service to take it up to the European Union average. From the figures that were announced yesterday, it is clear that that will not be achieved. My right hon. and learned Friend also drew attention to the spending parameters, and pointed out that this announcement covered three years, yet performance will be reviewed year by year.

In the exchanges I had with the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr. Radice), he made it clear that he does not believe the Chancellor's figures showing that growth will continue year on year. By implication, he disagreed with the Chancellor about there being no more boom and bust. He is right to argue that the strong pound is hurting British trade.

We agree with the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Dr. Brand) that NICE is taking too long in its assessment of new drugs. The hon. Member for Hemsworth (Mr. Trickett) said that the Government's position on the coal industry was not entirely plausible—he was right to criticise them for that. We also agree with him that their position on TECs is lamentable.

In an excellent speech, my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) emphasised our solid support for the NHS, and he was right to query whether his local hospital was safe. He asked when the tax rewrite plan would be debated. He rightly brought up the issue of the simplification of the tax system, which I would have addressed if I had had more time. This Budget is not is simple. My right hon. Friend rightly drew attention to the continuing problem of IR35.

My hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton (Mr. Taylor) described this as Lord Winston's Budget, and that was aptly put. He also made constructive comments on the regulation of the housing market. The hon. Member for Bury, South (Mr. Lewis) admitted that there are problems with exchange rates. Curiously, he started his speech several feet further down the Bench and moved to the left during his contribution—he was almost over here by the time he had finished.

In a delightful little cameo speech, my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Sir R. Body) could not resist a reference to the euro, but rightly drew attention to the problems of smuggling and beer duty. My hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) drew attention to the Rowntree report and the fact that the gap between rich and poor is greater than ever. My hon. Friend the Member for Poole rightly said that this was the 9p up, 1p down Budget.

After the general election, the Government, with their huge majority, were confident, poised and ready to sweep all before them. They called their first Red Book

"Equipping Britain for our long-term future". They set out clearly in black and white their long-term tax objectives. I shall begin by measuring this Budget and its predecessors against those objectives.

The first thing the Government said was that they wanted to keep

the overall burden of tax as low as possible.

Well, that is out of the window. They went on to say that

how and what is taxed sends clear signals about the economic activities which governments believe should be encouraged and discouraged.

What signal does it send when they tax pension funds, so that Tesco says it cannot meet its pension obligations? Do they mean to discourage marriage when they eliminate the married couples allowance? What do they mean when they leave the typical working family £600 worse off as a result of their Budgets? Are these the values that they want to entrench in society?

But the verbiage in that initial policy statement continues. The Government say that

tax policy is based on clear principles. These are to encourage work, savings and investment and fairness . . . it must keep tax-payers compliance costs to a minimum . . . and attention must be paid to any implications for the United Kingdom's international competitiveness.

They have not done very well on that lot either. How are we doing? Savings are down; we have slipped from fourth to eighth in the international competitiveness league, and it is not necessary to look far for the reason. Compliance costs are rocketing, which is having a damaging effect on small businesses. The Budget provides very little help, apart from £50, which is utterly inadequate, given reports to the Inland Revenue about the cost of compliance to small firms.

One thing that this Budget is not—like its predecessors—is simple. Even *The Sun* says:

The Sun has given a whole-hearted welcome to three Brown Budgets only to find there was hidden bad news on taxes.

This time we're taking a leaf out of his book. We're being prudent.

We're giving this Budget the seven-day test. It may look different next week.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde illustrated that point.

Nor is the tax and benefit system simple. As my hon. Friend the Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts), the shadow Secretary of State for Social Security, said the other day,

Only a few experts can master the complexities of the elaborate tax and benefit schemes which the Treasury is designing. Social policy is becoming like nuclear physics.

Personal taxes are paid by individuals on their annual income, but means-tested benefits are paid to households for their current needs. Trying to merge them in tax credits has absurd and unpopular effects.

We already have the working families tax credit, which includes a child care credit. Next year we shall have a children's tax credit; after that we shall have an integrated child credit; and then we shall have an employment credit. Each will involve different rules of entitlement and different methods of means-testing.

I think we can conclude from what I have said that the Budget has failed every long-term test that the Government have set themselves; but, as usual, it is more about what the Chancellor did not say than about what he said. It is about what he said he would do, and what he did not do. The list is becoming glaringly obvious. The Chancellor did not end his war on the motorist; he raised fuel prices yet again. Britain has far the highest petrol and diesel taxes in Europe. Why should it cost £50 to fill a Mondeo in the United Kingdom, and only £14 in the United States? With the 2p-a-litre rise producing £715 million, but with only £280 million extra for transport, hypothecation is clearly out of the window. It is not surprising that the Deputy Prime Minister looked so fed up during the Chancellor's statement.

The Chancellor did not take the opportunity to end his assault on marriage. He is phasing out the married couples allowance, but we will get no child tax credit until next year. We have a new definition of the gap year. Not only is there no compensation for the phasing out of the married couples allowance; there is no recognition of marriage in the tax and benefit system, something that a future Conservative Government will recognise.

The Government failed to deal with the collapse in savings. They could not resist tinkering with, and abolishing, personal equity plans and tax-exempt special savings accounts, the most successful share-owning and savings schemes that the country has ever had. It is all very well for them to say they will extend the £7,000 for another year; PEPs and TESSAs combined would have allowed £11,000 per person. Given artificial caps of that kind, no wonder the savings ratio is collapsing.

But it is on the new taxes that the Chancellor lives up to his reputation as the stealth Chancellor. Did we hear any mention in the Budget of the new aggregate levy, which will hit the construction industry hard, and will hit first-time house buyers especially hard? Did we hear about changes to double taxation relief for corporations? Did we hear about the extra taxes on insurance companies and Lloyd's? Did we hear anything about the abolition of the approved profit-sharing scheme which will affect the employees of many of Britain's old economy firms? We have heard from Tesco employees how they feel about the erosion of their pension scheme by the Government. How does the Chancellor think others will feel about the abolition of their profit-sharing schemes?

Just when everyone is worrying about new stealth taxes, we have increases in the old stealth taxes on tobacco and stamp duty on share transactions. What is the Chancellor trying to achieve by increasing stamp duty on property? It will hit business. With house prices rising at 15 per cent. a year, a 0.5 per cent. increase in stamp duty will not make any difference to housing demand. It is a return to the old politics of envy: attacks on those who have made enough money to the benefit of the British economy but with no thanks from the Government.

What is there for manufacturing in the regions? Not a lot. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe said, while the Chancellor is saying that exchange rates are a consequence of interest rates set by the Bank of England, and Eddie George is saying that they are a matter for the Chancellor, Rover is going bust in the midlands—and the Chancellor calls it a Budget for enterprise.

There is nothing in the Budget to decrease the burden of £30 billion-worth of business tax over the Parliament. National insurance contributions are rocketing. Will the Paymaster General take the opportunity to explain why the costs of IR35 have been doubled by the Red Book:

[Mr. Richard Ottaway]

from £475 million in 1999 to £900 million this year? Nearly £1 billion out of the pockets of the self-employed is serious money. The brain drain could develop into a mass emigration.

There was nothing to resolve the current crisis of employer national insurance contributions on the exercise of share options. The Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce said in Committee that the Government would consult, so we had a novel situation: the first reannouncement, probably, of a consultation.

Probably the stealthiest tax of all is the miserly increase in personal allowances and tax bands of approximately 1.2 per cent. They may meet statutory requirements, but, when the Chancellor says that inflation is running at 2.2 per cent., the man in the street expects his bands and allowances to go up by the same amount. With thresholds and allowances going up by 1.2 per cent. and with earnings rising at 5 per cent., the tax burden is bound to grow. If ever there were a breach of the Prime Minister's undertaking not to raise taxes, that is it. It is a 9p up, 1p down Budget. It comes as no surprise that tonight's *Evening Standard* poll says that the Chancellor's Budget has received the worst reception of any of the four Budgets that he has delivered.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Alan Johnson): The poll is pretty good.

Mr. Ottaway: I suggest that the Minister looks at the figures in the poll.

There is a certain irony in the Government's stealth taxes of the past three years. We all know that the Chancellor has increased total taxes by more than £40 billion over the lifetime of the Parliament. We know that taxes have gone up on pension funds, cars, petrol, diesel, charities, mortgages, marriage, medical insurance, house buying, cigarettes, alcohol, insurance policies, savings, betting, employer benefits in kind, the self-employed and on retirement: £1,500 extra taxes per taxpayer, a rise in the overall tax burden of almost 2.5 per cent.

All that is now in the public domain, but how many people have noticed how regressive many of the taxes are for those on low incomes? Who would have thought that it would be a Labour Government who left the basic and higher rates untouched, but raised indirect taxes by such a level that they hurt most of all the people in their heartlands? The irony is that it should be a one-nation Conservative party that must articulate on behalf of and stand up for their people.

When those people realise that it is a Labour Government who are imposing those burdens on them, and that it is a one-nation Conservative party that is coming to their defence—a party that believes in one nation of rich and poor and equal and fair treatment for all—it is the sign of a Labour Government who have lost touch with their core electorate and of a Conservative party that speaks for the nation as a whole.

Dr. Fox: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. At the beginning of the debate, I pointed out that, in his statement, the Prime Minister had apparently unintentionally misled the House with one of the figures that he gave. Is not the convention that, when Ministers of the Crown mislead the House, they should return to the House and correct the matter as soon as possible? I have given Ministers several hours' notice of the matter, and the figure has been confirmed by the Library and by other independent sources. I am sure that it would be helpful to the House if the Paymaster General could confirm that the Prime Minister made a mistake and gave a misleading figure on the Government's health care expenditure for 2003–04.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I was not in the Chair when those earlier exchanges occurred. However, as the hon. Gentleman is well aware, figures can sometimes be a matter for debate. I have no doubt that Ministers have heard the point of order.

Mr. Fabricant: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am sorry to delay the Paymaster General's reply to the debate. You will know that a usual courtesy of the House is that Front Benchers who attend a debate's opening attend its conclusion. Have you received a message—no apology was made to the House—explaining why the Secretary of State for Health is not in the Chamber for the end of this debate?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I have received no such notice. However, whether Ministers attend the conclusion of debates is entirely a matter for them.

9.46 pm

The Paymaster General (Dawn Primarolo): The hon. Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway) concluded his speech by saying that the Conservative party is the one-nation party. However, as we have seen in our debates in the past two days, the Conservative party is incapable of speaking with one voice even in this Chamber. We have heard from Conservative Members some very interesting and varied, but contradictory, speeches on the Budget.

In the short time that is left, I shall try to answer some of the questions that have been asked in the debate. I apologise to hon. Members who spoke in the debate, but whom I may not be able to mention because of the shortage of time.

Yesterday's Budget was about building a stronger and fairer Britain. The Budget provides significant resources to improve key priority services, particularly for our schools and hospitals. It also takes further action to tackle child poverty, to support pensioners, to promote enterprise and work, and to protect the environment.

Many of the speeches in today's debate—which has followed the statements by my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Health—were on the national health service. Nevertheless, it is worth reminding the House now of the reaction to the Budget.

The Trades Union Congress described it as "a good Budget". It said:

> The strong economy meant the Chancellor could afford to be generous and he has been.

The Confederation of British Industry said:

> This is a positive Budget

for small and medium-sized enterprises.

The Institute of Directors—that well-known socialist enclave that always supports Labour Governments—said:

> It is not just the tax measures which are significant—welcome though they are—it is confirmation of the Government's belief in creating an enterprise culture.

Many hon. Members on both sides of the House made very thoughtful speeches today on the national health service. There was general agreement in the House in welcoming the extra resources for the NHS. Hon. Members concentrated also on the issue of improving quality, and particularly on the issue of the dramatic variations in cost and performance across the NHS. They spoke also about the action that needs to be taken, in partnership with those who plan and work in the NHS, to build success in the service. Opposition Members were surprised that my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Health should use the word "partnership". I remind Opposition Members that partnership is necessary because the health service over which they presided was divided through secrecy and competition, by the use of the internal market.

The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) made an interesting speech. I was especially interested when he said that health was always his priority as Chancellor, but that real spending on health fell during that time. I was pleased to hear him welcoming the statements made today.

Mr. Kenneth Clarke: I wish to react to a somewhat startling assertion. I do not think that real spending on the national health service has fallen at any time for the past quarter of a century. The last time that spending fell was in 1976.

Dawn Primarolo: I would not wish to pick a fight directly with the right hon. and learned Gentleman, but I would ever so gently point out to him that the real terms annual growth in national health service expenditure in England in 1996–97 was minus 0.1 per cent. By 1998–99, that had risen to 2.3 per cent. He will find, on closer scrutiny of the figures, that his first assertion was right.

The right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) and several others raised the issue of IR35 and service companies, and I shall put one or two facts clearly on the record. In the tax system, rules govern whether one may designate oneself as self-employed or whether one counts under the PAYE definitions. The category in which a worker falls dictates the reliefs and tax that need to be paid. No one—including consultants in service companies—is allowed to choose their category. People may wish to be self-employed, but that is determined by the terms and conditions of their contracts.

IR35 deals with the massive avoidance of national insurance and a considerable amount of tax in which some of those service companies have engaged. It does not impose a new tax: it merely requires them to pay tax in the same way that millions of other taxpayers—companies, the self-employed and individuals on PAYE—pay tax. It is suggested that such consultants will form a mass exodus, but that does not bear scrutiny because other countries have similar mechanisms to those that we are introducing to the UK system. In fact, I have been amused by the postcards that I have been sent by rather silly consultants from the countries in which they claim they have settled because the tax regime is easier. I am disappointed that they do not give me a reply address, because then I could write back to them to explain how the tax system of Germany or the USA, for example, requires people to pay their fair level of tax.

My hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Mr. Blizzard) and several other hon. Members referred to the construction industry scheme. I think that the right hon. Member for Fylde will have some sympathy with me on that, although I do not wish to try to tie him in to any criticisms that have been made. The construction industry scheme was designed under the previous Government to deal with the specific problem of tax avoidance that was occurring in that industry. All of the consultation about what the new scheme should look like was conducted under the previous Government. Questions were raised about why the scheme did not work and some Opposition Members said that the Government had been warned. However, the Government were not warned until the scheme had been introduced. I am glad that hon. Members welcome the changes that we are making.

There was considerable discussion of our transport policies and whether the Budget was sympathetic to motorists. By chance, this morning I met representatives of the Automobile Association who told me that they very much welcomed the Budget. In fact, they told my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury that it was the first Budget in nearly 10 years that the AA had welcomed. That takes the shine off some of the more unreasonable points made by Opposition Members.

The hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Mr. Taylor) made an extremely thoughtful speech—I invite him to come and join us. He was quite right to say that we need confidence in our national health service and that people are entitled to know that they can get treatment when they need it. As he said, there have been difficulties in respect of NHS care and the quality of care declined under the previous Government. He said that there was a shift towards private medical insurance at the time because people lacked confidence in the national health service. I am sure that all my right hon. and hon. Friends agree that confidence in the national health service is also about the challenge of providing better quality care. I took particular note of the hon. Gentleman's cautionary tales about the Inland Revenue, which really is quite friendly. It only requires Ministers who know what they are driving through.

In conclusion, let me turn to the points made by the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Sir R. Body) about smuggling. He concentrated on beer smuggling, but I am sure that he is aware that the problem is much wider. Smuggling systematically challenges our health policy and spreads criminal activity throughout our communities. Today the Government announced expenditure of an additional £209 million over three years on Customs and Excise, employing nearly 1,000 extra customs officers at ports and inland. That is in addition to our commitment to increase penalties, provide better equipment and X-ray machines and develop a strategy to disrupt inland activities. The hon. Gentleman will welcome the fact that we can now employ extra staff to deliver on that commitment.

[Dawn Primarolo]

The Budget that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor presented to the House yesterday was based on clear visions and basic sensible principles that Conservative Members seem unable to understand. Economic efficiency and success are central to our strategy. By building a platform of stability we also build a platform for social progress, as economic efficiency and social progress go hand in hand. Conservative Members never understood that and they have demonstrated that they still do not understand it.

We continue in our aim to deal with unemployment and head towards our goal of full employment. In contrast, the Tories said that unemployment was a price worth paying. The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe even said that he had had to provide figures on unemployment because of the problems that had occurred.

We are dealing with child poverty and pensioner poverty and investing in the national health service. We have presented a Budget for all the people which is based on stability, public services, enterprise and investment to make sure that our economy grows and people have secure employment.

Debate adjourned.—*[Mr. Clelland.]*

Debate to be resumed tomorrow.

PETITIONS

Benefit Payments

10 pm

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): I am pleased to present a petition signed by some 25,000 Cornish people—even more than threatened to march on behalf of my Cornish ancestor Bishop Trelawney. The signatures come from residents in my constituency of North Cornwall, and from residents of the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member fof St. Ives (Mr. George). My hon. Friend is a member of a parliamentary deputation to Canada and is unable to be here today.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of North Cornwall, and the petition of residents of the St. Ives constituency, declare that the proposed changes in the method of benefits payments will have a detrimental effect on the post office network in Cornwall and Devon.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Secretary of State for Social Security to reconsider these proposals.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

To lie upon the Table.

10.1 pm

Mr. Matthew Taylor (Truro and St. Austell): I am very pleased to present this petition from residents of Truro and St. Austell, expressing their concern about changes in the method of benefit payments. The changes will prevent people from collecting their pensions at post offices, with the result that the post office network in my constituency is under severe threat. The petitioners request the House of Commons to urge the Secretary of State for Social Security to reconsider the proposals.

Some 12,000 of my constituents have signed the petition. It was collected across the breadth of my constituency, not by political activists but by ordinary people, and especially by those who run the post offices, who are extremely concerned about the loss of the service to the general public and, of course, about the potential loss of their own livelihoods.

To lie upon the Table.

Motor Components Industry

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

10.2 pm

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): I am pleased to have the opportunity to hold this Adjournment debate on the Government's policy on the motor components industry, and I am glad that my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) is able to attend. Although the normal conventions and the restricted time available mean that he will not speak in the debate, my hon. Friend is concerned about the principal issue—the redundancies earlier this month at TRW—that has caused me to raise the matter. I shall speak about TRW first, and then about the industry in general.

Although I am sorry to have dragged my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary here this evening, I am sure that on his desk there is a letter from Burnley borough council, asking him to meet a joint delegation to discuss the redundancies. The council is worried about the effect that those redundnacies will have, and about the loss of objective 2 status, in Burnley and in most of north-east Lancashire.

Most people in Burnley still know the firm now called TRW as Lucas. During the war, the Lucas firm was relocated to Burnley, which was a safe industrial area. In only a few years, it had become a major employer: it ran several different factories and employed several thousand people in the separate sections devoted to aerospace and to motor components. The name changed first to LucasVarity and then, in May last year, TRW Automotive Electronics, whose headquarters are in Farmington Hills, Michigan, acquired the factory.

I am sad to say that there is almost nothing left of what used to be a major local employer, as the last of the aerospace factories was sold last year. When I became the Member for Burnley, that company was the largest employer in the constituency, with several thousand employees working in the town.

Earlier this month I received a notification from TRW that it was making 450 redundancies. The notice was sent to my Burnley office by hand at the moment that the company was making the announcement on 2 March. It was faxed to my office at the House at the very moment when I was asking a question in the Chamber about the aerospace industry. Little did I know that I would rise a few minutes later during business questions to ask for an urgent debate on the issue. That intervention resulted in this debate.

TRW's press release on 2 March was accompanied by a letter to me saying that it had announced that it would reduce

the number of its employees by about 450 people as part of a major business change to make the plant at Burnley profitable.

The letter continues:

"Our intent is to build a solid and profitable foundation for the Burnley facility," said Gerd Kleinert, vice president and general manager, Body Control Systems, TRW Automotive Electronics. "Like our competitors, we are facing manufacturing overcapacity and feeling pressure from increasing customer demand for lower prices. We shall be transferring some products and processes to other plants to better utilize our total manufacturing capacity and lower costs at Burnley."

It must be noted that work is available and that the company is transferring work from the order book elsewhere. The letter continues:

"We appreciate the efforts of our employees at Burnley," said Kleinert. "The reduction certainly is not a reflection on them. TRW will do what it can to help them with the transition."

That sounds very nice but the work force does not think too kindly of that comment.

I immediately arranged a meeting with TRW. Peter Bagshaw, the personnel manager, arranged it for the following morning, Friday 3 March. Brian Nadel, the director of operations, was present at the meeting, plus union and council representatives. We went through the situation and discussed several options.

The following day was the regional conference of the north-west regional Labour party. The GMB, my union, moved an emergency motion, which was carried unanimously. That was at Southport on Saturday 4 March. The conference condemned overseas firms buying United Kingdom plants and order books and transferring that work to other places. It urged similar protection for our manufacturing industrial base to that which is given in France and Germany.

It must be said that the unions on site, the GMB and the Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union, remain committed, understandably, to the principal objective, which I would also support, of trying to eliminate the need for the redundancies, or at worst reducing the number of redundancies and saving the maximum possible number of jobs.

A letter to me from Burnley council on 6 March reads:

As you know Burnley is heavily dependent on manufacturing and many of our largest employers are "branch plants" of multinational organisations. We have a number of employers manufacturing components for the motor industry. They are all reporting severe pressure due to the high value of sterling especially against other European currencies, high and growing levels of interest rates and intense price competition. Whilst we have worked hard to alleviate the consequences of previous job losses, by supporting the creation of new businesses and the expansion of others, redundancies on the scale announced by TRW have a major adverse effect on the entire town.

A press release was issued after the meeting that was held on the Friday. It reads:

Councillor Tony Harrison, Chair of the Council's Economic and Property Committee, said "It is clearly not the fault of a loyal and hard working work force, although some of them will have to pay the ultimate price."

TRW supplies a number of car manufacturers and assemblers both in the UK and in Europe. We need to have a meeting because commercial confidentiality means that it would not be possible or appropriate to debate some of the points at issue in an Adjournment debate.

The switch gear that TRW makes is highly sophisticated. Switch gears on cars now operate so many things. They are not simple systems; they are expensive and complex, and TRW, formerly Lucas, has considerable expertise in manufacturing them.

The value of the pound is a problem, as is the fact that we have not joined the euro. Companies can go to other manufacturers to source the components elsewhere. It is a highly competitive industry and there is overcapacity. All of us who watched television at the weekend following the announcement about Rover last week—Rover is one of TRW's customers—will know about its massive overcapacity and the stocks of cars to be sold.

[Mr. Peter L. Pike]

We have to remember that problems selling cars have ramifications further along the line for the manufacturers of the components.

Enterprise, a company formerly known as Lancashire Enterprise, which does a good job in the area and outside in helping to secure jobs, wrote to me on 21 March, saying:

> It is essential to recognise and accept that the automotive market is now, most definitely, global with competitiveness as the number one priority . . . The strong pound and the United Kingdom being outside the "Eurozone" have been promoted by BMW as some of the reasons for pulling out of Rover. Other manufacturers in the automotive sector . . . also reflect these views.

This is not just about TRW, although that is the immediate problem. I have other car component manufacturers in my constituency. TRW has 949 employees, and 450 of them are under threat of redundancy. Michelin, which makes heavy vehicle tyres, has 545 workers. Tenneco Walker, which makes exhaust systems, has 210 employees and Viktor Achter has 600 workers. In a letter to me of 20 March, Burnley borough council said:

> Despite doing everything possible for themselves, these firms face a difficult future. This is in the context of local wage levels being 83 per cent. of national levels.

That is an important, because a lot of people are employed in manufacturing in the area—the percentage is particularly high in Pendle, Burnley and Hyndburn. We are not a high wage area, however. Many of our people benefited from the introduction of the national minimum wage, and TRW certainly paid wages above the national minimum wage. It paid very reasonable and respectable wages but, overall, we are not a high wage area so we are not pricing ourselves out of the market. The letter from Burnley borough council continues:

> If employment is going abroad from this area, it is difficult to see the rest of the country competing successfully.
>
> The only way we can compete more successfully is if interest rates were lowered to European levels, the pound's strength tackled to help exporters or Britain joins the Euro. Additionally, more assistance could possibly be given to support firms' investment in higher levels of automation and leading edge technologies to counter the attraction of moving work to areas of low labour costs.
>
> I have to say that as things stand at present, it is very difficult to see a move away from the accelerating trend towards Britain exporting lower skilled employment to low wage areas.

That letter is signed by Hugh Simpson, head of economic development. So this is not a problem just for TRW but for industry in general, and the motor components industry in particular.

The East Lancashire chamber of commerce says in a letter of 21 March:

> The news from Rover is plainly and simply bad for the area. We have companies entirely dependent now on supplying Rover cars and others whose major customers are Land Rover. After the split, some companies will presumably continue to supply those models being retained by BMW (until production moves overseas?), some being made on reduced scale by Alchemy and some in the Land Rover Ford compact. What supply chain assurances are there? Can the Government help obtain these?
>
> Will the temptation be for supply chain networks to be compressed into the South Midlands and South given the reduced overall demand, and the logistical disadvantage?

The Minister will know that MPs representing north-west constituencies—indeed, people throughout the whole region—are extremely disappointed that investment in the synchrotron development went to Oxford instead of to Daresbury. That went down badly in the north-west.

Discussions between unions and management are now under way at TRW about which lines are to go and when; and about comparative costs and labour rates. The company is already considering where much of the work will go—comparing the wage rates of more than £60 a week in the Czech Republic with those in Slovakia where they are slightly more than £45 a week. Slovakia is likely to be biggest gainer. Rates in Russia are even less.

Those matters worry people who work in the industry. They ask where the line should be drawn and how we are to save jobs in our industry. The workers and the unions contacted me when they knew that I would be initiating this debate. They asked me a series of simple but important questions.

Will the Government do more to ensure that sourcing is from within the UK wherever possible, within EU rules? Do the Government accept that the high exchange rate and our non-membership of the euro are severe problems for the manufacturing sector?

At times, France and Germany must be laughing all the way to the bank, because their euro rate is fixed, while most of our exporting companies have to fix their euro prices at the beginning of the year and take a risk about what will happen. Europe is our biggest market. In many cases, we are Europe's biggest market. European countries can sell cheaply to us, but we have to sell dear to them because of the present balance in exchange rates. The workers and the unions ask what can be done to remedy those problems as soon as possible.

The regional development agencies introduced regional supply offices to encourage large companies to source locally. Both Enterprise and the East Lancashire chamber of commerce already encourage that. The TRW workers ask why the RDAs cannot do more in that regard.

The workers at TRW have every sympathy with the Rover workers. The effect on individual workers at TRW is just the same—redundancy is redundancy whether it affects thousands or hundreds. The proportionate impact of 450 redundancies in Burnley and the ripple effect over a small area is not so different from the impact on the west midlands of the BMW-Rover decision. Will Burnley receive a proportionate response from the Government to repel that blow?

I hope that we receive some positive answers from my hon. Friend the Minister and that we shall do everything possible to assure those people that the Government are concerned about their position and about the motor components industry.

10.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Alan Johnson): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike) on initiating the debate and thank my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) for being in the Chamber. I know that the issue is extremely important to their constituents—as it is to the Government.

I express my regret at the announcement of the job losses in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley and our concern for the men and women who face the prospect of redundancy. It is extremely difficult for the Government to intervene when a company has come to a final commercial decision.

Officials from the Government office of the north-west and the East Lancashire training and enterprise council are keen to discuss with TRW whether we can help in any

way to enhance the future security of employment on the site, and what packages of assistance might be available to those who are made redundant. The Employment Service is liaising with the company to provide advice and to help employees who may be leaving. Burnley borough council has also been in close contact to offer whatever help it can. I shall say something more about that at the end of my speech.

Recent events have helped to remind us—if we needed reminding—just how important to the United Kingdom's economy the car and components manufacturing sectors of industry are. They employ more than 200,000 people and, in 1998, they accounted for more than 11 per cent. of total UK exports. Altogether, UK vehicle and component manufacturing has an estimated turnover of £40 billion—nearly 5.5 per cent. of gross domestic product.

As in all areas of manufacturing, the pace of innovation and technological change is quickening. Concerns over the environment and congestion require cleaner and more fuel-efficient vehicles and greater recyclability. New car models are being introduced more frequently and more quickly than ever before, and the industry is also at the forefront of much technological research. Lightweight materials, safety systems, telematics and fuel cells are but a few examples and the industry leads the manufacturing sector in developing and adopting lean manufacturing techniques, such as continuous improvement and just-in-sequence supply.

Clearly, in such a sector, companies have to be world class to survive. For the vehicle manufacturers, that has meant consolidation to take advantage of the economies of scale that can be achieved through having a global reach. It means having sufficient resources to develop and apply the new technologies of tomorrow and to introduce new models that will have a shorter lifespan in the marketplace than ever before. Last but not least, it means having a healthy and competitive supply chain.

The performance of any vehicle manufacturer is critically dependent on its suppliers. Some 70 per cent. of vehicle manufacturers' costs are accounted for by bought-in materials and parts. The efficiency of their assembly lines is dependent on having the parts delivered on time and to the right quality. That means that the same competitive pressures will be passed down to suppliers, too. Vehicle manufacturers are increasingly looking for suppliers that have global reach and are able to deliver whole sub-assemblies or systems with state-of-the-art technology, excellent production quality and competitive prices. In effect, they are looking for suppliers to take on some of the risks of developing new models.

As a result, vehicle manufacturers have been taking steps to reduce the number of suppliers that they deal with and to secure the economies of scale and technological innovation that can be offered by global suppliers. In turn, that presents the remainder of the supply base with greater challenges and burdens. I know that that process is resulting in difficult decisions. However, it also offers immense opportunities. Smaller suppliers may decide that their future lies in supplying larger global suppliers rather than continuing to supply direct themselves to vehicle manufacturers. Others may decide that their future lies as part of a larger global supplier. Many have chosen those routes already.

Any supplier—large or small, first or third tier—will have to be globally competitive if it is to have any chance in the future. Companies in the UK automotive chain have to be able to compete with the best. A lot has already been done, and much has been achieved. International comparisons on stock levels—a key measure of lean manufacturing—shows that the UK's automotive component industry compares well with the United States and very favourably with Europe. It is testimony to the increasing competitiveness of the UK supply base.

However, both we and the industry recognise that there is more to do, and we are helping to do it. We are actively supporting the industry's efforts to improve its competitiveness through the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders industry forum. It is a unique initiative that aims to develop and sustain world-leading competitiveness in the UK-based vehicle and components industry, through the development and adoption of world-class manufacturing improvement activity and training. Indeed, the initiative is being replicated in other manufacturing industries.

The Department of Trade and Industry has been closely involved with the project from the start and is providing more than £6.5 million of support. The results of that initiative are astonishing and have won praise from within the sector and outside. Right-first-time quality is up by two thirds, productivity has doubled and stock turns have more than trebled. However, that is just a beginning. The challenge is now to sustain and spread such improvements more widely.

We have also supported work by Cranfield university to improve the product development and introduction process among automotive suppliers and to help them design and manufacture new products more quickly and more cheaply.

The work is being reinforced by excellent initiatives at regional level. In the west midlands, the accelerate programme offers an integrated programme of training and support to small and medium-sized enterprises and direct suppliers in the automotive component sector to deliver measurable improvements in their manufacturing performance. The Longbridge taskforce will, as part of its work, consider what further assistance might be given to the automotive suppliers in that region to improve their competitiveness.

Competitiveness is also increasingly dependent on suppliers' ability to offer vehicle manufacturers leading-edge technology and innovation. That is why the Government are supporting the highly successful DTI-led foresight vehicle LINK programme, which has provided more than £12 million of public funds for strategic collaborative research between industry and the science base. That is helping UK-based companies to develop the materials and technologies for tomorrow's vehicles—vehicles that are clean, efficient and lightweight and that integrate information and communication systems fully into the road transport system.

The DTI has also been developing a programme to help suppliers locate new customers in the UK and abroad, taking a strategic approach to markets and responding to customer needs. In addition, the Department of Trade and Industry helps UK companies to participate in trade fairs and missions overseas. Most recently, we supported a large and highly successful contingent of UK companies at the US Society of Automotive Engineers show in Detroit and we will be supporting a group of UK companies at the Automechanika exhibition in Frankfurt in September.

[Mr. Alan Johnson]

We are also supporting major export campaigns in Mexico and central Europe and have on-going initiatives in India and China. All this represents a significant investment by the Government in spreading best practice and in helping UK-based companies develop and exploit new technologies. One of the most significant ways in which we have been able to support the motor components industry is to ensure the continued development of the vehicle industry in the UK, which provides the customer base for much of the UK's production of components.

I shall set some of the understandable and eloquent remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley in context. There are seven major car manufacturers in the UK—more than any other country in Europe. The majority of suppliers to the UK-based car manufacturers are based here. Ford's European operations source £2 billion a year from the UK, while Vauxhall adds a further £900 million. The Japanese vehicle manufacturers are estimated to be worth more than £2 billion to the UK components industry.

Since 1997—since the general election—more than £2.4 billion of new, additional investment has been won by the vehicle manufacturers in the UK. That investment has created more than 8,750 new jobs. To take some examples, Honda announced a £500 million investment to add a third model at Swindon. Peugeot and Vauxhall both added third shifts at their plants in Ryton and Ellesmere Port. There were two developments last year at Nissan in relation to production of the Almera and the Primera. Car exports last year of 1.1 million are the highest ever. UK car sales in 1999 are the highest on record and UK car production is the highest since 1972.

This investment and job creation is not simply in vehicle production but in research, testing and development. In a globalising industry, as my hon. Friend rightly said, this sort of high-quality investment helps to underpin the presence of the manufacturing operations in Britain and provides opportunities for component suppliers to work with vehicle assemblers on new products involving new technology.

Last year General Motors announced the establishment of its new light vehicle R and D centre at Millbrook with 100 new jobs. Ford has continued to invest in its R and D operations at Dunton and opened £80 million worth of new facilities in September 1999, on top of the £303 million invested in 1998.

Inward investment by automotive component companies has continued as well. Since April last year, 28 automotive component companies have decided to invest in the UK, with £128 million of capital expenditure bringing 1,700 new jobs and safeguarding a further 4,700.

My hon. Friend mentioned the euro. As we have made clear, we believe that that was not the primary cause of the events at BMW. What matters to businesses in this country is stability, and we believe that we are delivering that. Companies want sound public finances and low inflation. We understand the concerns of businesses, especially manufacturers trading with Europe, about the strength of the pound, but we are determined to take a long-term view. It would be wrong to let short-term pressures lead us back to the policies that have produced instability in the past.

I emphasise the importance that the Government attach to maintaining a strong automotive industry in the United Kingdom. We do not underestimate the challenges: global competition has never been stronger; vehicle manufacturers insist on the highest standards of performance from their suppliers; and the industry as a whole faces a challenging environmental and safety agenda.

My office is searching for a date early next week when I can meet my hon. Friend and his colleagues—I believe Tuesday is the preferred day, but we are checking that with my hon. Friend. At that meeting, we shall discuss all the ways we can help in Burnley, just as we are trying to help in the west midlands. We can also discuss fully the issues and concerns that he has eloquently raised on behalf of his constituents, especially those directly affected by the recent announcements at TRW.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-nine minutes to Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Thursday 23 March 2000

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

LONDON LOCAL AUTHORITIES BILL *[LORDS] (BY ORDER)*

Order for consideration, as amended, read.

To be considered on Thursday 30 March.

KENT COUNTY COUNCIL BILL *[LORDS] (BY ORDER)*

MEDWAY COUNCIL BILL *[LORDS] (BY ORDER)*

MERSEY TUNNELS BILL *(BY ORDER)*

Orders for Second Reading read.

To be read a Second time on Thursday 30 March.

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Jobseekers (Internet)

1. **Dr. Vincent Cable** (Twickenham): If he will make a statement on the Government's proposal to assist jobseekers through the internet. [114596]

The Minister for Employment, Welfare to Work and Equal Opportunities (Ms Tessa Jowell): As part of a major modernisation programme of the Employment Service, a national job bank will be available on the internet from autumn 2000. It will have more than 300,000 Employment Service vacancies and jobs from the private sector and other European countries. Jobseekers will be able to search for jobs on the internet at home or elsewhere, and, through a new learning and work bank internet portal, obtain information on learning, training, jobs and careers.

Dr. Cable: I welcome what, at first sight, seems to be a useful initiative. For clarification, may I ask, first, who will pay the internet access charges—will it be free to jobseekers? Secondly, what relation does the proposal have to earlier initiatives to equip all jobseekers with pagers and with special advisers? Does it supplant those services, or is it wholly additional to them?

Ms Jowell: The intention is to have 10,000 kiosks by which the learning and jobs bank can be accessed in every jobcentre across the country. We are having discussions on locating kiosks—and, therefore, access to the internet job site—in pubs, cafes, restaurants and other places where access to them will be maximised. When people use the internet site in jobcentres, the service will be available free of charge. When the service is used in the privacy of their homes, they will be liable for charges.

On the hon. Gentleman's second question about pagers and mobile telephones, it is important to understand that the jobs bank, pagers and mobile telephones are all part of a range of services being put in place to ensure that we speed the pace of communication on vacancies, and speed the process by which unemployed people get into jobs. Many of those initiatives will be delivered in the 50 new employment zones unveiled two weeks ago by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State.

Ms Rosie Winterton (Doncaster, Central): As my right hon. Friend said, it is extremely important that access to the internet should be made as easy as possible. I hope that she will agree that that applies particularly to areas where there have long been high rates of unemployment. She mentioned various outlets where internet access could be found, but is there not also a role for schools—particularly schools that are applying for specialist technology status—in providing such access? Often, those schools are based in the community, thus allowing good access. What help and advice can she give on the role that schools can play in providing such access?

Ms Jowell: As my hon. Friend will be aware, we have a major programme of investment in information technology in schools to ensure that children, from the earliest years of their education, are able to learn and use the opportunities afforded by the internet. She also makes an important point about the need to ensure that we do not create a new faultline in our society, between the information haves and the information have-nots. That is why, later this year, we shall be launching a programme of 700 IT learning centres in some of the most deprived parts of the country, to ensure that those who are at risk of being excluded from the IT revolution have the opportunity to seize its benefits for themselves.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): May I seek some assurances from the Minister that the 10,000 booths will be spread across the country, so that rural areas also will receive their fair share of them? Will the booths have access only to the Employment Service's internet site, or will people be able to access all the private jobcentre sites that are now available?

Ms Jowell: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. Of course we intend to ensure that this innovation provides additional information and help to people living in rural communities. I can confirm that the facility that I have described will be available in jobcentres serving rural communities. New technology will also offer further benefits to people living in scattered communities. We are in discussion about ensuring that those who have access to the learning and work bank have access also to the increasing number of high-quality employment sites that have been provided by private sector providers on the internet.

Further Education Funding

2. **Mrs. Betty Williams** (Conwy): If he will make a statement on the funding of further education. [114597]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. Malcolm Wicks): Further education is central to the Government's economic strategy given the importance of skills, and is central to our social purpose in terms of fairness. Only last November, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced an increase of £365 million for further education in 2001-02—the biggest ever investment in further education.

Mrs. Williams: I thank the Minister for that reply. Does he agree that young people from poor homes need extra money in order to stay at college? Will he tell the House how much money will be spent this year to expand the education maintenance allowance to support the campaign to encourage young people to stay in education?

Mr. Wicks: I am pleased to confirm that £53 million will be spent this year to expand education maintenance allowances because of our determination to ensure that young people stay in education. That, together with our other policies such as the connection strategy to bring about a youth support service, the new deal and modern apprenticeships, show our determination to ensure that young people across the country are encouraged to be well motivated, well educated and well trained.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): The Minister said that the Government's policy on the funding of further education is "central to our social purpose in terms of fairness." How can it possibly be fair for English students not to receive free tuition whereas their Scottish and European Union counterparts in Scottish universities will do so? Is not the Government's policy central to their purpose of keeping together their creaking coalition in Scotland, and nothing to do with fairness or academic good sense, since people will go to the university with cheap student fees rather than one which best suits their specialism?

Mr. Wicks: The original question was about further education, which is sometimes confused with higher education. The number of young people going to university is increasing year by year and we have a fair funding system, which means that quality and quantity march together. Under the previous Conservative Government, quality suffered in universities and funding per student declined. We are maintaining standards—indeed, we are pushing up standards—while enabling more of our young people to go to university. That has to be the right approach.

Mr. Tom Clarke (Coatbridge and Chryston): Is my hon. Friend aware that, on the subject of further education, to which the question relates, many people believe that resources for special needs students for subjects such as horticulture, hairdressing and personal hygiene are important, but so is access to core subjects such as computer literacy? Will my hon. Friend encourage all those concerned to make access available to those courses, and that includes physical access to the buildings involved.

Mr. Wicks: The new legislation is clear about our determination to enable those with special needs and physical difficulties to have full access to our education sector, and that is absolutely right. Our further education colleges do a splendid job in enabling a number of young people and older people with difficulties to gain access to first-class education. I should like to take this opportunity to applaud the work in our college system to enable that fairness agenda to be developed.

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): The Minister's written answers are sometimes, perhaps unintentionally, revealing. In the light of that, will he explain two things? First, during the last three years of the Conservative Government, as his written answers reveal, enrolments in further education rose from 3 million to over 4 million, but in the first three years of a Labour Government they have stagnated at best, and, in fact, slightly declined. Given that, how on earth will he fulfil his stated target of enrolling an extra 700,000 students in further education within the next two years?

Secondly, will he explain how that process is to be helped by the blatantly missed targets on individual learning accounts? Those were due to appear nationally in April this year, but the Government have so far failed even to establish the public-private partnership to service and administer them?

Mr. Wicks: As with higher education, we are concerned not just to increase the numbers entering further education colleges, but to improve standards and quality. Under the Conservative Government, there was a scandal around franchising involving many colleges. In one case, to boost numbers, a college claimed to be educating students who were, in fact, being educated in Scotland. The Conservatives should hang their heads in shame about the franchising scandal. They created the mess and we have cleared it up. We are determined to boost student numbers in further education while maintaining and improving standards. That is our agenda and we are sticking to it.

New Deal (Sanctions Regime)

3. **Mr. Tony McWalter** (Hemel Hempstead): What steps he has taken to tighten the sanctions regime for violation of new deal option obligations. [114599]

The Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. David Blunkett): With the exception of those who fall into the vulnerable groups, we have, from 6 March, introduced a new 26-week sanction for the small minority of young people who repeatedly refuse to take up or comply with the options available to them. That is fair to the hundreds of thousands of young people who have taken up the option and to taxpayers. That will be complemented by further moves, as announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor, in the light of Lord Grabiner's report.

Mr. McWalter: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. Is he aware that a trickle of people are starting to

come to Members' surgeries, some of them with fluctuating medical conditions, who feel that the mechanisms by which they can make their case are less than adequate? Will he ensure that those dealing with these matters are sensitive to such cases?

Mr. Blunkett: It is worth reinforcing the point that those who are subject to the new deal have been on jobseeker's allowance and have been available and declared themselves ready for work. Special advisers treat them with great care in ascertaining their medical condition to ensure that those in vulnerable groups are not included in the further sanctions that I have mentioned. Behaviour such as unjustified absence, refusal to attend a new deal option, leaving the option without agreement or serious misconduct is subject to the sanctions. Being ill, spasmodically or otherwise, is not.

Mr. Richard Allan (Sheffield, Hallam): I am sure that the Secretary of State agrees that the objective should, whenever possible, be to stop options breaking down so that sanctions do not have to be applied. Is he aware of feedback from some of the option providers who feel that people are sometimes placed inappropriately because of the pressure on the Employment Service to get the numbers through? Will he assure the House that as we bring the Benefits Agency and the Employment Service together and spread the new deal across the full age range, he will not set the targets in such a way that they take precedence over finding the right option for each individual going through the gateway?

Mr. Blunkett: First, there is no evidence that that is happening. Secondly, the special adviser service is designed to tailor the option that young people or those over 25 take to meet their particular needs. If the hon. Gentleman can produce evidence to the contrary, my right hon. Friend the Minister for Employment, Welfare to Work and Equal Opportunities and I will be happy to take it up. We are taking further steps with employers, including announcements to be made shortly on the intensification of the gateway period and the necessary support that will be available to ensure that people are placed in the right option at the right time to meet their particular needs.

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead): On 12 January, the Prime Minister boasted in the House that 170,000 young people had found work as a result of the new deal. In a press release last month on the latest figures, the Minister for Employment, Welfare to Work and Equal Opportunities claimed that 185,000 had found work through the new deal. According to the Government's Red Book, only half those jobs can be claimed as a direct result of the new deal. Are not the Government's continuing extravagant claims for the success of the new deal just another example of their fiddling the figures? When will the Secretary of State and his right hon. Friends stop spinning, start telling us the reality of the new deal and accept the verdict of the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) that it is not delivering?

Mr. Blunkett: Even on the hon. Lady's definition, the new deal is obviously delivering. It is delivering to those who have been unemployed for more than six months and are under 25. It will deliver and has been delivering to those who have been unemployed for 18 months or more and are over 25, who have suffered long-term unemployment and would have continued to do so under the previous Government. Without the new deal, without training programmes and without the intensive work that is undertaken in advising those young people, there is no evidence that they would have moved quickly into work. We know that there has been a 70 per cent. reduction in youth unemployment. We know also that 800,000 more men and women have a job now than when we came into office in May 1997. Further, we know that Conservative Members would do nothing for those who faced long-term unemployment until we were elected.

Classroom Skills

4. **Valerie Davey** (Bristol, West): What further encouragement by way of pay awards and training the Government will offer to develop further teachers' classroom skills in addition to the pay threshold. [114600]

The Minister for School Standards (Ms Estelle Morris): Regular performance reviews will inform professional development. Outstanding teachers will be able to gain two points a year on the main pay spine. Teachers above the threshold will be eligible for further performance points, at the discretion of the governing body, for sustained and substantial improvement. We are also developing an awards scheme for excellent and improving schools and a new national strategy for continuous professional development.

Valerie Davey: I thank my right hon. Friend for that positive response. Will she tell the House approximately how many experienced teachers are able to apply to go through the threshold and would potentially benefit from the awards that she has outlined?

Ms Morris: Slightly fewer than 240,000 teachers are stuck at point 9 on the salary scale. All those teachers would be eligible for threshold assessment this summer. If they pass—we have always said that over time we expect the majority of eligible teachers to pass—they will receive an immediate salary increase of £2,000 and access to a further pay spine, where performance points will be available to them for good classroom teaching, rather than taking on management responsibilities. For the first time in the pay structure for teachers, good classroom teaching itself will be recognised and rewarded. Our best teachers will no longer have to leave the classroom to take on administrative responsibilities to receive an increase in their salary.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): Is the Minister aware that schools in Trafford will not be able to afford to give additional encouragement to teachers, which they may want to do, because the Labour council has refused to give any funding to the schools to implement the Government's post-16 curriculum changes? Given that the Government said that the scheme would cost £35 million a year nationally, and that Trafford schools say that the cost will be £400,000 a year for them, how can they be expected to implement the changes without the funding being passed on to them?

Ms Morris: I have never heard anything so ridiculous in my life. The hon. Gentleman is a regular attender of

education debates and he knows that the money will come directly from Government after the assessment of teachers has been made. It is important that we give a clear message to teachers that if they apply for the threshold and are successful, they will receive the £2,000 increase. It is nothing to do with the money that is now in the school budget. It is extra money—an extra £2,000 per teacher—that will come from the Government. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman would have taken the opportunity to recognise that the schools in his constituency will receive their fair share of the money announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer on Tuesday. That, as well as the £2,000 that will be paid out to successful teachers, means that schools throughout Trafford will have more money next year than they ever had under the Conservative Government.

School Sport

5. **Mr. Vernon Coaker** (Gedling): What further plans he has to encourage sport in schools. [114601]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Jacqui Smith): The Government are committed to extending the range and quality of sport available to all pupils, and believe that two hours of physical activity a week should be an aspiration for all schools. Our specialist sports colleges and the first school sports co-ordinators, who will be in post from September, will encourage that development. The Government's sports strategy, which will be published shortly by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, will detail our plans for sport in schools and how they will link to the wider community and local sports clubs.

Mr. Coaker: That reply shows that we are clearing up yet another mess that we were left.

There is an awful lot of work to do in rejuvenating sport in our schools. Will my hon. Friend consider whether, in the partnership that she described, we can extend the range of support from professional football clubs and other sports and youth clubs? Will she ensure that, from the funding going into schools, we get capital works to improve sports facilities as well as to improve teaching?

Jacqui Smith: During our teaching careers, both my hon. Friend and I had the pleasure of standing on windy sportsfields and encouraging young people. I strongly agree that we need to develop partnerships to get the most out of school sports. That is why we especially welcome the opportunities offered by out-of-school-hours clubs. The £160 million made available by the new opportunities fund and the £80 million from our standards fund are being targeted on communities with the greatest need and on building partnerships to provide more opportunities for young people both in and outside the curriculum.

I also agree that we must ensure that our schools have the sports facilities that they need. That is why Sport England is being encouraged to ensure that its lottery funding gets into schools and why we will work with our DCMS colleagues to find new ways of improving facilities for schools.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): We are all grateful for that helpful reply. I fully endorse the view that the Minister expressed about the importance of partnership, especially between football clubs such as Macclesfield Town and the community that I serve. Does she agree that physical team sports are important and that they require grass pitches? Unfortunately, despite the efforts of successive Governments, schools are still selling off playing fields. Will the hon. Lady give additional emphasis to the need for schools to retain their grass playing fields for physical team sports, which I personally believe—I think my view is shared—are important to young people?

Jacqui Smith: I entirely agree. I wish that the previous Government had put the effort into that that we have. In our first major education legislation, we introduced the strictest criteria for local authorities to limit the sale of school playing fields. We have reduced the applications for sale from 40 a month to three a month. We are safeguarding those provisions for young people as well as providing, through the new opportunities fund, the chance to develop new facilities, sportsfields and grass areas for the use of all communities and schools. We expect the first of those grants to be made available this summer. We are not only defending sportsfields for our young people in a way that the previous Government never did but looking to develop those opportunities in our communities.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): Does my hon. Friend believe that it is important to enable the education system to give all our young people the opportunity to be taught to swim?

Jacqui Smith: Yes. That has remained an important part of the national curriculum and we think that all primary school children should have that opportunity. We have worked with swimming organisations to develop that further.

Class Sizes

6. **Mr. Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough): If he will make a statement on secondary school class sizes since May 1997. [114602]

The Minister for School Standards (Ms Estelle Morris): The most recent figures show that in January 1999 the average secondary class had 21.9 pupils. The corresponding figure for January 1998 was 21.7. January saw the first fall in overall average class size for 10 years, from 24.9 to 24.8. We are also well on course to deliver our pledge to limit infant classes to 30 by September 2001 at the latest.

Mr. Leigh: Have the Government yet delivered their election manifesto promises on this matter?

Ms Morris: Absolutely. We pledged that by 2002 there would be no child of five, six or seven in a class of over 30. We are on schedule to deliver that in advance of the target date. We have already cut the figure from more than 450,000 to 100,000, and in most local authorities it will be reduced further by September. The hon. Gentleman will be well aware that in his constituency six schools have received more than £110,000 revenue to

reduce class sizes and three schools have received between them almost £250,000 to build classrooms and other facilities.

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield): May I urge my right hon. Friend to continue to build policies based on good research and experience in other areas? While I congratulate her on the fact that we are reducing class sizes where it matters—in the early years up to seven where all the research says it is crucial—I ask her to be guided also by the research that suggests that other techniques after seven are probably a better use of resources.

Ms Morris: I take my hon. Friend's point, and the evidence clearly shows that it is in those early years that small class sizes are most important. He will know that for key stages 2, 3, and 4 we are adopting several strategies, including 20,000 more classroom assistants in the next few years, an advance in information and communications technology and, of course, the welcome extra money that will go directly into school budgets that was announced on Tuesday. That extra money will give teachers the flexibility to decide how to spend it to raise standards for children.

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere): Are not parents of secondary school children likely to be more than a little sceptical at the Minister's claim that the Government have fulfilled their pledge when the number of children in classes of more than 30 in secondary schools has risen by 25 per cent. since they came to office? Is not class size also important in secondary schools, as the Secondary Heads Association has pointed out? Larger classes in secondary schools make teaching even more stressful in schools in which it is already difficult to teach. Is not the situation especially bad in the former grant-maintained schools, which have lost hundreds of thousands of pounds in some cases through starvation of funding since this Government came to office? Given that the parents of children in secondary schools may well be waking up to the fact that they face large extra taxation as the result of the loss of the married couples allowance, are they not fully justified in concluding that in that area, as in so many others, the Government are taxing more and delivering less?

Ms Morris: I have always thought it sad—although perhaps only to be expected—that every single question on class size from the Opposition has concentrated solely on secondary schools, because our record in key stages 1 and 2 is good and shows that we are delivering the goods. It is amazing that Opposition Front Benchers have not yet woken up to the announcement that was made on Tuesday. The Chancellor put more money directly into secondary school budgets. The amount of money that will go into those budgets on 1 April is enough to pay for an extra 3,500 teachers, which is three times as many teachers as would be needed to reverse the recent trend in secondary class sizes. Indeed, in the constituency of the hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May), primary schools will receive £210,000 and secondary schools will receive £280,000.

The Government have already delivered class size success at key stages 1 and 2. We made the pledge and we have delivered, and the money is now in the hands of head teachers, so that if they decide to do so they can pay for teachers to reduce class sizes in the next financial year. That is good news for teachers, good news for schools and good news for pupils—but poor news for the Opposition.

Literacy

7. **Ms Joan Ryan** (Enfield, North): What plans he has to tackle literacy problems among secondary school pupils. [114603]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. Michael Wills): The national literacy strategy has already had a significant impact on standards of literacy in primary schools and we are now determined to build on that success in the early years of secondary school, where unfortunately there has not been similar progress. We have invited 13 local education authorities to take part in a pilot programme from next September which will include trials of a new framework for teaching English, and professional development and support for teachers in literacy.

Ms Ryan: I thank my hon. Friend for that response. Earlier this week, I spent a morning at Carterhatch school, and last week I did the same at Alma primary school—both of them in my constituency. I participated in a literacy hour lesson in both and I was struck by how productive and how focused year 6 pupils are and how much good work was being done. I am concerned that after the transition to secondary school, which is a big change, pupils' level of achievement can slow down and, in some cases, regress. Can my hon. Friend outline in a little more detail what training and support will be provided for secondary school teachers to build on the success of the literacy hour and to continue raising standards at that vital point in a child's educational career?

Mr. Wills: I reassure my hon. Friend that there will be considerable support for teachers in that regard. Our great success in raising literacy standards in primary schools has been due to the fact that we have an effective partnership between the teaching profession—the hundreds of thousands of teachers throughout the country, with their vision, inspiration, dedication and effort—and the Government. We are determined to continue that work into what my hon. Friend rightly identified as the critical early years in secondary schools. There are 13 pilot projects in 13 local education authorities—£6.5 million is available for those projects and there is a significant element of continuing professional development to support teachers in putting that policy into effect.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): Can the Minister assure the House that he is making continuing and continual assessments of the performance gain of pupils who attend so-called summer schools compared with those who do not? While it gives me no joy to say it, will he confirm that the rate of improvement in standards of literacy and numeracy overall in the past three years has been less than it was in the equivalent three-year period before that?

Mr. Wills: I can absolutely assure the hon. Gentleman that everything that we do is properly evaluated and the results are published. Unfortunately, there are problems

with literacy at key stage 3. That is why we are launching the programme and why we are determined to achieve in secondary schools the level of success with literacy that we have achieved in primary schools. I assure the hon. Gentleman that we will not rest until we achieve that.

Helen Jones (Warrington, North): When my hon. Friend considers the pilot programmes that he mentioned, will he ensure that he takes into consideration the needs of those who are teaching English in secondary schools who do not have their first qualification in that subject? Will he ensure that the training and development plans that are put into place take account of the particular needs of that group of teachers, who number several thousand, according to parliamentary answers that I have received?

Mr. Wills: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. We are considering that issue, which is important. It is also an important strand of the pilot projects that are under way.

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead): Literacy problems are often one of the key issues for failing secondary schools. Does the Minister accept that dealing with such schools is hampered by the confusion of initiatives in the area, by rising secondary class sizes and by the Government's policy on exclusions? Given that one head has declined to take up a job at a failing school after the Government's recent naming and shaming exercise, and that three out of 10 superheads at failing schools have resigned, when will the Government admit the failure of their policy on failing schools? How many heads do they have to lose before they admit their failure to deliver?

Mr. Wills: It is a source of great sadness to me that the hon. Lady does not recognise the considerable mess that we inherited and the extraordinary strides forward—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Lady scoffs, but the summary judgment on the Tory years of stewardship of the education system—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Lady will benefit from listening to this. The Moser report found that one in five adults is functionally illiterate. She is proud of that as a record of the Tory party's stewardship of the education system. That is the summary judgment on the Tory years of looking after our education system. We are putting that right. Unfortunately, there are failing schools. We are taking measures to deal with them—and we will deal with them.

Specialist Schools

8. **Charlotte Atkins** (Staffordshire, Moorlands): How many specialist schools there are in the UK; and what the projected number is by 2001. [114605]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Jacqui Smith): As of September 1999, 403 specialist schools were operating in England. Our plans provide for about 200 specialist school designations by September 2001, taking the total number to more than 600.

Charlotte Atkins: Is my hon. Friend aware of the tremendous improvement in exam successes in my local specialist technology school, Clough Hall school, and the great work that it does in sharing information technology resources with the rest of the community? In view of that, will she tell me what support is given to joint school bids for specialist status, given the Government's enthusiasm for spreading the benefits of specialist school resources to the wider community?

Jacqui Smith: I am aware of the very good results achieved at Clough Hall technology school, where the proportion of pupils gaining 5 A* to C grades rose from 27 per cent. in 1996 to 39 per cent. in 1999. I am sure that the House will join me in congratulating staff and pupils on that excellent effort.

My hon. Friend is right to highlight the process that schools go through to become specialist schools as essential to ensuring the level of success being achieved. I can reassure her that we will look carefully at plans advanced by schools working together to achieve the improvement in standards evident at Clough Hall. That improvement is, after all, the aim of this area of policy.

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead): Does the Minister accept that the children who will gain most from education at a specialist school are those with ability and interest in that specialist subject? However, specialist schools are able to select only a small proportion of pupils on the basis of aptitude for the specialist subject, as defined by the Government. The maximum benefit is therefore being gained by the few, rather than by the many.

The Government have already lost a court case brought by Wandsworth council on the adjudicator's decision to reduce partial selection in some of its schools. Moreover, the Government are in court today for a case involving the ruling of an adjudicator on selection for a specialist school. Will the Government accept, therefore, that their whole adjudication process is fundamentally flawed? Does it not reflect the Government's prejudice against providing the education that is right for every child? Does it not show that the whole adjudication system should be scrapped immediately?

Jacqui Smith: No, the Government do not accept that. However, the hon. Lady's question illustrates the Opposition's obsession with the selection of the few. Our commitment is to raise standards for the many.

Training Opportunities

9. **Mr. Paul Goggins** (Wythenshawe and Sale, East): What action he is taking to provide jobseekers with more flexible training opportunities. [114606]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Ms Margaret Hodge): We provide a wide range of help to unemployed people to support their efforts to move into work. All those opportunities are designed to be relevant to individual needs and the requirements of the local labour market.

Mr. Goggins: I thank my hon. Friend for her answer. I am also grateful for the Government's commitment to flexibility. However, will my hon. Friend examine the eligibility criteria for work-based learning for adults? That scheme provides work experience and training for adults who have been out of work for more than six months. Does

she agree that that can sometimes be too long to wait? Will she consider making the training available earlier, when job seekers often are more highly motivated?

Ms Hodge: We are introducing changes to the work-based learning scheme in April. Our aim is to reduce the constraints on the national vocational qualification framework, for example, and to focus on achieving better skills levels. We are always open to considering further improvements. We have asked the new deal taskforce to report back to us if changes are needed to improve the employability of people in the labour market.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): What discussions has the Minister had with the Foreign Secretary to ensure that the outcome of any meetings that might take place in Portugal today will not damage the flexible labour market?

Ms Hodge: I can tell the hon. Gentleman that this country will be leading the discussions in Lisbon today, to ensure that those flexibilities relevant to a successful labour market will be sustained. Our record shows that there has been the biggest increase in 10 years in the number of people who are active in the labour market, that we are enjoying the lowest unemployment levels for 20 years, and that the Government have brought about the creation of 800,000 new jobs. That demonstrates that we can lead in Europe.

Top-up Fees

10. **Mr. Peter Brooke** (Cities of London and Westminster): If he will make a statement on top–up fees in higher education. [114607]

The Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. David Blunkett): I, and the House, have specifically ruled out top-up fees. Over the three years of the spending review, an additional £1 billion plus has been allocated to higher education. We have reversed the efficiency gains that were running at 4 per cent. under the previous Government, and we have also put a real-terms increase of 11 per cent. into universities. Therefore, we feel justified in ensuring that we do not fragment the system.

Mr. Brooke: As the relevant Minister at Education questions a month ago deftly—even brazenly—avoided answering my question on whether the Government would accelerate their promised review of tuition fees, would the Secretary of State answer that question? If top-up fees have been ruled out, and if, as the Government indicated on Tuesday, schools remain their principal educational priority, how are we to sustain and maintain our world-class universities?

Mr. Blunkett: First, I have already announced a 5.4 per cent. increase for 2001–02. Secondly, a £1.4 billion investment in research is taking place with the Wellcome Trust, with 75 per cent. of research funding going to the top 30 university departments.

To pick up on the speech that I made at Greenwich, we want to ensure that universities in this country link together through the use of information technology—but also join, as many are doing, with those in Europe and north America to share teaching and research resources. We want to ensure that their excellence is available in this country and is enhanced by the available expertise in world-class universities elsewhere.

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): My right hon. Friend will be aware of the experience in Australia, where top-up fees were introduced in 1996 and led to a reduction in overall applications and a narrowing of the social base of students going to Australian universities. Would not the replication of such a system in Britain run completely counter to our aspiration to get 50 per cent. of the under-30s into universities by 2010? Is not that a powerful reason why Ministers are right to resist Conservative party pressure on top-up fees?

Mr. Blunkett: Anything that discourages open access to all universities and their departments in this country is, in my view, wrong. Those who argue for substantial differentiation in fees have to answer where the resources would come from to pay for those on low incomes to enter university departments, given that the top-up fee that they were levying would have to pay for that and for any improvement in quality. They would also have to answer how it would be possible for any Minister to argue with the Treasury for additional resources if those resources were going to be obtained by the universities levying fees on students rather than sharing the costs, as we are at present, with the taxpayer.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): Does the Secretary of State's reassurance that he has ruled out implementing top-up fees carry the same, more, or less authority than the Government's statement at the election that they had no plans to introduce tuition fees?

Mr. Blunkett: As we did not say that, the question is grossly misleading. We indicated the changes that we would introduce in maintenance payments and the repayment system. We spelled that out in our documents and our manifesto. We indicated that we were perfectly willing to consider the recommendations on fees in the Dearing inquiry report. In fact, we ruled out the Dearing proposal, espoused by the Conservative party, that all students should pay a contribution towards fees. Instead, we exempted those on low incomes, so that in England more than one third of students pay no fees at all.

School Playing Fields

11. **Mr. Richard Ottaway** (Croydon, South): What his policy is on school playing fields; and if he will make a statement. [114608]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Jacqui Smith): We are determined to protect playing fields that are needed by schools and their communities. To achieve that, we introduced legislation in the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 that stops local authorities in England from disposing of, or changing the use of, school playing fields without the prior consent of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. In June last year, we published for all to see the tough criteria against which we assess applications.

Mr. Ottaway: I am baffled. I have just heard the Minister say that she is determined to protect playing fields in our schools. Is she aware that the council has applied to sell the playing fields of Haling Manor school in Croydon and to build a housing estate on the site? Will the Secretary of State sign that off, or is it the fault of the Labour council?

Jacqui Smith: I am aware of that application, which was approved in February 1999, before the final criteria for applications were agreed and issued by my Department. To that extent, given that we have significantly toughened the criteria since we came to power, that decision has rather more relevance to the extremely lax situation that existed when the hon. Gentleman's party was in power than to the very strict criteria that are now in place.

Coal-mining Areas (Labour Market)

12. **Mr. Jon Trickett** (Hemsworth): What steps his Department is taking to broaden participation in the labour market in former coal-mining areas. [114609]

The Minister for Employment, Welfare to Work and Equal Opportunities (Ms Tessa Jowell): We recognise that serious problems are faced by communities in former coal-mining areas, in many of which, despite the growth in jobs nationally, unemployment rates are below the average for England as a whole. We are adopting two strategies. The first is to build capacity through the single regeneration budget and the European social fund specifically to improve labour market participation and get people back to work through a range of national programmes adapted flexibly to local circumstances. The second is the new deal for 50-plus, which is already available in two former coal-mining areas. It offers a tax-free employment credit of £60 a week, guaranteeing a minimum income for the first year back at work of £170 a week.

My right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced in the Budget £40 million to fund special action teams to help people in the worst unemployment blackspots. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will shortly announce further details of the action teams and of their locations, but my hon. Friend will wish to know that six will be established in former coal-mining areas.

In Doncaster, the new employment zone will offer tailored support for former mineworkers in addition to the £10 million made available through the Coalfield Regeneration Trust.

Mr. Trickett: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply. I pay tribute to the Government for the active way in which they are providing support for the former coal-mining areas such as my constituency, which were left devastated by the Conservative Government. Is my right hon. Friend aware that two schemes in my constituency—two intermediate labour markets, one at Havercroft and one at Sesku Ringway—are due to have their funding terminated next week? They are excellent schemes. Twenty long-term unemployed people now feel some enthusiasm for life, but the funding is about to expire, with the loss of experience that will result. What advice can my right hon. Friend offer to those of my constituents who feel somewhat dismayed about the future?

Ms Jowell: The point that my hon. Friend makes about the two specific initiatives underlines the importance of implementing national programmes with sufficient flexibility to recognise important local innovations. I know that efforts are being made locally to replace the funding that will come to an end, but I shall be happy to meet my hon. Friend as a matter of urgency to see whether further action can be taken.

Mr. John Healey (Wentworth): Does my right hon. Friend recognise the high rates of labour market inactivity in the former coalfield areas, especially among men over 50? Our experience in Rotherham of piloting the adult new deal suggests that the roll out of the new deal for 50-plus, the employment credit and the new transition support announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor in the Budget this week will all help. However, does she accept that there remains a problem with the attitude of employers, who too often will not accept the benefits that older workers can bring to their companies?

Ms Jowell: I accept that there is a problem with some employers, but fortunately others are leading the way in demonstrating the benefits of diversity, as the number of vacancies increases and the number of people unemployed and seeking work falls. As part of the national implementation of the new deal for 50-plus, we shall redouble our efforts to build on the good experience of many employers of the stability, motivation and loyalty that come from having older people in their work force. That will be linked to the code of practice supported by employers that directly tackles age discrimination in the workplace.

National Numeracy Strategy

13. **Mr. Steve McCabe** (Birmingham, Hall Green): What support his Department has given to the national numeracy strategy; and if he will make a statement. [114610]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. Michael Wills): We are providing annual funding of £55 million to support the numeracy strategy. In January, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced an extra £9 million in 2000-01 to enable more teachers to attend intensive training courses. Ofsted confirmed in a report published today that the strategy is already having a positive impact on schools.

Mr. McCabe: Is not the support of parents crucial to the success of the measure? That is also true for many of the Government's initiatives. I know from personal experience that it can be difficult for parents—especially working parents—always to play as full a role as they would like in supporting such measures. What steps are the Department taking to ensure that parents and the wider community are able to support the national numeracy strategy?

Mr. Wills: I am happy to reassure my hon. Friend that we realise the importance both of parents and of the wider community in helping children to participate in the numeracy strategy and to achieve success through it. As my hon. Friend is aware, Maths Year 2000 was launched earlier this year; it has a key role for teachers and parents. I am delighted that there has been a tremendous response to the recent television campaign. Since 19 January, there have been about 500,000 requests through the freephone order line for the free pamphlet of tips for parents to help their children with maths.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): Given that it is excellent teaching and leadership that will have the greatest impact on numeracy, why has the Secretary of State appointed a bureaucrat from his own Department rather than an excellent classroom teacher or head teacher to head the new institute responsible for promoting excellence among head teachers?

Mr. Wills: I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman is mistaken; we have not appointed a bureaucrat from our Department. I shall be happy to send him full details of everything that we are doing. I remind him of one salient fact about what we have already achieved in the numeracy strategy. We should all be grateful for the enormous effort that teachers have put into the strategy and note that, in one year, the number of children achieving level 4 and above at key stage 2 has improved by 10 percentage points.

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): We support much of the initiative. However, does the Minister accept that, despite the sums of money allocated centrally from the Government, what schools need is a consistent planning system so that they can fund year on year? In view of the Secretary of State's comments on the "Today" programme this morning, when he indicated that we shall have a nationally funded education system—if not within the lifetime of this Parliament, certainly within the lifetime of the next—will the Minister tell us whether he agrees with that way forward and that local education authorities are now redundant?

Mr. Wills: Again, I am afraid the hon. Gentleman is mistaken. We should be happy to send him a transcript of the "Today" programme to point out exactly what my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said. The hon. Gentleman will have to wait until the publication of the Green Paper for the details.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): Bringing us back to numeracy, is my hon. Friend aware that one of the problems in delivering the numeracy strategy is the number of primary teachers who are not themselves particularly numerate? Although we are taking action in teacher education to ensure that there is testing of new teachers, what action is he taking to ensure that primary teachers in the classroom become more confident with numbers than they are at present? That is one of the reasons why we are not doing as well as we should in mathematics internationally.

Mr. Wills: I am happy to reassure my hon. Friend that every primary school teacher is being trained in numeracy strategy, and will continue to be so trained.

Secondary School Places (South-west London)

14. **Mr. Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington): If he will make a statement on the impact of school selection policies on the availability of secondary school places in south-west London. [114611]

The Minister for School Standards (Ms Estelle Morris): This information is not available centrally. Section 14 of the Education Act 1996 places a duty on individual local education authorities to ensure that there are sufficient school places for all children of compulsory school age in their area.

Mr. Brake: I suppose I thank the Minister for her response, although it is not entirely helpful. Is she able to give my constituents any reassurances that next year their children will not be waiting in agony to find out whether they have a school place locally, when many of their friends will have already been allocated a place? Can she assure us that she believes that local children should have priority in local schools?

Ms Morris: I know that it is a policy of the Liberal Democrats that the Greenwich judgment should be reversed, but that is not a view that we share. We think that parents should have the option of expressing a preference for a school that is outside their LEA boundary. Children often live closer to a school that is in a neighbouring LEA than to a school in their own LEA. I accept that the waiting game for knowing which place a child will get is difficult for parents and pupils, but I am afraid that it was ever thus. I assure the hon. Gentleman that every child will have a place.

Business of the House

12.30 pm

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): Could I ask the Leader of the House to give us the business for next week?

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): The business for next week will be as follows:

MONDAY 27 MARCH—Conclusion of the Budget debate.

TUESDAY 28 MARCH—Second Reading of the Criminal Justice and Court Services Bill.

Motion on the Wireless Telegraphy (Television Licence Fees) (Amendment) Regulations 2000.

WEDNESDAY 29 MARCH—Progress on remaining stages of the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill.

THURSDAY 30 MARCH—Second Reading of the Learning and Skills Bill *[Lords]*.

FRIDAY 31 MARCH—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the following week will be as follows:

MONDAY 3 APRIL—Second Reading of the Nuclear Safeguards Bill *[Lords]*.

Conclusion of remaining stages of the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill.

TUESDAY 4 APRIL—Progress on remaining stages on the Freedom of Information Bill.

WEDNESDAY 5 APRIL—Conclusion of remaining stages of the Freedom of Information Bill.

THURSDAY 6 APRIL—Remaining stages of the Armed Forces Discipline Bill *[Lords]*.

Remaining stages of the Sea Fishing Grants (Charges) Bill.

Opposition Day (7th Allotted Day) (Second part). There will be a debate on an Opposition motion in the name of the Ulster Unionist party. Subject to be announced.

FRIDAY 7 APRIL—Private Members' Bills.

The House will also wish to be reminded that, on Wednesday 29 March, there will be a debate on the aid system for flax and hemp in European Standing Committee A. Details of the relevant documents will be given in the *Official Report*.

[*Tuesday 4 April 2000:*

European Standing Committee A—Relevant European Union document: 13048/99, Banana Imports; Relevant European Scrutiny Committee Reports: HC 23-v and HC 23-x (1999-2000).

I should like to inform the House of business to be taken in Westminster Hall for April.

THURSDAY 6 APRIL—Debate on the Second Anniversary of NHS Direct.

THURSDAY 13 APRIL—Debate on the Ninth Report from the Education and Employment Committee Session 1998-1999 on Opportunities for Disabled People.

THURSDAY 20 APRIL—There will be no debates in Westminster Hall.

THURSDAY 27 APRIL—The House will not be sitting.

The House will also wish to know that, subject to the progress of business, the House will rise for the Whitsun recess at the end of business on Thursday 25 May and return on Monday 5 June.

Sir George Young: The House is grateful to learn next week's business, the provisional business for the week after and the provisional dates of the Whitsun recess. We hope that the right hon. Lady's voice lasts for the next half hour.

I am grateful for the response to the request that I made last week for more time to be given to consideration of the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill, and welcome the fact that we have been given that extra time. I am also grateful for the opportunity to debate on Tuesday the television licence fee increase.

May we expect a statement on Monday from the Prime Minister on the Lisbon summit? If we can expect that, might it be sharper in focus than the statement that we heard yesterday? When the Chief Secretary to the Treasury winds up the Budget debate on Monday, will he clarify the statement made by the Prime Minister yesterday? He asserted:

> It means that by 2003-04, NHS spending will have risen to 7.6 per cent. of gross domestic product.—[*Official Report*, 22 March 2000; Vol. 346, c. 981.]

According to many independent health analysts, the figure of 7.6 per cent. can be reached only by including private health spending. We need some clarity on that.

Does the right hon. Lady understand our disappointment that the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry will no longer be taking part in the Budget debate? With concern about the impact of the high pound on exports—a subject that the Chancellor of the Exchequer skated over in his Budget—we would have welcomed the Secretary of State's participation in a debate that could have dealt with the plight of manufacturing industry. At the very least, might we expect a statement from him following his discussions with BMW? We also regret the absence of the Deputy Prime Minister from the Budget debate—left out, no doubt, because his Department was a significant loser.

The programme for 6 April looks congested, particularly if there is interest in the Armed Forces Discipline Bill. Might the right hon. Lady reflect on thinning it out?

Finally, almost all the business for the next two weeks is devoted to the Government's legislative programme, with no time whatever to debate other matters such as the Wakeham report, the intergovernmental conference White Paper, the Liaison Committee report, separate debates on the Armed Forces and the Dame Fritchie report on the abuse of patronage. Is not the Government's ambitious programme seriously distorting the work of the House?

Mrs. Beckett: I am grateful for the right hon. Gentleman's welcome for the extra time, for which the Opposition asked, to debate the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill and the television licence prayer.

I anticipate that the Prime Minister will be making a statement after the Lisbon summit. I am slightly surprised by the right hon. Gentleman's less than generous remarks about yesterday's statement, given that it is only now, for the first time since Lady Thatcher's day, as I recall, that Prime Ministers have again started to come to the House.

I think that I am right in saying that my right hon. Friend is the first Prime Minister to do so in order to deal with a domestic, as opposed to an international, matter. Considering how, however inaccurately, Opposition Members are always complaining about the Prime Minister not coming to the House, I would have thought that they would have welcomed him doing so. Of course we know that they do not welcome any announcement on health or education—or, indeed, on pensions—because they do not wish the British public to make a link between the improvements that they are seeing and the actions of this Government.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury will no doubt take note of the right hon. Gentleman's remarks. I have not seen the analysis to which the right hon. Gentleman referred. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry was of course before the House only a few days ago, and I anticipate that he will do what he can to keep the House informed on the progress of any discussions in which he is engaged.

The right hon. Gentleman is right about the Deputy Prime Minister; there are a limited number of Budget debates and we wish to concentrate on its key themes. However, to describe my right hon. Friend's Department as a loser, when it has just been given an extra £280 million, seems rather an odd choice of words, but there we are.

The right hon. Gentleman said, "Oh dear; there is a lot of Government legislation." Yes; that is one of the key purposes for which the House exists. I remind him that, contrary to what is often said from the Opposition Benches, there is nothing unusual or heavy about the Government's legislative programme. It is substantial because there is much work to do, but there is nothing unprecedented about the number of Bills that the Government are seeking to deal with in this Session.

The issue of abuse of patronage is interesting. It would be nice to have time to look back over the previous Government's record in those matters, but I fear that we shall have to deny ourselves that luxury.

Ms Glenda Jackson (Hampstead and Highgate): My right hon. Friend will be aware of the increasing number of early-day motions protesting at the proposed closure by Barclays bank of branches that are of vital interest to some of its most loyal customers—pensioners—and of particular concern to small businesses. In the light of the recent Cruickshank report, which alleged excessive profits by high street banks, is it not time that the House had a full-scale debate on services that are continually declining while customer charges and profits seem to be ever increasing?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend makes a very strong point. She is absolutely right about the interesting conclusions of the Cruickshank report. I fear that I cannot undertake to find time on the Floor of the House in the near future for such a debate; as she knows, that is always a problem for any Government. However, I draw her attention to the extra debating opportunities in Westminster Hall.

Mr. Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove): Does the Leader of the House recognise the bitter disappointment in the north-west at the decision to site the replacement of the Daresbury synchrotron in the south of England? Does she agree that, given the problems described by the shadow Leader of the House on the value of the pound and investment and development, it is essential that a replacement Government research programme is soundly based in the north-west? Will she persuade the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry to assure the House that the Government have recognised the issue created by the decision?

I draw the right hon. Lady's attention to the Culture, Media and Sport Committee's report, "Whatever Happened to *News at Ten*?" and particularly recommendation 56, which states:

> We recommend that the ITC require ITV to reinstate *News at Ten*.

Can the right hon. Lady give us a report and bring a Minister to the House to say what pressure the Government have brought to bear on the Independent Television Commission to implement the recommendations in that Select Committee report?

Mrs. Beckett: My many right hon. and hon. Friends from the north-west have made plain to the Government how great is their concern about the decision on the partnership project, and the Government themselves have made it plain that they understand and sympathise with those concerns. However, I am confident that the hon. Gentleman will have observed that among the many proposals announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor in the Budget were extra resources for various regions. I accept that the hon. Gentleman is also making a separate point about science, and I believe that my right hon. Friend has indicated that he is aware of those concerns and has the matter under consideration.

On "News at Ten", I know how strongly that view is shared in the House. The hon. Gentleman asked me to bring a Minister to the House to deal with the matter; it is Department for Culture, Media and Sport oral questions on Monday.

Angela Smith (Basildon): I draw my right hon. Friend's attention to early-day motion 556, in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Mr. Truswell).

[*That this House believes the £6 return charge imposed by GNER for carrying passengers' bicycles is excessive, unnecessary and inconsistent with the promotion of environmentally friendly transport; and calls upon the company to adopt a more positive and sympathetic approach to those who wish to combine rail and cycle travel.*]

Does she share my horror at the information that Great North Eastern Railway is charging passengers a £6 return fare to put their bicycles on the train? When we are trying to encourage integrated, environmentally friendly and healthy transport, is that not a disgrace?

I am pleased to announce that my local railway, LTS, does not charge for bicycles, and neither do many other companies. Could we have an urgent debate on this matter to ensure that we get integrated transport, and that we are not being kiboshed by railway companies trying to force people to use their cars rather than their bicycles?

Mrs. Beckett: I understand my hon. Friend's concerns and those of my hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Mr. Truswell). Train operators are required to provide facilities for the carriage of cycles; they are free to make

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a charge, although it should be reasonable. However, it sounds to me like a classic subject for a Westminster Hall debate.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex): Will the right hon. Lady do her best to find out whether it is possible to have a separate day's debate on the urgent matter of the funding of defence? Is she aware that so serious is the situation that defence manufacturing companies are having to lay people off because of the slow down in defence procurement, and that major top-level budget holders in the Ministry of Defence are seeing their budgets slashed in a manner that is wholly unacceptable not only for the good order of matters such as property management, but for operations and exercises? Does the right hon. Lady understand that there is real concern and anxiety about that, and that we should have an urgent debate?

Mrs. Beckett: Of course I understand that anxiety. However, my recollection is that, although the defence budget is scheduled to fall by some 3 per cent. over the next three years, under the Government of which the hon. Gentleman was a distinguished member, it fell by a third.

Mr. Soames: That is not the point.

Mrs. Beckett: It is all very well for the hon. Gentleman to say that it is not the point, but it is the truth.

Gillian Merron (Lincoln): In view of the Chancellor's welcome announcement this week that many thousands of extra pounds will be going direct to schools, can my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on ensuring that extra Government resources get to children in schools and are not diverted or blocked by Conservative-run county councils such as Lincolnshire?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend is entirely right to say that there is always concern about whether education resources are being used for the purposes for which they are allocated, and I am well aware of Lincolnshire county council's track record on that. I always thought that it had something to do with the fact that, at least in my day, there had never been a chair of the education committee, under Conservative party rule, who had attended a state school or sent their children to one.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): Will the right hon. Lady ensure that we are encouraged to send her our views on specific issues relating to the decision on whether to continue and make permanent the arrangements for sitting in Westminster Hall or to discontinue the experiment, if not next week, then well before she makes an assessment and a decision and puts a motion before the House? I am thinking in particular of what I consider to be the absurdity of the House, as it were, sitting in two places at the same time. That usually happens on Thursday afternoons.

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point. The Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons, which I chair, is anxious to hear Members' reactions to the current experiment. We hope to assess it towards the end of the summer but, if Members have specific concerns of the kind that the hon. Gentleman has identified, they are more than welcome to send them to the Modernisation Committee.

Mr. Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Hall Green): Has my right hon. Friend had an opportunity to read the remarks of Mr. Martin Barnes, director of the Child Action Group? He says:

> This is a welcome Budget for the 4.4 million children living in poverty in the UK. We applaud the Chancellor's stubborn and consistent commitment to supporting families and children . . . We welcome the fact that as a result of this Budget up to one third of a million children will also be lifted out of poverty.

Given the stark contrast between the two main parties' approach—the Government seek to lift children out of poverty, whereas the Opposition, when in government, created the conditions that took them into poverty—could my right hon. Friend possibly find time for a debate on this important subject?

Mr. Soames: Answer that!

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend is entirely right. The Child Poverty Action Group has welcomed the response to what he rightly describes as a major problem. Notwithstanding the laughter that I heard from Conservative Members, it should be a source of shame to them that, during their tenure of office, so many children ended up living in the poverty from which this Government will need to try to rescue them.

The Budget was also welcomed by representatives of pensioners and single parents, as well as representatives of the business community. Indeed, it was welcomed by nearly everyone except the Conservative party.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): Given the problems of the immigration directorate, which are turning the constituency offices of a minority of Members into outstations of the Home Office because the latter cannot answer letters, may we have a statement next week? Can we be told why not a penny of the £285 million which, according to Tuesday's statement, is to be devoted to law and order, will go towards reinforcing the directorate?

Mrs. Beckett: The right hon. Gentleman is more up to speed than I am in regard to how the allocation will be used. I do not know whether it will be used for the immigration directorate, but I am aware of the problems that the right hon. Gentleman mentioned, and he is right to say that many Members experience them. As he will know, the system is a source of long-standing difficulty, and the Government are working hard to overcome it.

Mr. Mike Gapes (Ilford, South): Further to my right hon. Friend's answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Gillian Merron), is she aware that the Conservative leadership of Redbridge council, supported by the Liberal Democrats, has adopted a budget allowing money made available under the standard spending assessment for education not to be directly passported to schools in my constituency? Will my right hon. Friend give us an early opportunity to debate the relationship between central Government and local government, and education spending? That would enable us to welcome the

provision in the Budget for money to go directly to schools in my borough, rather than being frittered away on other matters by the Conservative council.

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend makes a strong point. I know of his long-standing concern for the welfare of the schools in his borough, and the children who attend them. I cannot undertake to find time for a debate in the near future, but opportunities to question my right hon. Friends the Secretary of State for Education and Employment and the Deputy Prime Minister will give my hon. Friend a chance to air his worries.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): The Leader of the House will be well aware of the desperate plight of Britain's pig farmers. Will she arrange for the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to make a statement to the House explaining exactly what the Budget has done for them? It should not take very long.

Mrs. Beckett: I think that the hon. Gentleman is aware that the Prime Minister intends to meet representatives of agriculture on 30 March. I take it that his remarks constitute a call for more resources for the industry. I note that Conservative Members continually call for more resources, which strikes me as incompatible with their other policies.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): May I return to the Government's inexplicable decision to transfer the synchrotron project to Oxfordshire from the north-west, a subject that was raised by the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell)? The decision may now be irreversible, but the Prime Minister told me only on Tuesday that the Wellcome Trust said that it would withdraw from the partnership if the decision were taken to locate the project at Daresbury. However, there is some confusion about the Wellcome Trust's position and that of the French Government. Many Labour Members—in the north-west group and in other parts of the party—would welcome an early debate so that there is full transparency and we understand all the reasons why the decision was taken to transfer technology from the north-west to Oxfordshire.

Mrs. Beckett: However much I know that my hon. Friend and other north-west Members are rightly expressing concern about the decision on behalf of their constituents, I fear that I cannot accept that it is inexplicable. Sadly, it is all too explicable. Nor, indeed, am I aware that there is any confusion at all about the reasons for it or about the position of the Wellcome Trust or the French Government. I either remind or tell him—I am not sure which—that the French Ministry of National Education, Research and Technology issued a press notice on 13 March saying:

> This site was strongly supported by the French Partners in the project and we are delighted with the choice.

In a letter to *The Guardian*, the French ambassador said:

> The French Government has consistently made clear its preference for the Rutherford Appleton site.

I understand that that has also always been the position of the Wellcome Trust. As I say, I understand the anxieties and concerns expressed by my right hon. and hon. Friends, but, unfortunately, the decision is all too easy to understand.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): Will the Leader of the House ask a Minister to make a statement next week to correct the mistaken information that the Prime Minister gave the House yesterday? He said that national health service expenditure would increase

> to 7.6 per cent. of gross domestic product.—[*Official Report*, 22 March 2000; Vol. 346, c. 981.]

However, the Red Book clearly shows that the real figure is 6.4 per cent. He arrived at his figure by including private health expenditure. That is a simple drafting mistake—there is no big deal about it—and a statement would clarify the matter. However, that increase represents a doubling in private NHS expenditure and, therefore, a great departure from Government policy. We need a statement.

Mrs. Beckett: We had a statement and a debate yesterday and I do not think that the House needs any further opportunities to discuss the matter. Indeed, the point has already been made in this Question Time.

Mr. Tony McWalter (Hemel Hempstead): Is my right hon. Friend aware that, in the bright and multifaceted diamond that was the Budget, there was possibly one face that was slightly darker than the others? Naturally, I shall advert to that. As we know, many pensioners who are just above the minimum income guarantee are poorer than those on the minimum income guarantee. They do not receive income support so they do not get various other benefits that come with it. When the Secretary of State for Social Security said that a report dealing with their difficulties would be made in the next Parliament, did he mean the Session beginning after the Queen's Speech in November or the Parliament beginning after a general election? Will she ask him to make a statement in the near future to clarify the position?

Mrs. Beckett: There will be questions and a debate on social security matters on Monday and my hon. Friend will find time to raise the matter then. However, he may be mistaken in thinking that no one who is not already on the minimum income guarantee is affected by yesterday's announcements. After all, those who are not in a position to take advantage of it—because of capital, for example—will find their circumstances substantially improved. One other group remains particularly difficult to assist and it is to those people, who have a small additional income as opposed to capital, to whom my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is turning his attention. I am sure that he will make proposals that he believes to be workable and effective at an earlier date if he is able to do so. Yesterday, he said what he anticipates to be the likely timetable for what is a particularly difficult policy area to resolve.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): With regard to the right hon. Lady's comment that we should be ashamed of our child poverty, may I remind her that the Rowntree Foundation has said that the divide between rich and poor has increased in the past two or three years under the Labour Government? When he returns from Munich, will the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry make a statement not only on the future of the Longbridge plant, but on the concerns over the future of the Dagenham Ford plant? Is she aware that there is growing and informed speculation that engine production will be transferred from the Ford plant at Dagenham to the newly acquired Ford Land Rover plant?

Mrs. Beckett: As Ford has not yet acquired the Land Rover plant, as far as I am aware, and as the matters are

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still being discussed, that may be a little premature, but my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry keeps all those matters under review.

On the hon. Gentleman's remarks on the divide between rich and poor, I am sure that it has not escaped his memory that the Rowntree Foundation figures were on the first two years of the Government's life, during which they were following the Budget guidelines that were set by the party that he supports.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): May I draw to the attention of the Leader of the House early-day motion 547:

[*That this House regrets the Government's decision to award the £200 million Diamond Synchrotron project to Oxfordshire and not to the existing synchrotron facility at Daresbury in Cheshire; notes that the long-term cost to the North West economy will be £550 million; notes that it will damage the science base of the North West risking the loss of over 200 high-skilled jobs, likely to go overseas; further notes that the Science and Technology Select Committee found no scientific case to favour Oxfordshire over Cheshire as a site for the new investment; and believes that this decision taken personally by the Prime Minister, shows that he has not given sufficient weight to the importance of regional policy or to the need to promote science and encourage investment in the North West.*]

It stands in my name and has the support of Members of her party. It raises concern about the Government's decision to site the synchrotron project in Oxford and not in Cheshire. Is she aware that that will take some £500 million out of the north-west economy and that it is a major blow for regional policy? Following the comments of the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell), I hope that we may secure all-party support for the motion, not just by-partisan support.

The Prime Minister was prepared to come to the House earlier in the week to explain to north-west Labour Members why he will ignore their views on the matter. Would it not be a courtesy for him to make time to come to the Chamber to make clear his reasons for taking that decision?

Mrs. Beckett: I remind the hon. Gentleman that the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) yesterday and the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) today were less than welcoming to the Prime Minister coming to the Chamber to make statements, other than at Prime Minister's Question Time. The Prime Minister has made plain his regret at the impact of the decision on the north-west. The hon. Gentleman will know, I hope, that the Government commissioned a review of the science base in the north-west and have committed in advance some £25 million from the science budget to implement the review recommendations. Therefore, the Government are aware of the concern and will do what they can to address it.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): Is the Leader of the House aware of the report that was submitted by foreign policy supremo Solana at the European Union in which he describes the way in which the security situation in Kosovo is spiralling out of control? As she is unwilling to grant a single service debate at an early date, will she at the very least allow the House a foreign affairs debate, as our armed forces are gravely at risk and Mr. Solana's prognosis is dire in the extreme?

Mrs. Beckett: Of course I understand the hon. Gentleman's concern and that that leads him to call for a foreign affairs debate, but one of the things that led the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons to recommend the creation of the experiment in Westminster Hall was the anxiety that a foreign affairs debate, which would cover, naturally, the entire world, was perhaps of less value to all participants than more focused debates of the type that we envisaged Westminster Hall accommodating. I warmly recommend that the hon. Gentleman seeks such a debate on Kosovo, if he wishes to.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): Following the Lisbon summit, will it be possible to have a full-day debate on the internet and e-democracy? That would give us an opportunity not only to expose the glorification of St. Tony and the nauseating No. 10 website, but, on a wider scale, to look at the possibility of inter-activity with Standing Committees in their pre-legislative stages and Select Committees. Archive material may be put on some of the Select Committee websites, so that people may be able to access that, give their own suggestions as to areas of concern and make representations to Select Committees on the issues that they are discussing.

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman made various suggestions on how we might, in future years, better exploit the opportunities offered by the internet. He will know that some of the House's own Committees are examining that matter. I suggest that, first, he should write particularly to the Information Committee to raise some of those issues. Many of the points that he made are a matter for the relevant Select Committee and for other Committees. However, I think that, as time goes on, ever more members of the public and hon. Members will wish to take advantage of the opportunities that he described.

Personal Statement

1 pm

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): The Parliamentary Commissioner has held that I breached the code of conduct for Members of Parliament in not making clear to the Lord Chancellor's Department that, when giving a reference for a person for an honour, the person concerned had, not long before, given me a loan. This was clearly an error of judgment on my part, for which I have already apologised unreservedly in person to the Select Committee on Standards and Privileges. I have made it clear that I fully accept that I deserve to be criticised.

The Committee has recommended that I apologise in person to the House. I wish to say sorry sincerely to the House, without reservation or hesitation of any kind.

I have explained in detail to the Standards and Privileges Committee how the circumstances of the reference came about. It was not initiated by me. I responded to a request for a reference from a completely disinterested person. However, I accept that those are matters of explanation and are not an excuse.

I hope that it will be appreciated by all concerned that it is not always possible to have total recall of events. I can only say to the House that, at all times when these matters have been under consideration, I have sought to co-operate fully with the Parliamentary Commissioner and to give truthful and accurate responses.

I also recognise that, when there is any criticism of any individual Member of Parliament, it reflects on Members of Parliament as a whole. I should thus wish to apologise to each and every hon. Member for an error of judgment and a mistake on my part, and my part alone.

Orders of the Day

WAYS AND MEANS

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [21 March].

AMENDMENT OF THE LAW

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That it is expedient to amend the law with respect to the National Debt and the public revenue and to make further provision in connection with finance; but this Resolution does not extend to the making of any amendment with respect to value added tax so as to provide—

(a) for zero-rating or exempting a supply, acquisition or importation;

(b) for refunding an amount of tax;

(c) for varying any rate at which that tax is at any time chargeable; or

(d) for any relief, other than a relief which—

(i) so far as it is applicable to goods, applies to goods of every description, and

(ii) so far as it is applicable to services, applies to services of every description.—[*Mr. Gordon Brown.*]

Question again proposed.

Budget Resolutions and Economic Situation

1.2 pm

The Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. David Blunkett): I know that the whole House will want to congratulate the Chancellor on Tuesday's excellent Budget statement, and particularly to applaud his announcement on additional investment in education and employment. This Budget will provide not only that additional investment, but substantial investment in the national health service, in tackling crime and in supporting and helping retired people. It is a Budget that really rewards hard work and reinforces the something-for-something commitment that we have been making.

The Budget underpins success in our schools, as it supports our teachers' work, our pupils' commitment and success and the hard work of the Employment Service and of hard-working families across the country. All those people will find that their endeavours are being supported by the Chancellor's announcement this week.

In the Budget, we have a commitment from the Chancellor and the Prime Minister of almost £4.5 billion extra for education in the coming year alone. That is an 8.5 per cent. real-terms increase in England, with more than 10 per cent. in real terms going into schools in the coming year. That is how the Government reward those who have given their wholehearted commitment to raising standards and to building the foundations for further success in the future.

In Tuesday's announcement, the Chancellor said that schools across the country would immediately receive a massive uplift in funding, which would enable them not simply to deal with the deficits that were built up in the 1990s, but to engage in new undertakings, such as obtaining new books and equipment or taking on additional staff. Additionally, heads and governors are to have freedom in determining how the new resources are used, to ensure that the resources not only meet their particular needs, but clearly target the standards agenda that we have agreed with them. For primary schools there will be an uplift of between £3,000 and £9,000 for the coming year. For secondary schools there will be an uplift of £30,000 to £50,000 and for all special schools there will be an uplift of £15,000. Special schools have under 200 pupils so the money will provide a substantial per pupil uplift to support special education.

Over the three years of the spending review, we will see an enormous and sustained commitment to education spending such as we never saw under the previous regime. We have already committed ourselves to reversing the trend of reductions that took place in 1995, 1996 and into the 1997 Budget. We have seen a reversal of the downward trend in the proportion of gross domestic product spent on education and I can announce to the House that the £4.5 billion increase will take the proportion of GDP in the coming year to over 5 per cent. I am pleased that we have been able to make that progress so rapidly.

The £300 million that we agreed to distribute to schools is complemented by a £20 million uplift in the recovery programme for primary pupils to be invested in booster classes, which have been so successful. That will mean a doubling of the investment we had already indicated for such classes, giving children who would not otherwise have the opportunity to do so the chance to recover on what is done in the classroom and in after-school activities.

Madam Speaker—is it still Madam Speaker in the Chair? [HON. MEMBERS: "Yes."] Cough when you leave, Madam Speaker.

The increase for booster classes will put pupils whose parents cannot afford to buy such classes on equal terms with those whose parents have traditionally bought crammer and booster classes for their children, often in addition to preparatory school fees in more affluent parts of the country. That is a major contribution towards the uplift in literacy and numeracy of which we have been so proud over the past year.

When that is taken with the money that we have already located within the Department's budget—the £50 million that tops up the revenue support grant—we genuinely believe that schools will be able to move forward with confidence from 1 April, knowing that their endeavours will be underpinned by the resources necessary to achieve their goals.

A dramatic improvement in the progress of primary schools now needs to be matched by a similar step change in the secondary sector. In my north of England conference speech at the beginning of January and in two major speeches on secondary education this month, I have spelt out how critical it is that we transform the education of those aged 11 to 16 who have often found that the progress they made in primary schools has been reversed in the first year of secondary school. In fact, 30 per cent. of pupils in year seven—the first year of secondary school—have seen their progress reversed. That is totally unacceptable and the substantial increase in resources for secondary education is designed to ensure that the programmes that we are laying out for secondary pupils can now be reinforced by the resources necessary to achieve their goals.

We have said that we will be investing heavily in changes to what is known as key stage 3—the 11 to 14 curriculum. We have laid out the way in which literacy and numeracy will be reinforced, changes to the science curriculum and support for new science teaching, and new and imaginative ways to ensure that secondary pupils can be engaged and retained within the education system. We will be saying more during this year about how we can increase the diversity of provision and opportunity so that vocational education and connection with the world of work can be commonplace to ensure that those who disengage themselves from school, or who are excluded from school, can once again be engaged with the education system and, therefore, with their own future.

We are announcing today an additional £60 million to underpin the fresh start and city academy programmes. That money will be available for existing and new fresh start school proposals and for the city academy initiative that I announced a week ago. For city academies, we intend that the money will partner the voluntary and private sector contributions that will be made. It will ensure that we transform the environment in which teachers teach and pupils are taught.

It is clear that the environment in which teachers work is important and the optimism and hope that decent premises and good equipment can engender make a

difference to their professional commitment. That can help a school to re-emerge from failure and the threat of imminent closure.

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): Is the Secretary of State aware that the Minister for School Standards told the Select Committee yesterday that there were no plans to hold ballots involving local parents when it was proposed to turn a failing school into a city academy? Why does he not abolish ballots on grammar schools, which are about destroying diversity in schools, and introduce a system of ballots for converting failing schools into city academies, which is about creating diversity in schools? That would involve parents in the positive side of education, not the negative side.

Mr. Blunkett: If a school is going to close because it is collapsing around the pupils and parents who are engaged there, the options are dramatic change or closure. That is obvious. Grammar school ballots are about a change in admissions policy. We are not proposing to change admissions policies in the code of guidance that the House has approved for city academies. There will not be a vote on the admissions policy, which includes all the options that are currently available to schools in an area. We want to address the needs of local pupils who have been let down by the failure of the school. Drawing in parents and pupils from somewhere else would simply distribute the problem of the pupils who have been underachieving to neighbouring schools. That is why it is important to address failure where it exists, rather than simply moving the deckchairs on the Titanic as a school goes down.

The aim of fresh start and the city academies is to address a situation in which dwindling numbers, caused by parental preference, leave a school unviable and therefore likely to close in the immediate future. We have seen time and again across the country, particularly in the most deprived areas, that pupils who are left at such schools get a less satisfactory education as the months and years go by, providing them with less opportunity than is acceptable. The new system and the investment that we are announcing today will address that problem head-on.

This is about diversity. Beacon school status involves one school supporting and helping another. Specialist schools have funds specifically allocated for outreach to share their specialism with the community and other schools. Those ideas, together with excellence in cities and the education action zones, ensure that help is targeted where it is most needed and that collaboration and co-operation are at the heart of our programme. Schools have to share with each other the benefits that they gain from extra resources, the specialism and commitment of their staff and the targeted help that they can offer to the community. Rather than operating in a market that knocks one school out or lets one school succeed at the expense of others, schools must be prepared to share their expertise in a way that will enable all schools and all pupils to succeed.

We are proud of the way in which failure has been overcome. We now have more schools coming out of special measures than going in for the first time. Over the past 12 months we have had 91 more schools coming out of special measures than went in. We are turning round schools on special measures in 17 rather than 25 months. That is a dramatic change since the general election. We are doing this to ensure that children in those schools and parents choosing or exercising a preference for those schools will know that they will get the sort of education that others take for granted.

Mr. Jonathan Shaw (Chatham and Aylesford): Can my right hon. Friend assure me that if a school is in special measures, it will be treated equally when it makes an application for the new deal for capital improvement? A school in my constituency needs that boost for a capital programme but it is concerned that it will not be treated equally when the application is submitted.

Mr. Blunkett: From schools desperate for the doubling of capital investment to which we have already committed ourselves, I hear the grumble, "Why should schools on special measures get preference?" I assure my hon. Friend that there will not be discrimination. We need to be able to invest in the action plan and in the recovery programme of such schools so that the new deal for schools capital and the way that it is targeted is geared entirely to ensuring that the standards in a school can be improved. I am sure that, with my ministerial colleagues, we can ensure that the new deal for schools investment programme will be part of the programme of recovery, as will the excellence in cities initiative, an extension of which I can announce.

With the money that was allocated on Tuesday, we can announce a substantial increase in the number of areas that will be entitled to the programme. The programme includes mentoring and support for individual pupils and their families, learning support units that ensure that children who are disruptive or who have a particular problem are out of the classroom but not out of education, and ensuring that our investment in gifted and talented children to tailor education to the needs of the child, whichever school he or she is in, can be enhanced and increased.

We are therefore announcing that the 450 secondary schools in the excellence in cities programme will be almost doubled to 750, which is one in five schools. It will cover 21 new local authority areas, including Tyne and Wear, Gateshead, Newcastle, North and South Tyneside and Sunderland and the boroughs that make up Teesside: Redcar, Middlesbrough, Stockton and Hartlepool. It will also include major cities that were not included in the original round: Bristol, Leicester, Stoke-on-Trent, Kingston upon Hull and Nottingham. In addition, we shall extend the existing programme of excellence to areas in London, including Barking and Dagenham, Brent and Ealing.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Ms Margaret Hodge): Hear, hear.

Mr. Blunkett: I am glad that I got a "Hear, hear" from my hon. Friend, who of course had no influence over this decision.

In the north-west, the boroughs of Wirral, St. Helens and Halton, together with Rochdale in Greater Manchester, will be included. The extension will also include a new programme for primary schools. They will now be included in the inner cities programme. About 200,000 primary pupils will initially be included in the programme in existing excellence in cities areas. It will

[Mr. Blunkett]

then be extended to the new areas from next year. I hope that with the assistance of my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and the spending review as a whole, I shall be able to do more through excellence in cities in the years to come. It is a programme that even my most vehement opponents from left and right have not so far denounced, although I am obviously—

Valerie Davey (Bristol, West): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Blunkett: I knew that I had spoken too soon, but not in this case, I think.

Valerie Davey: My right hon. Friend is quite right. I want to welcome the initiative being taken in Bristol, in particular, and to ask whether he will endorse again the nature of this development, which, in sharp contrast to the previous Government's city technology proposals, instead of being divisive and establishing new schools in isolation from the rest of the school community, promotes both excellence and collaboration?

Mr. Blunkett: Yes. That is why I emphasise the crucial nature of collaboration and partnership in all our initiatives to target disadvantage and support achievement. Excellence in cities and the city academies involve partnership and a commitment to working with the most difficult children and not only those who are already succeeding. The measure of the success of our partnership with teachers, heads and parents will be what we have done for those who were previously excluded: those who were outside the system and were least likely to succeed within it.

Mr. St. Aubyn: The Secretary of State talks about partnership in the new schemes. Why did it take 10 years for any Labour Member to visit Emmanuel college in Gateshead, which was stretching out its hand in partnership to the local community and was shunned by the local education authority and by the 10 Labour Members in the surrounding constituencies?

Mr. Blunkett: I seem to remember the hon. Gentleman asking me that question about 12 months ago in Education and Employment questions. The answer is exactly the one that I gave then. I am sure that he will remember it well, given that I remember the question.

Today we are addressing the backlog of neglect for all schools: not only those that were fortunate enough to get extra resources in the past but those that are now getting extra resources for the future. We will further invest in overcoming the backlog of disrepair, neglect and decay in too many of our schools.

As part of the £837 million programme for England, I am announcing a £250 million boost to the new deal for schools capital programme, ensuring that a further 3,000 schools will have investment in overcoming inadequacies such as leaking roofs, windows that let in the cold and wet, temporary classrooms—there are still 10,000 of those—and the neglect of the basic fabric that has led to the deterioration of buildings over the past two decades.

We have already doubled the capital investment in education. The extra money will enable us to do far more in the coming two years, which will be welcomed in constituencies throughout the country. We will shortly announce how it is to be distributed. In the previous round of new deal for schools, we had bids that exceeded the resources available fivefold, so we will not reopen the bidding process, but we will work with schools and education authorities to tackle the priority needs that it was not possible to meet under the previous round. I hope that all concerned will welcome that.

We will also be able to tackle what might be described as the school and classroom of the future and to experiment with how the school day, the school year and the nature of teaching will change in years to come. I stress that we want to work in partnership with both the profession and education authorities in achieving change. We want to ensure that experiments are evaluated and that people are free to take new steps in finding out what works best.

The experiment in Telford city technology college—with the learning day instead of the traditional school day, the use of technology and the provision of teachers as learning managers and mentors—has been extremely successful. We want to learn from such programmes in looking to the future for a secondary school system that matches the aspirations that we all share. It is, therefore, crucial to ensure that the worlds of school and work are developed in partnership together. That is why I wish to stress this afternoon the importance of our investment in skills and in employment. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Employment, Welfare to Work and Equal Opportunities and the Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment, my hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Ms Hodge) will spell out with me over the next few weeks the way in which the additional resources for employment will be targeted at extending our programmes, and intensifying the new deal programme and the work with young people at an early stage. That will include directed help to particular areas of the country where there are low levels of employment and high levels of unemployment, and will include employment zones, which we announced two weeks ago.

In the months ahead, we shall talk about the development of specific help for those moving from long-term unemployment back into work, including lone parents, and how we can assist that progress further. We shall also examine how we can extend the success of the new deal for the under-25s to the long-term unemployed over the age of 25, including from this April the extension of the pilot programmes for getting the over-50s back to work. The older one gets, the more important the work with the over-50s seems.

We can work closely with the Employment Service and its partners in the private sector on enhancing the work that has been done in the past two years in making the new deal a success, including the progress that has been made with 800,000 men and women in work who previously would not have had a job and the improvement of 70 per cent. in youth unemployment. All that links the ability to learn with the ability to earn one's own living and to have optimism—not simply for those who have been unemployed and who now have a job, but the optimism that is passed from adults to their youngsters, so that generational disadvantage and the decay and misery of lack of aspiration and expectation can be overcome at last. In some of our most deprived areas, that is a critical factor in inspiring young people to believe that working in school is worth while at all.

Incidentally, we are not ducking exclusion from schools, which is difficult for Government and teachers alike. We are not forcing head teachers to keep children who are disruptive in the classroom; far from it. The 200 learning support units that are already in train—the number of which will be substantially increased by the investment that I have announced today—will enable us to continue to give an education to those who would otherwise be on the street. It is truancy and permanent exclusion from schools that lead to permanent exclusion from the world of work and society. That is why more than 70 per cent. of those who have been long-term truants or excluded end up in prison and why the prison population regrettably consists on average of people with a reading age of eight or below. Even those who turn to religion—*[Interruption.]* On that note, Madam Speaker leaves. I must have said something amiss.

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): She has gone to pray.

Mr. Blunkett: I know that she does so regularly, in order that we in the House might get it right and be brief, so I will make progress.

The measures that we have taken today will ensure that we can make that link between the education system and the future of young people. They will also mean that we can take steps to overcome the problem of the variation in teacher-pupil ratios in secondary schools—an issue on which we have experienced criticism from the Opposition. My right hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards dealt with that issue at Question Time, so I do not intend to go over it in great detail. Suffice it to say that the investment of extra money in secondary education from this April will allow for 3,500 extra teachers, if that is what head teachers choose to prioritise. It will ensure that the 10-year worsening of pupil-teacher ratios in secondary schools can be reversed. I want to make it clear that where we ring-fence funds and target them at reducing pupil-teacher ratios or class sizes, we take responsibility for doing so. We have done that for five to seven-year-olds: we have earmarked the money and there is a clear and specific research argument for undertaking that reduction.

When heads have a choice, as they do in secondary schools, about how they organise their classes, which they do, and prioritise the extra money, I do not accept that the Government have a responsibility to order them to spend that money on teachers as opposed to teaching assistants, information technology, books or equipment, merely to make the Government's figures on secondary school PTRs look better. Again and again in this Parliament, I will make it clear that if we mean that heads should have greater freedom to determine how they spend their budgets, we should back that up by being prepared to support them if they choose to achieve our standards agenda slightly differently from the way in which politicians would wish. I hope that the Opposition parties will acknowledge the intellectual rigour of that argument and will stop whining that we have not done what they did not do in 20 years.

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield): This is an opportunity to have a second bite at this question in one day. I thank my right hon. Friend for those remarks because those of us who want progress in education want it to be based on research, good practice and evaluation. The Select Committee on Education and Employment recently investigated this subject and talked to Mr. Woodhead, who asserted strongly that progress must be based on secondary school heads having the flexibility to make their own decisions to get the best quality results that they can.

Mr. Blunkett: I thank my hon. Friend for those remarks. The Select Committee has been keen to ensure that facts influence the decisions that are taken.

Last Tuesday was the first day of spring and now there is a new spring in the step of heads, teachers and non-teaching staff, who are looking forward to increased pay under the new pay and performance arrangements and to increased books, equipment and staffing and, of course, subsequently to increased success. This is what the Budget was all about: reinforcing hard work and achievement, underpinning the successes that have already been gained and providing people with optimism for the future. It is optimism about having the future in their hands, working with us and supported by us, to enable them to make decisions that influence their future and that of their children, and to ensure that they can earn their living and make choices within their family. It will ensure that the Government of the day are seen to be supporting that hard work and innovation.

We are very pleased about the £1 billion extra throughout the United Kingdom for education, the increased investment from the windfall levy for employment—

Mr. Tony McWalter (Hemel Hempstead): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Blunkett: My hon. Friend is just in time.

Mr. McWalter: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. That is why I jumped up. While I congratulate him on the substantial resources that have gone into education and on his negotiations to achieve that, I am perplexed about the extra money for schools. On average, a school will get £40,000, which is welcome money and it absolutely addresses the issue. However, there may be worries about using the money for extra staff when it may not be forthcoming in future years and those staff may have to be laid off. Will he give an assurance—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. This is an over-long interruption of a peroration.

Mr. Blunkett: My hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mr. McWalter) only just got his intervention in. With the additional £1 billion for 2000–01, it is obviously recognised that the expenditure commitment from this year will have implications for later years. Decisions on funding for schools from 2001–02 onwards will be taken as part of the spending review, but the additions announced in Tuesday's Budget will be additional, on-going revenue. There is no intention that the money announced should be a one-off addition. We will carry it forward as part of the additional funding in the spending review, enabling schools to make decisions now that they can be sure will be carried forward from April 2001.

My right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury is sitting beside me. I hope that his presence will reinforce the assurance that I am giving to the House.

[Mr. Blunkett]

How could we possibly start programmes in September 2000, with a view to ending them in March 2001? We are talking about additional funding—additional money going to my Department and additional spending in the future. I look forward to the discussions in the spending review that will carry forward the Government's commitment to education, education, education.

1.36 pm

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead): I begin by making it absolutely clear to the House that the Opposition welcome increased spending on education. We want more money to go to schools, to be spent on improving the education of children. We have welcomed extra spending announced by the Government before, but that does not mean that we always think that the Government spend the money well, or that the methods of allocation cannot be improved. However, we do welcome extra spending on education.

I am sure that many schools and governors will be very interested in the Secretary of State's response to the intervention from the hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mr. McWalter). The Secretary of State said that the £1 billion extra for 2000-01 announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer on Tuesday will be on-going additional expenditure. If that is the case, the Secretary of State should ask the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to issue an amendment to the Red Book, which states that that extra £1 billion applies only to 2000-01 and that it does not carry through into other years.

Before I speak about schools and education, I should like to touch briefly on employment issues and the Secretary of State's comments about the new deal. The Government consistently tell us about the success of the new deal, and the matter came up earlier in Education and Employment questions. However, the history of the new deal is worth examining.

The Government came to power in May 1997, having made an early pledge to get 250,000 long-term young unemployed people off the dole and into work. As it happened, they took office at a time when there were only 167,000 long-term young unemployed, thanks to the success of the previous Government's economic policies in getting people into jobs—so the pledge that I mentioned had been broken before the Government even took office.

Since then, the Government have made various claims about the number of young people getting work as a result of the new deal. As we know from the Red Book, those claims are incorrect. The Government do not accept what the Red Book accepts—that 50 per cent. of those who come off the new deal at some stage and get jobs would have found those jobs anyway. Their success in finding work is not a result of the new deal.

Mr. Blunkett: Will the hon. Lady accept that the Red Book's reference is to the research carried out by the National Institute of Economic and Social Research, which used statistics from the first year of the new deal to the beginning of 1999? The institute stated that the figure to which the hon. Lady referred was its best estimate. That estimate was not made by the Treasury or my Department.

Mrs. May: The reference in the Red Book is indeed to "independent evaluation". That evaluation has been accepted by the Minister for Employment, Welfare to Work and Equal Opportunities, who has stated categorically that the figures for the new deal scheme contain at least 50 per cent. dead weight. Therefore, only half the number that the Government claim have got jobs through the new deal have in fact done so.

It is important to make one other reference to the new deal figures. The Government should look at the rate at which young long-term unemployed people have been getting jobs since the new deal was introduced and compare it with what happened under the previous Government. Between May 1993 and May 1997, nearly 5,000 young long-term unemployed people a month were getting employment. Since the new deal started, that figure has fallen to 2,771.

Charlotte Atkins (Staffordshire, Moorlands): Will the hon. Lady say whether she would abolish the new deal?

Mrs. May: The hon. Lady will have to curb her impatience a little longer. [HON. MEMBERS: "Answer."] I am answering. The hon. Lady will have to curb her impatience a little longer for proposals to get unemployed people into work. I suggest that before she rises to say what a good job the new deal is doing, she looks carefully at the cost of each job under the new deal. She should look at the reality of the figures for the new deal, which show that it has not been getting as many young people into work as the Government have claimed. She should look at the rate at which young people are getting jobs under this Government, which is nearly half of what it was under the previous Government. She should listen to employers who complain that many people sent to them under the new deal either have no interest in their area of employment or are not suited to it, and that the scheme could work better if the Government actually listened to what employers say. The sad fact is that the Government are making many claims for the new deal, but they are failing to deliver.

Mr. Peter Bradley (The Wrekin): I am even more confused than I was when the hon. Lady replied to my hon. Friend's intervention. If the new deal is not serving the unemployed and is not serving business, why will she not say that she would abolish it?

Mrs. May: The hon. Gentleman's confusion is not a matter for me; it is a matter for him. Again, I suggest that he looks at what the Government are claiming for the new deal and the reality. *[Interruption.]* I suggest that the Labour Whip, the hon. Member for Sheffield, Attercliffe (Mr. Betts), is a little patient and curbs his excitement. I can understand why the Government are keen to hear of better ideas for getting young long-term unemployed people jobs—it is because of the expensive failure of the new deal.

I repeat that we welcome extra spending on education, particularly on schools, but then, we welcomed the £19 billion extra announced in the comprehensive spending review. However, it did not take long to realise

that it was not £19 billion and that, at the best estimate, it was only £9 billion, and that was before the issues of real terms and the underfunding of teachers' pay awards were taken into account.

The best description of the way in which the Government have manipulated the figures on education spending was given at the weekend in one of the newspapers by a former Member of the House, Phillip Oppenheim. *[Interruption.]* Perhaps Labour Members would like to listen and understand what their Government have done with the figures. He made the point that if someone was 3 ft and grew by 1 ft a year over three years, they did not end up being 9 ft tall. That is exactly what the Government have done with the figures on education spending—they have double and treble-counted.

I say to the Secretary of State, who finds this so amusing, that the issue for him is the expectations that teachers, parents and governors had of what the schools would receive. Those expectations have been dashed. There is considerable disillusionment in schools among teachers, governors, parents and others because what they thought was going to be an additional £19 billion for education has turned out to be nothing of the sort. We see disillusion setting in because the Government are failing to meet their manifesto commitment to increase the share of national income spent on education over and above that spent by the previous Conservative Government. The extra £1 billion that the Secretary of State announced today will do nothing to meet that commitment and nothing to ensure that, during their term in office, the Government will be spending more as a proportion of national income on education than the previous Conservative Government. In fact, they will be spending less.

The Secretary of State has said that £300 million will go directly to schools and that it will be up to heads to decide how it should be spent. I welcome his conversion to our policy that heads should have freedom to decide how money is spent in their schools. I would like heads to have freedom of decision over the whole of their school's budget, rather than the small proportion that the Secretary of State has announced. It is common sense that heads know best what is in the interests of children in their classrooms.

However, the Secretary of State's comments this afternoon about the importance of freedom for heads to determine how to spend their budget will be met with incredulity by former grant-maintained schools which had that freedom but had it taken away by the Government. Those schools were able to exercise the sort of freedoms that the Secretary of State now talks about over the whole of their budget and they flourished and improved the quality of education. That freedom was taken away from them. One can imagine how they feel, hearing of the Secretary of State's damascene conversion. I should be interested to see what happens when he meets the former grant-maintained school heads who have consistently complained about the removal of that freedom.

Ms Linda Perham (Ilford, North): If heads were so keen on the freedom that grant-maintained status provided, why did so few schools decide to go grant-maintained? Only 1,100 out of 24,000 schools did so.

Mrs. May: Perhaps the hon. Lady will talk to Labour councillors who, in all too many areas, conducted vendettas against schools that wanted to go grant-maintained and exercise their freedoms.

When he referred to the money that will go to primary and secondary schools, the Secretary of State did not refer to the new requirements that secondary schools will have to meet. I hope that in the reply to the debate we shall hear exactly what the new requirements will be. It is stated in the Red Book that an average secondary school will receive its extra funding only

> In return for meeting new requirements.

Will those be targets set for exam results or key stage 3 results? How will they be measured? I hope that we shall hear when the money will be made available to schools if performance targets are set. Schools will want to know how that money will come to them and how they can succeed in getting it.

The Secretary of State reels off the figures, but there is concern among primary schools with large numbers of pupils—say 400—that will receive £9,000 that secondary schools with similar numbers of pupils will receive £30,000. The Secretary of State will find that many primary schools will question the way in which the money has been divided.

For schools that have in recent years faced a cut in their budget of perhaps as much as £250,000, the extra money will go some way towards relieving the pressure, but it certainly will not meet all their requirements. Schools such as the London Oratory have faced a £250,000 budget cut. I do not know whether the Secretary of State will now advise the Prime Minister on whether he needs to make his parental contribution to the London Oratory, given that an extra sum of money is available.

Mr. Sheerman: I congratulate the hon. Lady on beginning her speech with a welcome for the extra spending. Although she talks about reality and figures, she has not yet said one word about how she balances her criticisms of spending—obviously she intends to spend more—with the commitment given by the leader of her party to cut taxes. Can she square those two matters?

Mrs. May: That is a bit rich coming from a Member whose Government claim that they can cut taxes and, at the same time, increase spending on health and education.

Head teachers should receive their whole budget, with the freedom to control their spending. That is what we shall introduce under our free schools policy—we shall set the school free and, once again, trust the professionals.

This morning, on the "Today" programme, the Secretary of State was interviewed following comments from Sir Jeremy Beecham, the leader of the Local Government Association and a leading, senior Labour councillor, who has expressed concern about the impact on local government—especially local education authorities—of the Government's decision on spending controls. I suggest to the Secretary of State that to have Labour councillors complaining that he is taking responsibility away from them is hardly the best way to spearhead the Labour party's local government election campaign.

The Government are reducing the role of local authorities, by stealth, in various ways. Under the Learning and Skills Bill, the role of LEAs in sixth-form funding will be removed. City academies will be taken

[Mrs. May]

away from the direct control of LEAs. The extra funding announced by the Secretary of State will go directly to schools and not be channelled through local authorities.

Mr. Blunkett *rose—*

Mrs. May: Will the Secretary of State bear with me? I may be about to answer the question he was about to ask, so he may not need to rise.

Mr. Blunkett: Shall I answer the question, and then the hon. Lady can ask it?

Mrs. May: By stealth—by the back door—in all those ways, the Government are reducing the role of LEAs. However, they do not have the guts to say that LEAs should have a new role and that schools should receive the whole of their budget with the freedom to spend it as they want. That is what we have said we will do under our free schools policy—local authorities will continue to have a role in education, but it will be different from the one they have at present. Schools will be free to spend their budget as they think fit.

Mr. Blunkett: May I clarify the answer to the question that I would have asked if I had been able to intervene a few seconds earlier? If the new Conservative policy involves direct funding to schools, what role would the education authority have in the distribution of those resources?

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): None, I hope.

Mr. Blunkett: The hon. Gentleman has answered the question. If he is correct, does that imply that a Conservative Government would set up not only a national funding formula, but an agency equivalent to the Funding Agency for Schools for England to distribute the resources? Would they thus accept full responsibility for the pupil-teacher ratio, the books, the equipment and the running costs of each of the 24,000 schools?

Mr. Willis: That would have been my question, too.

Mrs. May: I am happy to answer the Secretary of State's question and the putative question from the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis). We are considering the formula for funding schools under the free schools policy. Many teachers have told us that a national funding formula should be adopted by the Government. I understand that the Secretary of State said this morning that he, too, might consider such a formula and the adoption of such responsibilities.

What is important is to ensure that money for education is spent in the best possible way—in the interests of children in our schools and of improving education. In order to do that, we need to give heads the common-sense responsibility to decide what is in the best interests of the children in their schools. That is the right approach.

I am interested in the Secretary of State's reference to freedoms. That is yet another Government U-turn in only a few weeks. For example, there were an amazing number of U-turns last week on the issue of selection. The Secretary of State told us today that he was expanding the excellence in cities programme, but I must point out to him that that includes an expansion of selection. Selection is a key element of that programme, with pupils not being selected by aptitude as the Government say they will be for specialist schools, but being accepted on the basis of ability. That will give the 5 to 10 per cent. most able pupils in such schools a different education from that received by the other children in those schools. The Government claim that there will be no selection by examination or by interview. Perhaps the Secretary of State can explain how the children in excellence in cities schools are selected for their ability if it is not by examination or interview.

That is not the only Government U-turn that we have witnessed—there have also been U-turns on freedoms and selection. Last week, the Secretary of State was spinning around in a whirl on the issue of grammar schools. One minute he was against them, then he was not against them and then he was against them again. Grammar schools woke up after the vote in the House of Lords feeling that the pressure on them had been relieved and that their future was once again certain, only to find their hopes dashed by the Secretary of State's intention to reintroduce ballots when the Learning and Skills Bill comes before this House. Grammar schools now know that their future is uncertain and that they are under constant threat directly as a result of the Government's actions.

Another U-turn was made on the issue of city academies. I am sorry that the hon. Member for Bristol, West (Valerie Davey) has left the Chamber. She asked the Secretary of State to confirm how terrible city technology colleges were and I understood him to confirm that point. However, the city academies are very much based on the approach of the city technology colleges. The hon. Lady spoke about division, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn) pointed out, much of the division—where it existed—was caused not by the creation of city technology colleges, or by their heads and teachers, but by Labour councillors who refused to meet the CTCs. For example, in Bradford, they refused to allow local authority schools to play sports against the CTCs. They froze out CTCs and excluded them from the local community of education and the local community of schools.

Last week, the Secretary of State announced the setting up of the city academies, and we heard in the Budget that £60 million would go to them and other failing schools projects. When the Financial Secretary responds to the debate, will he explain what the legal status of city academies will be, given that they will be outwith the control of local authorities?

I hope that the Government will take the opportunity to applaud the work done by Surrey county council in bringing in the company 3Es to take over the failing Kings Manor school in Guildford. I hope that the Government will also take the opportunity to condemn the actions of the National Union of Teachers in Surrey, which is trying to prevent 3Es from exercising the freedom that it believes it needs on staffing in the school so that it can turn the school from a failing one into one that provides the right quality of education for all children.

Diversity and excellence in education is an issue with which we are particularly concerned. However, it is interesting to note some of the comments that have recently been made about it. The following statements were made:

> My vision is one of excellence and diversity, a vision of transformation . . . there are a number of key principles behind such transformation including . . . increased diversity of provision . . . schools will be built and managed by partnerships involving . . . voluntary, church and business sponsors.

An alternative statement is:

> We believe that a commitment to . . . genuine diversity is fundamental to achieving excellence in education . . . Partner schools . . . will be set up by the private sector or voluntary groups or charities.

You, Mr. Deputy Speaker, might not think that there is very much difference between the statements. However, the second statement on diversity is a direct quotation from the Conservative party's document on "The Common Sense Revolution in education", which we announced last November and which is about partner schools. The first set of statements is more recent. Again, I welcome the Secretary of State's conversion to diversity in education—this time in his proposals for city academies.

Mr. Blunkett: Perhaps the hon. Lady can recall the name of the document on which the 1995 Labour party conference voted, which caused so much controversy and dealt both with selection and grant-maintained status. The name of the document was, of course, "Diversity and Excellence in Schools".

Mrs. May: Given the policies that this Government introduced on taking office, that document sounds as much of a joke as the Secretary of State claims the comments he made at that conference were. The Government have ceaselessly tried to remove diversity from education, in attacks on grammar and grant-maintained schools. In so many ways, they have cut parental choice and removed diversity.

I welcome the fact that the Secretary of State is now willing and happy to adopt the Conservative party's partner schools proposal—except, as in everything, he wants to restrict that good idea to a few schools and to prevent it from being open to all. I ask him to consider that issue. We should be increasing diversity and excellence in education for all children in every part of the country, not targeting certain ideas merely on particular areas—notably, from the sound of those set out by the Secretary of State today, Labour local authorities.

I shall deal now with the issue of failing schools and the announcement of £60 million for the fresh start programme and city academies. The Secretary of State made several comments on the exclusion policy in failing schools. I want to address that serious matter because it relates to the quality of education received by both the child who is at risk of exclusion or has been excluded, and others in a classroom where a child has not been excluded and continues to disrupt learning.

Those who are dealing with failing schools and difficult schools in inner cities consistently refer to the problem of being unable to exercise the discipline policy that they want and to the fact that that inability to exclude pupils restricts their ability to improve education and turn the schools around. It is right to provide children who are excluded with an appropriate education; they should not be left on one side, because their life chances depend on their receiving an appropriate education. However, keeping those children on site, either in the classroom or in the learning support unit, is not always the answer for either the child concerned or others.

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. May: I shall in a moment.

Not only teachers but pupils to whom I talked the other day in a secondary school in Kettering said that they were concerned because disruptive pupils were being kept in the classroom as a result of the head teacher's inability to exercise the complete freedom to exclude. Head teachers should have freedom to exercise the discipline policy—including exclusion—that they believe is right for their schools, the pupil concerned and others in the classroom.

Mr. Willis: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. May: I shall finish this point then give way first to the hon. Member for Brent, North (Mr. Gardiner).

No pupil's learning should be disrupted because the Government have forced on a school a target of reducing exclusions, thus tying its hands and reducing its ability to exclude and exercise the discipline policy that it wants.

Mr. Gardiner: Does the hon. Lady accept that in the last three years of the Conservative Administration, exclusions in schools rose from 3,000 to 12,000 a year? Will she join me in congratulating local education authorities such as Brent, which, through its work in targeting excluded pupils, has seen that figure drop by half?

Mrs. May: There is good work in many areas in targeting pupils who are at risk of exclusion, ensuring that they are not excluded. There is a care centre in Birmingham, for example. However, if the hon. Gentleman is saying that pupils should be kept in the classroom regardless of their impact on themselves or others, that is wrong. Heads should have the ability to exclude where that is right for the pupil concerned and for the rest of the children in the classroom.

Mr. Willis: I apologise to the hon. Lady and the Secretary of State for arriving a little late. One of the issues that affects her policy is what we do with those youngsters in free schools. If all 24,000 heads are able to exclude students whom they think are disruptive, what will happen to those students, and how do we get them into another free school?

Mrs. May: It is necessary to ensure that education is provided for those pupils who are excluded, but it might be appropriate for them to be educated not in a formal school environment but in a centre that will meet their particular needs. That is why it is important to consider the interests of the child concerned as well as those of all the children in the school, and not simply to say that there should be a target—which the Government are so keen on—to reduce exclusions and that schools should be financially penalised if exclusions are not reduced as the Government want them to be.

[Mrs. May]

I noted this morning that the Secretary of State is willing to take responsibility when he thinks that schools are doing well, but not when his failing schools programme is failing, as demonstrated by the resignation of three of his 10 superheads in the fresh start initiative. Failing schools are faced with a confusing myriad of initiatives, including education action zones, excellence in cities, mini-EAZs, city academies, fresh start and superheads.

Schools and heads are subject to initiative after initiative. Sadly, they continue to be unable to meet the children's needs because of too much interference from the Government. They are unable to get on with the job that they want to do, which is to ensure that they are providing the education that is right for the children in their classrooms.

It was interesting that, last week, head teachers of the 36 most improved schools in England warned that the Government's educational reforms

are in danger of being submerged under red tape.

Time and again, schools complain about the bureaucracy and red tape surrounding all the Government's initiatives and say that they cannot get on with the job of improving education in the classroom because of the imposition of initiatives and too much prescription and interference by the Government.

We want schools to be free to do what they believe is right for children. The Government should set schools free, get the budgets to schools and enable heads to decide how to spend them. They should start trusting the teaching profession again, let teachers get on with teaching and increase parental choice. By doing that, we shall ensure that all children are able to achieve their full potential.

2.8 pm

Mr. Ian Pearson (Dudley, South): Any Budget in the modern era needs to be judged not just on domestic terms but on how it positions Britain in the international economy. Everywhere in the world countries are changing their economic and fiscal policies to meet the challenges of the new millennium. The trend is towards lower business and individual tax rates, and lower debt through tight control and efficient public spending.

In the United States, business and individual taxes are low. The Clinton budget in January forecast the elimination of the national debt by 2013. Germany is slashing its federal business taxes and has started to reduce the top rates of income tax. France, Italy and Holland are all, to varying degrees, adopting similar policies. The accession countries in Europe are following a similar strategy for tight control of public spending and debt, and low business taxes. Even newly developing countries such as Brazil have embraced the golden rule, pledging to borrow only to invest and to balance the books over the economic cycle.

Nations around the globe are embracing the new economy. They recognise that e-commerce and the internet will revolutionise trade between nation states and completely change the way in which we do business in every country. The Lisbon summit is discussing that as we speak. It is clear that, although we cannot make a future for ourselves taking in each other's e-washing—we still need to make and distribute things—the e-commerce revolution will transform businesses and economies over the next decade.

The trend across Europe is leading to a change in the European social model. The European social model is breaking up. It is all very well for some Opposition Members to grumble darkly about the creation of a European federal superstate, but that is not what the future holds. The future is about establishing competitive conditions across Europe, opening markets and ensuring that there is fair tax competition. It will then be for nation states to compete like fury, beneath a Europewide set of rules and trading arrangements. Securing national competitive advantage is the name of the economic policy game.

Mr. Blunt: If things do not turn out as promised by the hon. Gentleman, will he join the effort to establish a body of opinion to support us Conservatives in the quest for a future such as the one he has portrayed?

Mr. Pearson: I do not know how things will turn out, but I do know that the Opposition parties need a great deal of help, and they will not get it from me.

How is Britain doing, and how will Budget 2000 affect our economic performance? We have the highest employment rate in our history: 800,000 more people are now in work than at the time of the last general election. We have high growth rates: the Budget projects rates of between 2.75 and 3.25 per cent. in the new financial year. We have a smaller debt burden than any other advanced industrial nation—smaller than that of the United States, although it plans to exceed us in that respect. We have made Britain an attractive environment, in which businesses want to work and people want to enjoy their lives. In recent times, two thirds of inward investment in Europe has been in Britain.

Budget 2000 maintains our competitive position and, by ensuring a strong economy, allows the Government to proceed with our fairness agenda while maintaining a budget surplus—£14 billion in the new financial year, and £16 billion and £13 billion in the following two years. That is testimony to the importance of running a sound macro-economic system, imposing low business tax rates, and operating a policy that encourages and rewards enterprise.

I welcome the massive boost to the health budget, as do people throughout the west midlands. It is now imperative for a grown-up debate to take place about how the wall of cash that will hit the NHS over the next four years can be spent as wisely and efficiently as possible. The Prime Minister launched that debate yesterday; I fear that the Leader of the Opposition did not want to join in, but I hope that more sensible Conservative Members will play a constructive part in the discussion of how we can strip the NHS of some of its bureaucracy and provide the service that will be needed in the 21st century.

The boost to the education budget will have a big impact in my constituency. I calculate that more than £450,000 extra will go to schools in my constituency alone, while well over £1 million will go to Dudley metropolitan borough council's schools. That is part of the policy of transforming education in this nation. I firmly support the strategy announced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. I strongly suspect that more good

news will come as a result of the comprehensive spending review, and that "education, education, education" will remain a priority of Labour Governments.

Significant announcements were made about taxation of charities. Philanthropy is all too often forgotten in Britain. Historically, we have quite a low giving rate, and I think those announcements herald a major step forward. The challenge is now to the charities sector: to embrace the changes and to market itself aggressively in order to reap the full benefits of the Chancellor's largesse.

The Budget also challenges some of the entrepreneurs who have made a lot of money in the new economy to pull their weight, and to use the available tax breaks to invest more and give something back to the community that brought them up and allowed them to prosper.

Mr. Sheerman: Does my hon. Friend think that the Budget will lead to what he and I have campaigned for—a greater propensity to donate money for university research, as happens in America? Does he think that it will bring us nearer to establishing the genuine partnership that exists in the United States between philanthropy and investment?

Mr. Pearson: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Donation rates among alumni in the United States are dramatically higher than those in Britain. The Budget changes will make it far easier for individuals to give to universities, and for businesses to donate assets to both universities and charities. I hope that, over the next 10 years, a far greater proportion of universities' income will be raised from donations from alumni and businesses.

Like every other Labour Member—I suspect that our view is widely shared—I welcome the increase in the pensioners' winter fuel allowance to £150, and the increase in the minimum income guarantee in line with average earnings. Pensioners will also welcome the fact that the price of petrol is to rise by only 2p a litre. They drive cars too, and those who must live on low incomes still need to get out and about. I think, however, that the Government might have been more generous in one respect. The Chancellor referred to the needs of those who are just above minimum income levels and who have to pay the full whack regardless of any benefit entitlement.

I still believe that what pensioners really want is an increase in the basic state pension. It would cost an incredible amount—some £18 billion—to restore the earnings link, and no sensible Government could advocate it. However, as part of their review, the Government should consider on a year-by-year basis whether the economy can afford to increase the state pension in line with earnings.

We should not forget pensioners when we talk about the new economy. The rate of internet take-up by pensioners is low, but new facilities such as internet shopping could be of great benefit, particularly as some of our nation's pensioners become increasingly housebound. I hope that the Financial Secretary will consider in due course the introduction of a scheme whereby pensioners could receive free internet training.

There is much to be welcomed in the Budget's enterprise package and the proposed changes in respect of the enterprise investment scheme and venture capital trusts are sensible. They will be widely welcomed by industry, as will making the 40 per cent. capital allowances regime permanent, reducing the capital gains tax taper from 10 years to four and increasing the range of business assets that qualify. We should not underestimate the significance of those changes and their likely impact. I shall discuss that in a moment.

I also welcome the all-employee share ownership scheme. I did one of the roadshows to promote it in Birmingham recently. Companies clearly want to be seen to be fair to all their employees and recognise the link between employee share ownership and economic performance. I am particularly glad that the Government have decided to continue with the save-as-you-earn share-save scheme, which is very effective. There is no reason to discard it.

The decision to have 100 per cent. capital allowances for buying information technology equipment is novel. It shows that the Government's thinking is going in the right direction—they want to encourage all companies, regardless of the sector in which they operate, to embrace the knowledge economy. However, as I have said before, leasing rather than purchasing IT equipment is often a far more effective option for many companies. Some IT systems become obsolete quickly, which means that it is dangerous to buy assets as they soon end up on the scrap heap. We ought to consider ways of introducing leasing arrangements to the capital allowances regime, which would pass the benefits of leasing on to companies.

I also welcome the enterprise management incentive scheme. Since the pre-Budget report, it has been modified to take account of industry's needs and now offers decent incentives for small businesses that want to attract and retain high-quality, high-calibre senior employees.

I urge the Government to do more for our manufacturing industry, particularly companies that export. Interestingly, the Confederation of British Industry made little reference to manufacturing industry in its pre-Budget submission. It did not want a package for manufacturing, but called for other measures. No initiatives came from it that would help our hard-hit exporters. At least the Government are doing something and have announced the introduction of regional venture capital funds across the nation.

As someone with a background in regional venture capital, I believe that venture capital is important and that we must maintain our lead in Europe in terms of having a thriving industry. However, I feel that we are missing the point. We are planning to allocate about £100 million to the west midlands region and similar sums to Yorkshire and other regions, although amounts vary, but there is already a properly functioning venture capital market in place. Recently, Greater London Enterprise and West Midlands Enterprise, an organisation for which I used to work, announced a £60 million venture capital fund and this week South Yorkshire Investment Partners announced a £110 million fund. They and the Government's regional venture capital plans are targeted on similar areas.

We are missing the gap, which exists in two respects. First, there is a shortage of decent propositions to back and of proposals from universities that are prepared to work on technology that can be dragged out and exploited by other companies. Secondly, we must do something about companies that will never have spectacular venture capital internal rates of return of 20 per cent. or more, but offer solid growth prospects, even though they may have

[Mr. Pearson]

strained balance sheets and need long-term loan finance. The Government could do more to help businesses if they addressed those issues.

I have three proposals on manufacturing. The CBI has not come up with any, but let me try mine. To be fair, the CBI regards infrastructure as very significant. The previous Government did not pay enough attention to infrastructure and I am worried about whether this Government are paying sufficient attention to its important contribution to Britain's economic performance. I am pleased by the announcement that the Manchester metro extension is to go ahead and I should like the metro be developed in the west midlands, too. Investment in our transport infrastructure has a substantial knock-on economic development benefit for our industries. Let us consider the benefit of building the black country spine road. Industries clustered around it and upgraded their capabilities. We now have profitable companies with modern production facilities that moved from inefficient plant lay-outs to convenient sites. We need to do more for infrastructure, although £280 million is a great start, and I hope that the comprehensive spending review will go substantially further.

We could also help exporters by strengthening the budget and operations of British Trade International so that it can offer packages to help companies to access even more new markets and provide additional assistance with getting projects under way. The Government should consider that, as well as giving more support to regional development agencies and boosting the regional selective assistance budget, which should be targeted on manufacturing industries and companies that export.

I want briefly to discuss the situation at Rover-BMW and Longbridge, which relates directly to those matters. The workers at Longbridge have obviously been badly betrayed by BMW. They are not to blame for the situation. The Government negotiated in good faith with BMW and put a package together. They are not to blame for the situation. Following BMW's announcement, the Government acted extremely quickly. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry for taking the time and trouble to go to Longbridge to talk to the workers, the trade unions and management. BMW did not extend that courtesy to its work force when it made the announcement. Today, my right hon. Friend is showing his active support for Longbridge's future by having conversations with Joachim Milberg in Germany.

We have established a taskforce, but there is an urgent need for clarity on how the £129 million that has already been allocated will flow. There must be no strings attached to that money. It needs to be able to be spent wherever in the region it is most needed after the decision on Rover Cars. The automotive components supply base will suffer along with Longbridge following the likely loss of jobs there. About 40,000 jobs are at risk in the supply base. We need to ensure that as many of those jobs are safeguarded as possible.

It would be wrong to talk of wage subsidies. Teams of accountants need to look at our supplier companies. Bodies will quickly start to appear on the battlefield. The teams need to take a long hard look at those companies that have a future: those that can, with a bit of bandaging—perhaps long-term loan support—get over cash-flow problems. We need to provide a sensitive, sensible package of financial support, as well as high-quality outplacement support to those workers who will probably not be required in future. The £129 million that has been announced so far should be regarded only as a starter for 10. More cash will be needed if we are to stop the crisis turning into a disaster.

People who live and work in Dudley borough have benefited from the Budget. Every school in my constituency and all the hospitals in the borough will benefit substantially this year and over coming years as a result of the Labour Government. It is a far-sighted Budget, fit to start the new millennium. I congratulate the Chancellor on his achievement.

2.32 pm

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): I should like to return to the theme of education, but I compliment the hon. Member for Dudley, South (Mr. Pearson). It is always a pleasure to listen to him in the House, particularly on the problems that he has experienced in his constituency.

In last year's debate, when the hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) stood up to speak on behalf of the Conservatives, the Secretary of State's dog was sick. I suspect that, if Lucy had been in the Chamber this afternoon when the present incumbent, the hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May), was speaking, she would have jumped across the Table and bitten her leg. Fortunately, she was not here.

I am reminded of Tory policy during their 18 years in government. It was about diversity and excellence: basically, it diverted the poor from excellent schools. The Secretary of State and I disagree on a number of things, but we agree on that fundamental issue: we must no longer have a two-tier education system, where the wealthy and middle-classes have quality schools and the poor are condemned to second-rate schools.

Therefore, it would be disingenuous of the Liberal Democrats not to acknowledge that the additional resources allocated by the Chancellor for our schools are welcome. As a party, we have constantly harried the Secretary of State and the Chancellor for more resources for schools. We thank them for doing something about that.

Heads and governors will undoubtedly feel relief that the perpetual round of cuts that they have experienced in the past decade will, at least this year, not happen. However, it is ironic that schools will have already made cuts for next year. They will already have set budgets, taken staffing decisions and, in many cases, handed out redundancy notices. They will have planned accommodation needs. Admissions will have been agreed and appeals heard. We may be ending boom and bust elsewhere, but such a statement would clearly be premature in education. However, we welcome the resources.

The move to extend education maintenance allowances to other areas of England and Wales is positive. I congratulate the Chancellor and the Secretary of State on doing that. I know from personal experience just how difficult it is to persuade young people to remain in full-time education. The idea of putting resources in place to encourage a seamless progression is worth while.

When he taps into the billions in the comprehensive spending review, will the Secretary of State consider the position of disadvantaged young people in rural areas?

Often, they do not apply in great numbers, but they have equally severe problems. Travelling to a place of education post-16 becomes a big obstacle for many poor families. I hope that the Government will look at that issue.

We welcome the money for booster classes. Again, we support the idea that youngsters who are failing and who can receive additional support should be able to benefit from that at no additional cost to the school, but we find it difficult to understand why heads cannot make the decision about who should be boosted. In schools that I visit—I am sure that it applies to other hon. Members—sometimes, the real priority is not the children whom the Secretary of State wants to get to level 4 to meet his target and to save his job, because that is what he promised, but children at the other end of the extreme, who are finding it incredibly difficult to access even level 2. It is important for them to have booster support.

We support the announcement about the extension of the excellence in cities scheme, particularly the move to extend it to primary schools. There was always a lack of logic in running the scheme in secondary schools and not recognising that those are incredibly dependent on quality product from primary schools.

I worked in the east of Leeds. The Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment, the hon. Member for Croydon, North (Mr. Wicks), was kind enough to visit the area when it was looking at the family of schools initiative. That is bearing significant fruit. One of those schools is regarded as one of the most improved schools in the country this year. That is a great credit to all concerned.

At last, there is a clear admission in the Budget statement that the Government have misled schools about spending. For the past two years, we have been bombarded by Department for Education and Employment press releases announcing and re-announcing the £19 billion of "funny money" to put education, education, education into practice. I quote:

> This is an historic day for education and the country. The Government is providing an additional £19 billion for education over the three years from 1999/00 to 2001/2002. This is the fulfilment of our pledge that education would be our number one priority and that we would increase the share of national income spent on education.

Those were the Secretary of State's words on 14 July 1998. It was an historic day—the Government lost their halo and began telling lies to our teachers, governors, parents and children about spending on education. The lie was that £19 billion was additional money, real money, when it was no more than funny money, a series of manoeuvres to count, double-count and treble-count, to announce and re-announce and to disguise the fact that the only way in which education spending targets could be met was if much-maligned local authorities increased council tax by, on average, three times the rate of inflation. That is how the real money got into schools. The lie was that a Labour Government—I quote from the Labour manifesto:

> will increase the share of national income spent on education as we decrease it on the bills of economic and social failure.

Mr. Blunkett: It is a good phrase.

Mr. Willis: It is. I wish that the Government had meant it, but it was not true. Even after the comprehensive spending review and the Budget, Labour's spending on education over the lifetime of the Parliament will be 4.6 per cent. of GDP. I have the Library note stating that, if the Government go until 2002, in that final year, they will achieve 5 per cent. However, over the lifetime of this Parliament, the average will be 4.6 per cent.

The previous Government, under the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major), achieved an average of 4.9 per cent. We are therefore seeing a real-terms reduction of the percentage of GDP spent on our schools.

We must always welcome a repentant sinner. This week, there was no mention by the Chancellor of the £19 billion figure—it was absent from his statement—and neither was it mentioned today by the Secretary of State. At last, some transparency and an admission that this really is new money! On 21 March, a Treasury official told *The Daily Telegraph* that

> This is new money. You haven't seen it before and there's no double counting.

Clearly, he has heeded the advice in Nick Davies's recent article in *The Guardian*. *[Interruption.]* It is marvellous that the Secretary of State can laugh at what has become a national scandal.

One group of people who will not see that money are those in local education authorities. This morning, on the "Today" programme, the Secretary of State made it clear—I have now looked at the transcript, and I thank him for pointing me in that direction—that he wants that money to bypass LEAs and to go to schools. In their announcement, the Government have taken a giant step towards a nationally funded education system, and perhaps heralded the end of local democratic involvement in our state education system.

Understandably, there will be those—such as Conservative Members—who will rejoice at a direct funding formula, although certainly many head teachers would protest at yet more interference by Government in the curriculum, teaching, assessment and targeting. As a former head, I tell the Secretary of State that I can see the attraction of a centrally funded system, but I know that there are also significant and inherent dangers.

The dangers were certainly flagged up by the hon. Member for Maidenhead. Can hon. Members imagine there being 24,000 free schools in the United Kingdom, each with its own admission authority? That is what we are talking about. The huge mountain of bureaucracy that would be needed to manage such a system is incomprehensible. However, there would be no system to provide special educational needs support or some of the other specialist services that our LEAs provide. Clearly, the good schools—the schools that take the middle class youngsters who have or can afford those types of support—will not need such a system at all.

Mr. Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks): Could the hon. Gentleman tell the House whether the dangers that he sees in the direct payments to schools that the Secretary of State has started outweigh the benefits, which the hon. Gentleman embraced earlier, of teachers seeing the money in schools, or is he seriously suggesting that the money that the Secretary of State is giving in a direct payment should be top-sliced to the LEAs? Perhaps he would now come off the fence.

Mr. Willis: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. Despite the perhaps flippant way in which he

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has raised the issue, it is an incredibly serious issue. It is not an either/or matter. It is not a matter of simply saying either that the Secretary of State can fund all schools directly from the centre, or that all money should be provided via LEAs. I shall develop that point later. If I do not fully answer the hon. Gentleman's question, perhaps he will intervene again.

I agree with the hon. Gentleman that the system of standard spending assessment is as confusing as it is irrational. It is said that only two people at the Department for Education and Employment have ever understood the SSA system—one of them is now dead, and the other works the computer, which is broken. No one could justify the £683 per secondary school pupil gap between Brent and Islington, which are both deprived boroughs, or the £1,306 more that a primary school child in Kensington and Chelsea receives compared with a primary school pupil in Stockport. There is no sense to that.

The report of the senior chief inspector of schools for 1998-99 examined 115 schools with similar proportions of pupils eligible for free school meals and similar proportions of pupils with statements of special educational needs. It found a funding difference per pupil ranging from £1,801 to £3,600. That is not only unacceptable, but grossly unfair. The system is archaic and arcane, and it fails the Government's own test, in the preamble to "Fair Funding", which specifies the criteria of "equity, accountability and transparency".

The Government have confused the system yet further. They have increasingly directed spending through the standards fund, which will have grown from £4 million, in 1983, to a staggering £1.475 billion, in 2001–02. Given that the teachers' threshold payments and the Chancellor's announcements are also to be directed centrally, the Secretary of State now controls £4 billion of schools' expenditure. Add that to the £6 billion that he will control with the learning and skills council from next year, and one begins to see how centralist and powerful this Secretary of State has become. If the hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Mr. Fallon) does not want to see so much power in the hands of the Secretary of State, no matter how benign, he needs to re-examine the Conservative party's policy.

Understandably, ring-fenced resources to education action zones, specialist schools, city technology colleges, fresh start and city academies, plus a culture of perpetual bidding that leaves one in three schools disappointed, have resulted in heads and governors saying, "Enough is enough. Give us the money centrally."

What we need to do is to reform the SSA system. However, we need a reform that will strike a balance between local and national responsibilities. We need transparency, and we need efficient distribution. However, we must be able to respond to local need. An education system controlled by a Government of any political persuasion is a dangerous concept. I put it in the same line as a national police force controlled by a Government of any political persuasion.

The growth of our education system has been a response to diversity and to local needs. Our schools movement originated back in the 19th century, in national schools, the Church of England and the British and Foreign Schools Society and the non-conformists. The movement originated in villages and in schools, as a response to need. Our education system has been built on that basis ever since. Our system is not perfect, but it certainly does not deserve to be thrown away in its entirety.

The distribution of £512 million in this Budget will bring smiles to the faces of many head teachers and governors in my constituency. However, they should beware of Secretaries of State bearing gifts, because there is usually some pain to follow.

We should like to know—partly given the question asked by the hon. Member for Maidenhead—what will happen, next year, to the £512 million that has bypassed LEAs. The Red Book deals with that matter. The Secretary of State indicated that the money would be included in SSAs—although the Red Book does not say that. Will it be part and parcel of a central pot from which the Secretary of State will directly reward schools? How will it be incorporated in future? If the £512 million is to be only one-off funding, in the following year, schools will be plunged into chaos if they have to try to make up a deficit of £40,000 in large secondary schools or £3,000 to £5,000 in small primary schools. The Liberal Democrats will participate fully in any review of resource distribution to schools, but we oppose root and branch a back-door nationalisation of our education system by this or any other Secretary of State.

The most significant part of the Chancellor's speech was that revealing that education is no longer the Government's No. 1 priority. Tax cuts are their No. 1 priority; £1 billion for education compared with £2.6 billion to cut income tax tells its own story of the Government's priorities. The Government, like all their predecessors, know how to sell out their remaining principles when a general election is coming.

What about the rest of the education system? Are all the problems resolved? Why are tax cuts preferable to providing a quality early-years education place for all three-year-olds? I expected the Secretary of State to announce that this afternoon, but there was not a word about it. In all the rural areas of Britain less than 10 per cent. of our three-year-olds have a paid place in early-years education. Outside the cities, thousands and thousands of playgroups have been closing during this Parliament as a direct result of that lack of provision. A total of £390 million would have meant an early-year's education place for every three-year-old. Is that not preferable to a tax cut?

Why are tax cuts preferable to seeing more teaching assistant support in our primary schools? Our primary schools are overburdened. They are desperately seeking some relief from bureaucracy and need to find an opportunity to plan effectively for the youngsters in their charge. Why are tax cuts preferable to building into school budgets some time for primary school teachers to prepare properly?

Why is there nothing in the Budget to remove the inequities of charging English and Welsh students tuition fees when the Government know that the system is having an adverse effect on student recruitment? As the hon. Member for Maidenhead made clear in her contribution, the real-terms numbers are starting to fall in not just further education but higher education, too. The latest figures from the Universities and Colleges Admissions

Service show that overall applications are down this year by 1.8 per cent., with the figure for mature students down, for the fourth year running, by over 5.7 per cent.

We find student poverty not just in Scotland but throughout the United Kingdom. A total of 18 per cent. of higher education students now drop out and the majority cite a lack of finance as their principal reason for doing so. The cost of that to our system is about £350 million. That money is utterly wasted and we would rather see it spent on the students.

As a party, we stand firmly behind the Government's aims for the expansion of FE and HE, as, I believe, does the Conservative party. To be fair, one of the Conservative party's proudest achievements over the past 20 years has been the expansion of student numbers at both FE and HE level. We also support the Government's view that that expansion should give greater access to those from poorer homes and that we should end social exclusion in the FE and HE sectors.

We accept the Prime Minister's argument that Britain must develop its human capital more effectively in order to compete on the world market. However, that expansion must be based on offering students a quality experience, and that is not what many of them are getting today. Since Labour took office, the funding per full-time equivalent student in FE has fallen by 7 per cent., from £3,050 in 1997-98 to £2,840 next year. In higher education, the full-time equivalent funding has fallen by 3 per cent. in real terms. That is in total contradiction to what the Minister told us at Education and Employment questions earlier today. That drop means a drop in the quality of the product that we can offer in our universities and colleges.

The Minister's noble Friend, Baroness Blackstone, admitted in a written answer in the other place on 27 January that the previous Government spent 1.29 per cent. of GDP on higher education, but this Government will spend only 1.14 per cent. To match the Tories' level of spending, the Government would need to spend an additional £5.9 billion, but they say that tax cuts come before investment in education.

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments and I agree with many of them. Will he note that the figures given in the written answer in the other place included the science budget? We secured some further corrected figures, excluding the science budget which, if anything, made the disparity with the performance of the previous Conservative Government and the adverse trend today appear even more stark.

Mr. Willis: I am grateful for that intervention. The hon. Gentleman is right. The £500 million that the Wellcome Trust poured into research is double-counted by the Government as money that they have given to research. I thank the hon. Gentleman for pointing that out.

Perhaps, as in 1997, the Secretary of State has another plan for higher education after the next general election. Will the Minister confirm that he has already agreed in principle with the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals and the Russell group of universities that, after the next election, the Russell group will be able to charge differential fees to students? If that is not the case, I invite the Minister, who is responsible for this matter, to intervene and say so. Since he is not doing that, the answer speaks for itself. That is the reality. After the next election, the Labour party's solution to the underfunding in education—it was hinted at by the hon. Member for Dudley, South (Mr. Pearson)—is that there should be an ivy league, as there is in America. Charter schools will be imported as academies and we will have an ivy league where students are charged differential fees. I am sorry if that is to be the system used to support access from poorer homes.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. Malcolm Wicks) *rose—*

Mr. Willis: I am delighted to see that the Minister intends to intervene.

Mr. Wicks: I was enjoying the hon. Gentleman's thoughtful speech, but he is overdoing it a bit now. The Secretary of State has made it clear that we are opposed to top-up fees. We will support no policies that make it difficult for poorer students or students from middle-income families to gain access to our best universities. Our approach is based on fairness and equality. I want to make that absolutely clear.

Mr. Willis: I have no difficulty accepting that assurance from the Minister. I have some real difficulty accepting that that is the view of Her Majesty's Government. Top-up and differential fees are different in terms of semantics and, in reality, the Government are all about semantics. They say one thing to one audience and change a word or two for another. The Minister has not denied that the Government are holding unofficial talks with the CVCP and the Russell group about differential fees. Those talks are going on. If I am wrong, I hope that there will be a clear statement to that effect. That would be a betrayal of many of the principles about which many of us are thinking.

If the hon. Member for Dudley, South is right and we are to be a more generous society with huge levels of bursaries for our universities, good luck to him. However, the giving culture in the United States and the tax system that underpins it is totally different from the culture in Britain and the tax system that underpins it here. Each of the two education systems has approached its position from different directions. I am not saying that one is better than the other, but I would like to think that the British higher education system is more egalitarian than that of the United States.

My party's biggest disappointment with the Budget for education is that it fails to invest in the future of our education system—our teachers. The ICM poll in February this year told its own tale. Even with the promise of more pay, one third of our teachers under the age of 35 said that they wanted to leave teaching within the next 10 years and 50 per cent. wanted to leave within the next 15 years. In only 9 per cent. of cases did those teachers cite pay as the prime reason for leaving the profession.

It is surprising, therefore, that there is nothing in the Budget to assist with teacher recruitment and retention, despite the worrying trend. Figures produced last week show that applications for secondary postgraduate courses in education are down by a staggering 21 per cent. on this time last year. Applications for maths, science and modern

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languages are now below 1998 levels and, even with the introduction of golden hellos, maths recruitment is 23 per cent. below the Government's target with science not far behind at 19 per cent.

We need an increased supply of quality entrants to teaching. Do the Government believe that the standards agenda can deliver improvements with such appalling statistics? Our schools are starting to experience the same fate as our hospitals, which have an acute shortage of nurses, doctors and specialists, yet the Government have no clearly defined recruitment strategy. Department for Education and Employment bursaries were withdrawn during the recession. They were replaced by the Teacher Training Agency's schemes, now augmented by the golden hellos, but those are not strategies to make teaching the attractive career that it should be in a new knowledge-based economy.

A year before the end of new Labour's first term in office, the Government have delivered cuts in higher education, cuts in further education and cuts in teacher recruitment. They have told teachers what to teach, how to teach and when to teach. They have removed from head teachers the ability to prioritise and sought to manage our schools with centralised targeting. The Budget is a little, too late.

3.1 pm

Ms Linda Perham (Ilford, North): I am pleased to be able to speak in the debate on the Budget resolutions on education and employment. I shall start with education, because that is where we all start on the path to learning for life. I welcome the extra £1 billion in the Budget for education. It is wonderful news that an average primary school will get £6,000 extra for more teachers and books and the average secondary school will get £40,000 more.

I have been a school governor for 15 years and for eight years I have chaired the board of the large local primary school that my children attended. It will be eligible for £9,000. I know how much hard-working, dedicated head teachers in my constituency and throughout the country will welcome that cash boost going directly to them, particularly as at the recent budget meeting of my local council, the London borough of Redbridge, Labour's plans to spend more than £11 million on education—the highest figure proposed by the three parties represented on the council—were outvoted by the blue and yellow alliance of right-wing Conservatives and fickle Liberals. The Liberal-Tory coalition has also turned down Labour's proposal for a school safety officer to promote safer travel to schools, yet it has still managed to hike up the council tax, with a staggering increase of almost 20 per cent. in two years.

Another welcome boost to education is the £10 million enhancement for education business links from April 2000, as announced in the 1999 pre-Budget report, to encourage young people to consider careers in business. The money will improve existing infrastructures, enhance teachers' professional development and improve the quality of work experience, as well as helping to double the scale of enterprise programmes with a proven track record of success, such as young enterprise. I have been involved for two years as a judge in the running of the Redbridge business education partnership young enterprise competition. I have been impressed with the standard of entries and the understanding that young people in my borough's schools have of the culture of entrepreneurship and enterprise.

As well as acknowledging the Government's efforts on business education partnerships, I welcome the measures in the Budget to build stronger businesses and promote entrepreneurship and productivity, with the reductions in capital gains tax rates, the extension of the 40 per cent. first year capital allowance for small and medium-sized enterprises, regional venture capital funds to give a £250 million boost for investment in London alone and the £50 million e-commerce package to get more small firms online. I am sure that some of the young entrepreneurs whose work I admired in Redbridge will soon be taking advantage of those far-sighted opportunities provided by the Government. From my work on the Select Committee on Trade and Industry, particularly our visits last year to the United States and Sweden, I know how vital it is for British companies, especially smaller and micro companies, to engage with the knowledge economy.

Two weeks ago I spoke to business people in the South Woodford area of my constituency. I am sure that they will welcome the incentives, as well as the £285 million to fight crime, including £100 million to recruit and retain police officers. They and many other local people are concerned about the battle against street crime, shoplifting and burglary.

There are many retailers, local shopping centres and parades in my constituency. They provide an excellent service to the public and convenient employment for local people, but there are still more than 1,400 unemployed people in the constituency. I am particularly encouraged by the extension of the new deal to people beyond the 18 to 24 age group and the enhancement of the gateway provision, with more intensive contact with new deal personal advisers, greater access to support services and improved job search facilities. For those not finding unsubsidised work, there will be flexible access to a period of subsidised employment, support for self-employment, work-based training or a programme to improve key skills or enhance employment prospects, including work trials or work with the voluntary sector.

I am the secretary of the all-party group on ageing and older people and I campaign with a group called Equal Rights on Age. A great deal of my work in Parliament is focused on fighting for the rights of older people, so I reserve my loudest plaudits for the new deal 50-plus, which started in nine pathfinders in October 1999 and rolls out nationally in a few weeks, in April 2000. I was pleased that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State drew attention to that in his opening statement. There will be personal advice, help with job searching and an employment credit of £60 for full-time or self-employment and £40 for part-time employment for a year, as well as training support to address the dramatic fall in the employment rate of men over 50 in the past 20 years and the fact that women over 50 have generally not enjoyed the opportunities available to younger women to increase their participation in the labour market.

The Government have been a trailblazer in tackling unemployment among the over-50s by pioneering an

innovative programme targeted at older jobseekers and aimed at reversing the declining pattern of employment in that age group:

> Since coming to power, the Government has put in place an array of initiatives on almost all aspects of economic, social and educational affairs. The scale and energy of this is almost without parallel in modern government.

Those are not my words, but those of the Third Age Employment Network in January 2000. I endorse them. As my right hon. Friend the Chancellor said in his stirring conference speech, when it comes to getting the country back to work and improving things for all our people, "We've only just begun."

3.8 pm

Mr. Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks): I cannot follow the content or sentiments of the hon. Member for Ilford, North (Ms Perham), but I pay tribute to her for giving a lead to the House and the country on world book day, which was a most welcome initiative. It was a pleasure to be involved with her local libraries. I hope that she repeats that idea.

I should like to talk more about the business aspects of the Budget than about education, although the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) has tempted me. I shall come back to the issue that he mentioned. I declare the business interests recorded in the register.

The Budget is not old Labour—it talks a lot of e-commerce and entrepreneurship—and neither is it wholly new Labour, because it has a strong redistributionist flavour in the detail of the working families tax credit and other issues. However, it is certainly real Labour, because it will mean more tax on business and entrepreneurship. It is also real Labour in that the Government can no longer shelter behind the spending programmes that they inherited or take credit for the supply side reforms that we left them. They are striking out on their own.

One striking characteristic of the Budget is that it contains the remedies for a number of mistakes that the Government had already made. The welcome changes on capital gains tax were reforms to the Chancellor's own reforms. It is his mess over the taper and retirement relief that, to some extent, his new proposals clean up. As for vehicle excise duty, he has listened and learned, but it is probably too late for those road hauliers in Kent who have been put out of business by his earlier escalation of the duty on diesel and vehicle excise duty. At least that lesson has been learned.

We are promised an army of Excise officers throughout Kent to chase bootlegged alcohol and tobacco. It might have been easier to tackle the problem at its source and to have done more with the duty itself. At least the right hon. Gentleman has understood the damage that his original mistakes were causing.

The Chancellor has accepted what we told him all along: his replacement of personal equity plans and tax-exempt special savings allowances by individual saving accounts—a less generous scheme—was bound to lead to lower take-up. That is why he is revising his scheme and holding out the promise of a higher allowance for the first year.

If the right hon. Gentleman has acknowledged and partially corrected those mistakes, there are others that lie uncorrected. On stamp duty, he still fails to make any distinction between that which is levied on domestic houses and that on commercial property and businesses. The stamp duty that business pays is an increasing burden on business transactions. He still fails to reverse the mean-minded cut in dividend tax credit on pensioners. I thought that the hon. Member for Dudley, South (Mr. Pearson) might have touched on that. He has been eloquent on the subject previously, but now that the cut has gone ahead, presumably he thinks that it is too late to comment further. I do not think that it is. It was a mean-minded cut that affected those who had saved throughout their lives. It unnecessarily took from them sums ranging from £70 to £700 a year.

The Chancellor has not yet listened sufficiently to industry and business on the climate change levy. There are still serious concerns. There are serious concerns also, which have emerged over the past couple of days, about the taxation of controlled foreign companies. I know that the Minister will want to respond to these concerns as swiftly as possible when he replies. It is alleged by these companies' advisers that the Chancellor has made a serious mistake in his initial proposals. Whether he or the companies concerned are right, the House should be told as quickly as possible.

I move on to the economy. The stability and low inflation that we set in train continue. We can argue about the extent to which that was the legacy that the Conservative Government bequeathed, or whether by transferring responsibility for monetary policy to the Bank, the Government have managed to lock it in. I remain suspicious of the method that they have chosen. The interest rate is the sole mechanism for regulating the economy. All the evidence is that the heat is being taken on the exchange rate, with the damage that we are now seeing, especially for larger-scale manufacturing and agriculture.

It is necessary only to go to the north of England, as I did earlier this week, to see the discrepancy within a policy that is supposed to be one size to fit all. There is the difference between north and south, between large businesses and small businesses and between dot.com companies and, as they are already being called disparagingly within the City, not.com companies. Those companies are equally important to the creation of the wealth that we all need. There is the disparity also between those who must rely on pension funds for their income and those who enjoy big City bonuses.

The high exchange rate is damaging business and manufacturing, and is sucking in imports. I do not offer the House any easy answers. I know that the euro is weak, and weaker than it was designed to be. I would have preferred the Chancellor at least to address the problem in his Budget statement. I could find no reference to the exchange rate nor acknowledgement of the real pain that is being felt in manufacturing throughout the hour that he spoke to the House on Tuesday.

On the contrary, it is this Government who have increased the costs of manufacturing. Manufacturing uses diesel, and the Chancellor increased the cost of it. Manufacturing also uses labour. Similarly, the Chancellor has increased the costs of labour as well as stamp duty on commercial property, and all the rest of it.

It has always puzzled me why the Government have got it in for savers. The Government wanted to continue to fuel consumption as soon as they took office, but I have

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never understood why they wanted to attack savers at the same time. However, they have done it consistently. In the 1997 Budget, they put a pensions tax on dividends. In 1998, they abolished PEPs and TESSAs and replaced them with less generous ISAs. In 1999, they introduced the 10p starting rate of tax, but for the very people who one would think should be encouraged to save, they left the savings rate at 20 per cent.

We are left with the ludicrous position that base rate taxpayers who are paying 23p or 22p on their income have a lower rate of 20p on their savings. Starting rate taxpayers who are paying income tax at 10p must pay double that rate on their savings. That is not logical. Cumulatively, all the attacks on saving help to explain why the proportion of household income that is saved—the savings ratio—has fallen dramatically from 10.6 per cent. in 1997 to 5.5 per cent. now.

I know that in times of low inflation the savings ratio tends to fall, but it has been falling quite consistently and I think that it is now worryingly low. I ask the Government to re-examine ISA take-up. The point of ISAs, as the Government originally intended them—and fair play to them—was to take the PEPs and TESSAs culture to those people who had not yet been affected. They wanted to get new people to save who had not considered saving before. I ask the Government to consider the complexity of the rules. If the Chancellor had addressed these matters, he would have my support. There is confusion between the maxi-ISA, for example, and the mini-ISA.

I urge the Chancellor to do something about the 20 per cent. on savings that the 10 per cent. taxpayer has to pay. Why not scrap the provision altogether? We are talking about the very people whom we should be encouraging to save.

It has taken a long time for the Government to come clean on the rising tax burden. The Chancellor has hedged and hedged before the Treasury Select Committee and it was finally the official spokesman from Downing street who admitted—the Red Book makes no bones about it—that the tax burden has increased. Despite defining the burden as net taxes and social security expenditure as proportionate gross domestic product, the burden has risen from 36 per cent. in the last year of the Conservative Government to nearly 38 per cent. this year, and it will continue increasing.

We were told originally that the burden was falling. Then we were told that it would fall, or the Government hoped that it would. Now it has increased, and the people have begun to notice that. Mortgage interest relief at source and the married couples allowance have disappeared. We have had increases in the price of petrol and all the so-called stealth taxes. My constituents are asking what they are seeing for the extra taxes that they are paying.

As I understand it, Labour was elected above all else to make a difference, yet motorists are paying more for their petrol while public transport gets worse. We are all paying more council tax, yet we have 1,700 fewer police officers and crime rising for the first time in six years. We are all paying more stealth taxes, yet we have 248,000 more people waiting to see a national health service consultant. The Government promised higher quality public services and instead we have longer queues.

Suddenly, three years on, we have the promise of shed loads more money for health and education. Suddenly, the Chancellor is so worried about why people do not think that schools and hospitals have improved that cheques are being sent to schools three years into a Labour Government and £2 billion extra is going to the NHS. Next week, there is to be an 8 per cent. increase for education, and the further £2 billion will make £4 billion in all for the NHS. What were the Government doing before to make them plan public expenditure like this?

Mr. Gardiner: I listened carefully to what the hon. Gentleman said about the 10p and 20p tax rates on savings. Is he not aware that one of the Budget measures is that the extension to savings of the 10p starting rate of income tax will now be effective from 6 April 1999? His point is no longer relevant, and the time differential was accounted for in my right hon. Friend the Chancellor's remarks.

Mr. Fallon: I am sure that that is helpful, but what was the point of the 20p rate on savings for those on 10p tax? I would not tax at all those on the very lowest incomes who pay the starting rate.

Like all Conservative Members, I welcome the increase for education and congratulate the Secretary of State and his ministerial team on securing it. As I recall, negotiations with the Treasury are never easy, and it is a good increase. Is it a one-off payment, though, or will next year's Budget—or even the pre-Budget report—allocate similar annual payments directly to schools? Has a precedent been set?

Unless I misheard him, the Secretary of State said that the one-off payments would be targeted. When he publishes the guidance—he said, perhaps by mistake, that it was already available, but I certainly have not seen it—will he make it clear what the payments can be used for? Are schools free, for example, to use them for teachers' pay? Will they be able to use them to fund the new performance-related pay bonuses, or are they restricted to the non-salary element of their delegated budgets?

Mr. Richard Allan (Sheffield, Hallam): The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. In Education questions earlier, the Secretary of State specifically related the amount of money to the number of teachers employed, and clearly schools cannot go around employing teachers unless they have some certainty for the future, so I hope that the Minister will clarify the matter.

Mr. Fallon: That is a most helpful intervention. I apologise to the House for not having been present at Education questions. I was speaking to a school group, which I suppose is a better excuse than some. As that intervention demonstrated, if the payments are for the salary side, they will bind schools into commitments that they may not be able to meet in subsequent years.

Mr. Gardiner: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Fallon: I am sure that this intervention will be as helpful as the hon. Gentleman's previous one, so I will.

Mr. Gardiner: Indeed, I intend to be helpful. The Secretary of State said specifically that the moneys were

to be used by head teachers in whatever way they chose. He was also specific on the extra £2,000 for performance-related pay and said that it would come directly from central Government as teachers break through the threshold.

Mr. Fallon: In trying to be helpful, the hon. Gentleman is digging the Secretary of State into a bigger hole. If the head teacher can use the money however he chooses and he decides to use it to top up teachers' pay or to recruit an extra part-time teacher, what certainty has he that the money will be repeated in subsequent years? There may be no mystery here, and perhaps the Minister will make it clear that the money is a one-off and head teachers had better look out and not make commitments that they cannot meet in subsequent years, or perhaps he will say that it was always intended that at least that amount and no less should be repeated in subsequent years, but I hope that he will agree that the matter can be easily cleared up at the end of this debate.

As I understand it, the extra payments will be given indiscriminately to every school, irrespective of performance, on the basis of pupil numbers. I have no objection to that, but it is not what the Government said last year, when they produced public service agreements saying—it is all there on page 11—that the money allocated to the Department for Education and Employment would be specifically committed in return for meeting certain performance targets.

That was the whole point of public service agreements. That is the agreement that the Chief Secretary and the Secretary of State signed in blood, but on Tuesday we heard that schools would get their cheques irrespective of whether they had achieved their literacy or GCSE targets. Have the agreements been abandoned? Perhaps the literacy targets have been abandoned. That might get the Secretary of State off the hook, as I think that he promised to resign if they were not met.

The hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough asked what were the Government's intentions towards local education authorities. As it happens, I do not agree with him. He said that one must seriously debate whether one wants Ministers in charge of the system, making all the payments centrally, or whether councillors should be in charge, ensuring democratic accountability. I can only say to him—he has left now, so I say it to the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr. Allan), who may be his parliamentary private secretary, for all I know—that that is not the stark choice. I do not want either in charge of the system.

As I said repeatedly when I was a Minister, and as I have written endlessly since, I do not think that either Ministers or councillors should be in charge of the education system. In the end, parents should be in charge. That is the whole purpose of our free schools policy. Parents should be in the driving seat and able to choose freely the schools that suit their children's particular skills and abilities.

The hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough also tempted the Minister into the field of higher education. He was right to ask for clarification, and I think that he got some, on the fact that the Government do not intend to have top-up fees. He went on to try to draw a distinction between top-up fees and differential fees. I do not think that there is a distinction. I see no objection in principle to the very best universities being able to devise such arrangements, provided that they are supported in other ways, through alumni and business contributions.

I would start at the other end. The cruellest deception, having expanded higher education, is to pretend that the university at the very bottom is delivering the same quality of research, scholarship and higher education as those at the very top. My only regret about our reforms to end the binary line and bring polytechnics fully into higher education status is that we did not go further and introduce more of a market system by encouraging proper publication of the outcomes so that students are not tempted by anecdote, history or the personality of a teacher or head of department to sign up for courses that lead to a worse outcome, with less chance of getting a job at the end.

It can be said in the Chancellor's favour that at least he did not try to triple count the new money he gave the NHS, as he has done before. We did not hear as much about the £21 billion as we did when it was announced two years ago. Indeed, the £21 billion was not only triple counted, but we were told that it was enough to give the NHS all the resources it needed. The famous £21 billion was announced in 1998 and started to take effect in April 1999. Before the first year of all that extra, triple-counted money has ended, the Government have suddenly said that it was not enough. Now an extra £2 billion has to be found and health service spending must jump from 3 per cent. to 6.1 per cent. a year. Suddenly, the NHS needs wholesale reform. What have the Government been doing for the past three full years?

In return for the extra taxes, the public deserve to see better quality public spending. We heard nothing about a reduction in the welfare bill, which is still rising. Less money should be wasted on dealing with asylum seekers, and that problem should be tackled at source. Less money should be wasted on regional bureaucracy and a tougher approach taken to public spending across the board.

I am a little wary of the various small tax breaks that the Chancellor introduced for business. Of course industry welcomes capital allowances and those who are offered free computers or special deals on the leases welcome that. However, too much of the help announced on Tuesday is spread too thinly. Behind that assistance lies the dangerous assumption that e-commerce is now the only form of enterprise on the table. E-commerce is important, but in many respects it is a means to enterprise, not the only enterprise. The Government are trying to be fashionable in channelling extra money to a sector that appears to have much activity and investment already. Do the dot.com companies need that extra public subsidy? They seem to get a lot of attention without it.

The business postbag in my constituency has a different agenda. Businesses complain about the level of business rates, but I heard nothing on Tuesday about the level of the uniform business rate, which is a huge and—with the revaluation—growing burden on business. Above all, I heard nothing on Tuesday about the Government's so-called campaign to cut red tape. We had a deregulation task force. The Government call it the better regulation task force. That is not just semantics, because we have seen no deregulation. We used to have 30 or 40 deregulation orders a year, but the Government have hardly any.

[Mr. Fallon]

Businesses might have forsaken a penny or so off corporation tax if they no longer had to put up with all the extra bureaucracy of the working families tax credit, the minimum wage, paternity leave, the working time directive and the rest. The Government now expect businesses to be an arm of Government—to be tax collectors, benefit offices and immigration officials, all of which simply adds to costs.

I have some other concerns about the Budget and I was glad that the hon. Member for Dudley, South expressed some scepticism about the role of regional venture funds. Venture capital was a problem four or five years ago, but it is less so now. We seem to be awash with venture capital funds up and down the country, looking for investment opportunities. Rather than putting taxpayers' money into state venture capital funds and investing in regional bureaucracies, we should put it into infrastructure itself.

Mr. Blunt: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, because my intervention will save me making a point in my speech later, if I am lucky enough to catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee is taking evidence on the urban White Paper, and it has become clear that there is now a huge variety of funds of one sort or another and many different organisations with overlapping responsibilities for urban regeneration. The situation is so bad that bureaucracy has now become an obstacle to urban regeneration, and that example reinforces the point that my hon. Friend is making.

Mr. Fallon: My hon. Friend is right. When we had highly focused development corporations in specific areas—usually riverside areas, such as Merseyside, Teesside, Tyneside and Wearside—they could channel money where it was most needed, improve the infrastructure and the skills base, and refurbish the industrial landscape. Now we have a surfeit of such programmes, none of which interlock properly, and public money will be poured into bad venture capital opportunities, instead of into the infrastructure on which most business men would prefer it to be spent.

Labour has had the benefit of the doubt. After three full years and four big Budgets, it can no longer shelter behind the legacy that we left them or the great supply side reforms of the 1980s. The Government told the people that a Labour Government would be different. So far, things are not different; all that has happened is that people are paying more and getting less.

3.37 pm

Mr. Piara S. Khabra (Ealing, Southall): My speech will be brief, factual and relevant to today's debate and the proposals in the Budget on education and employment, rather than being philosophical and speculative. I welcome the proposals outlined in my right hon. Friend's Budget on Tuesday. Employment and education are the lifeblood of the country, and the announcements by my right hon. Friend will give a massive boost to these sectors.

Unemployment is at its lowest level for two decades, and more than 800,000 new jobs have been created since the election. What is more pleasing is that some 80 per cent. of the increase in employment over the past year was in full-time work. In addition, long-term unemployment, which seemed never-ending during the Tory years, has fallen by 67 per cent., and youth unemployment has been cut by 74 per cent. in my constituency. So, at last, it is the Labour Government who are giving the younger generation the opportunities to work, which under the Tories were denied to them.

No one can deny the harmful effects that mass unemployment has on society. For example, all hon. Members will remember how crime rose significantly during the high unemployment of the 1980s under Conservative rule. The link is unquestionable, and I am proud that this Government have been prepared to face up to that challenge. I believe that the Government will step up that fight in the near future.

The announcement that the employment and windfall levy allocations of £455.5 million will be phased in over the next two years to allow the extension of support to get people back into work is excellent news.

Under the new deal for 18 to 24-year-olds, partnerships must ensure equal opportunities for people of ethnic minority backgrounds. That is important in my constituency and I welcome the fact that the Government are asking the equality commissions, working with employers and other organisations, to put together an effective package of support and advice for businesses. I have many businesses in my constituency—medium and small businesses are flourishing there.

I also welcome the fact that the Government intend to intensify and extend the new deal for the over-25s on a national basis from April 2001. Building on the principles of the new deal for the under-25s, it will help those who have been unemployed for 18 months or more to find work. The package will be backed by extra steps to advertise the support and advice available to jobseekers aged 25 and over.

Similarly, the new deal for the over-50s was launched in nine pathfinder areas on 4 November and will be rolled out nationally in April 2000. Pilots for the new deal for disabled people have also been launched. It will help people with disabilities to remain in work. There is also an enhanced package of the new deal to help more lone parents, including all those with children over three, and to offer more options for those considering work, plus an extra £12 million for child care for those in further education, providing an extra 10,000 places.

In addition, the employment tax credit to extend a guaranteed minimum income to people without children, the new job grant of £100 from April 2001 to ease the transition into work for those who have been unemployed for a year, and the package to tackle the multi-billion pound hidden economy are all to be applauded.

On education, the schools in Ealing, Southall will benefit from the extra £1 billion announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor. That money will be vital in recruiting more teachers and buying more books. The money includes an average of an extra £45 per pupil next year, and a typical secondary school in England will receive a direct grant of £40,000 extra in the year from April to help in the drive to improve standards in schools.

However, everyone recognises that standards in teaching should be high from the start if we are to improve literacy, so primary schools will receive grants worth up to £9,000 each. The provision of an extra

£20 million to help primary schools to provide catch-up literacy and numeracy for the weakest pupils is also good news. That is on top of the £42 million that has already been announced, and it shows the Government's commitment to ensuring that children have the three Rs.

I must mention the Government's commitment to provide section 11 funding to local authorities, which was abolished by the Tories. I also welcome the fact that the Government have not forgotten the importance of special schools, which will also receive a grant of £15,000 each.

The need for skills is very important to our economy, and the Government have clearly recognised that to achieve this more people must go into higher education. That process is already taking place, but the announcement that £53 million of recurrent spending will be used to extend education maintenance allowances and to support a campaign to encourage young people to stay on in education can only add to the list of incentives for young people.

There is something in this Budget to please everyone. It shows a commitment to the Labour party's core values of achieving full employment and maintaining and improving the public services that we all cherish so much. It is a comprehensive package of measures that I warmly welcome, and I am sure that my constituents will also welcome it.

Finally, I believe that the economy is safe in the hands of our ablest Chancellor of the Exchequer—the Action Man of the 21st century.

3.45 pm

Mr. Clifford Forsythe (South Antrim): At the risk of losing friends on the Opposition Benches and gaining them on the Labour Benches, I generally welcome what seems to be a balanced and fair Budget, in which the Chancellor has attempted to be both even-handed and, in some spheres, relatively imaginative.

That said, I have misgivings about a number of things, and it is on those that I shall concentrate. Although I will naturally refer to matters that affect Northern Ireland and my constituents, I will also speak in general terms as many right hon. and hon. Members throughout the country experience similar problems.

On social security and pensioners—the older folk—there is no doubt that one welcomes the increased social security benefits for families and the extra £50 for pensioners, plus the 1p off income tax. One also welcomes the increases in the personal and age-related allowances and the fact that the £3,000 cash limit and £7,000 overall limit for ISA contributions is to be extended for another year.

Personally, I welcome the affordable warmth programme and the reduction of value added tax on insulation, heating and so forth to 5 per cent. Hon. Members will know of my association with the plumbing industry.

However, there is a downside, which the Chancellor did not mention—indeed, the Government have not mentioned the matter for some considerable time—because the standing charge is to remain for everyone who has a BT line rental. The standing charge is proportionately much greater for people who use the telephone only a little. My hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim (Mr. Beggs) has tabled an early-day motion, which has received 112 signatures, to ask that the charge be reconsidered. I hope that the Government will look at it, although I do not know within whose power it lies.

Another concern relates to the reduction in the television licence for residential homes, as there is an anomaly. Apparently, if housing associations have a vacant dwelling, they are obliged to offer it to someone who may not be a pensioner even if all the other residents are pensioners. If a building is divided into six apartments, one of which is given to a person who is not a pensioner, every person in that building must then pay the full price for the television licence. In such a case, the five pensioners would all have to pay the full licence fee because the building contained one person who was not a pensioner. I know that that anomaly has been examined before and was supposed to have been sorted out, but it clearly needs to be looked at again.

I welcome the training in industry for people who have become unemployed, but I greatly regret the loss of the apprenticeship scheme, as it used to be conceived. The schemes that still exist are slightly different from what we had in the past, when people gained technical knowledge and a great grounding in the industry in which they were to be employed. It is sad that more support is not given to apprenticeship schemes.

Mr. Boswell: All hon. Members will welcome the hon. Gentleman's comments about apprenticeship schemes, and my experience of the modern schemes is that they are very powerful. Does the hon. Gentleman agree, however—in the context of potential redundancies in Northern Ireland, and given what has happened at Rover in the west midlands—that it is extremely important that the Government secure continuity in the education and development of people engaged in apprenticeship schemes who are made redundant?

Mr. Forsythe: That is a very fair point, and I hope that the Government pay attention to it. It is essential that that continuity be secured.

The air passenger duty is a great bone of contention in Northern Ireland. I welcome the fact that for economy class it has been reduced to £5, and that for travel within the European Union it remains at a level £10. People may consider that the business-class price of £40 for people travelling from outside the EU is easily affordable, but Northern Ireland—like other parts of the United Kingdom—wants to attract business people and their industries or businesses into the area. People coming to Northern Ireland, and to other parts of the UK, are being penalised by the cost of the air fare whenever they come back, and that is a great disadvantage.

The highlands and islands of Scotland have been granted a concession over air fares. I welcome that and fully support it. However, the absence of the same concession for Northern Ireland means that the Province is once again disadvantaged, this time by the strip of water that separates it from the UK mainland. I wonder whether the Chancellor of the Exchequer has considered that problem. We in Northern Ireland do not expect jam all the time, but that matter deserves to be looked at.

For obvious environmental reasons, I welcome the fact that vehicle excise duty is to be graduated. The fuel tax escalator is to be ring-fenced, and I understand that it will be neutral this year. As a result, the ring fencing that will

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give money to other parts of economy will not apply this year. However, if the duty rises in the future, and if the resources thus realised return to the Treasury, will the money be held centrally or will it go to the regions from whence it came?

Moreover, the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries has raised the price of oil substantially this year, and the cost may rise further. I hope that the Chancellor will take that into consideration in the future.

Northern Ireland shares a land frontier with another EU nation. That is a great disadvantage to filling stations near the border. Other colleagues have told Ministers that before, but the point is worth repeating. The vehicle excise duty also causes difficulty for our transport industry.

I have some reservations about ring fencing. In last year's Budget, we in Northern Ireland were promised extra money for roads in certain parts of the Province. We later discovered, however, that the money was to come from the sale of the port of Belfast. It now appears that, if the port is not sold, the money will not be made available. I therefore hope that, in future, ring-fenced money that becomes available will be passed on.

I mentioned that I welcomed, for environmental reasons, the introduction of graduated vehicle excise duty. Travel by bus and rail must also be considered, if we are to have a better environment. To cut the use of motor cars and other vehicles, we must turn to rail. Putting lorries on to the railway has great financial consequences, but that remains an option, as does the extension of light rail services. However, public transport must be attractive if people are to be persuaded out of their cars. If we make it attractive enough, we may have some success. We in Northern Ireland do not benefit from the free concessionary fare schemes administered by councils in Great Britain. As the House can imagine, that lack does not go down very well with our pensioners.

There is great deal of debate in this capital city among certain people about the railways and the tube. Such a debate can only be good, and we hope that something positive will come from it. Unfortunately, the amount of money spent on Northern Ireland's railway system is miserably low. It was suggested that it needed an investment of £80 million, and better rolling stock, to bring it up to standard. We were then told that the amount spent would be £18 million, after which we discovered that it would be £5 million. I hope that through the auspices of the House, those who are responsible for the railways in Northern Ireland will look again at that investment. If they need to speak to the Chancellor about it, we have his representatives here on the Treasury Bench who I am sure, knowing them as I do, are listening carefully.

We need a planning strategy for the environment and the roads, and everything else that needs to be done. Part of that strategy should be to build more on brownfield sites than on greenfield sites. It is nice to live in the country, and I suppose that when people buy a house in a rural area, they get comfortable and do not want anyone else to join them. I understand that—it is human nature. I do not know yet whether there is a plan in Northern Ireland for brownfield sites. It would be most unfortunate, however, if we got to the stage of digging up graveyards to use as brownfield sites. We should draw the line at that.

The international airport is in my constituency. It is privately run, and a lot of money has been put into it. The people who run it are doing their best to attract international flights. As part of that operation, they are planning an extension. I was speaking a moment ago about the planning of brownfield sites. It is most unfortunate that the planning service appears to be holding up operations that include upgrading the roads and bringing them up to standard, resulting in a different way of approaching the airport. The current suggestion is to extend one part of the rail system. Sadly, it is then proposed to close down another part. When we are looking at ways of attracting people to use trains and buses instead of cars, it seems ridiculous that the extension of one section of the rail system means that another will close. That should be looked at very carefully.

On the climate change levy, from the point of view of Northern Ireland I welcome the five-year moratorium for natural gas, provided that the European Union agrees. I spoke earlier about air passenger duty. We welcome that gesture towards Northern Ireland.

There is much in the Budget with which the Chancellor, the Government and Labour Back Benchers should be pleased. However, there are problems that the Government must face up to if they wish to achieve their overall aims. My party and I share many of those objectives. By taking my advice, that of my party and that of colleagues in other regions of the United Kingdom whose parties are represented in the House, the Budget can be beneficial to the UK as a whole. That will happen only if the guidance of right hon. and hon. Members is heeded and their comments are given the consideration that they deserve.

4.6 pm

Mr. Jonathan Shaw (Chatham and Aylesford): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for South Antrim (Mr. Forsythe). I agree with many of his remarks. He pointed out some of the anomalies in the tax system, particularly for elderly people living in residential homes or sheltered accommodation.

The Budget is very welcome on this side of the House. The investments in education and, in particular, the health service, gave us all considerable cheer. To make those investments in the public services, we have had to manage the economy soundly. We inherited a lot of debt, and had to bring about stability. Some Conservative Members have asked, "Why now?" We have made steady increases over the years, and we do not want to return to a situation of spending today and cuts tomorrow.

The Budget also builds on important social reforms that we have been proud to bring about for a fairer, more equal society. I refer to the minimum wage and the new deal. Many right hon. and hon. Members have mentioned youth unemployment in their constituencies. In mine, it has fallen by 89 per cent. One important feature of the measurement of the new deal that is not contained in the Red Book is its quality. Young people who have been through previous programmes are cynical because there was little investment to back them up. One young man I knew wanted to go into retail, and his training programme consisted of washing cars on a forecourt. There was nothing about customer liaison or marketing. Not surprisingly, he became disillusioned and gave it up after

a few weeks. The quality of the new deal comes through when we talk to young people who have been on the programme.

We have seen paid holidays for workers, and have tackled child poverty. I hope that the trade union reform will soon be enacted. Trade union membership is on the increase. That should be welcomed, as it ensures fairness at work and minimum standards. The working families tax credit and the increases announced by my right hon. Friend in the Budget were very welcome. Even more hard-working families will benefit—there are some 1,500 in my constituency.

One of my local citizens advice bureaux ran a campaign to encourage people to apply for the working families tax credit. The manager wrote to me recently, saying that some families had received more than £100 extra a week and were surprised and delighted by the magnitude of such sums. Those are her words, not mine.

We know that many people are not taking up the working families tax credit. The Government have run a high-profile campaign, but we need to do more. As I understand it, some 400,000 families could be eligible. If our national advertising campaign has not been as successful as we want, perhaps we should look for a more local focus. The Government should perhaps invite local authorities or citizens advice bureaux to spread good practice and there could be some reward incentive for those who produce the best results.

On the welfare-to-work agenda, we have yet to grapple with one piece of the jigsaw—housing benefit. In areas where rents are high and when the benefit clawback can be up to 70p in the pound, people have no real incentive to move into work. They receive the working families tax credit, but then face housing benefit and council tax benefit clawbacks, and perhaps feel that all was not made clear to them. That is a great challenge to the Government. I look forward to the Green Paper, but housing benefit represents a considerable difficulty. It is undoubtedly a cousin of the Child Support Agency.

Housing in the south-east is expensive. There are competing pressures to protect the countryside and ensure that indigenous populations can remain in the towns and villages that they come from and where their extended families are. It is no good any political party saying that it supports the family if families have nowhere to live because they cannot afford rents, because land values are so high or they cannot afford to purchase property. Yet that is exactly what will happen if we do not have planned development.

Furthermore, without housing development, prices will not just go through the roof, as some commentators have said, but in London and the south-east they will go into orbit. People such as postmen are essential in our communities, but how can they afford to buy a family home that costs £100,000 or £150,000? Such sums are beyond scores of ordinary working people. To halt development would be to create a scenario in which prices rise sharply. I welcome the proposal made by my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister that planning should be reviewed every five years. That is a far more sensible approach than predict and provide, and letting housing development rip.

The competing force is the need to protect the countryside. I have lived all my life in the county of Kent, which boasts some of the most beautiful countryside in the United Kingdom. I will not stand by and allow concreting all over the place, which is what some Opposition Members have suggested will happen. It is obvious and right that we should build on brownfield sites, but it is much more costly to build on contaminated land, so we must consider incentives for builders to deal with those costs.

I know that my hon. Friend the Paymaster General is set to hold a review of how stamp duty could provide incentives for brownfield development. On page 119 of the Red Book, the Government talk about regenerating our cities and protecting our countryside. They say:

> the Government is attracted to the idea of offering relief from stamp duty for new developments on brownfield land.

They say that they welcome the urban renaissance report by Lord Rogers of Riverside. I look forward to taking part in that consultation, but nowhere in the Red Book is reference made to the main recommendation in Lord Rogers' report on harmonisation of VAT levels for new build on greenfield sites, and for renovation and brownfield development. If the statement of intent is to move taxation from goods on to bads, how can it be that building a £2 million mock tudor mansion on a greenfield site is zero-rated—zero-rating is supposed to be for social reasons—when doing up two or three empty terraced properties in Chatham for families on low incomes is charged at the full rate of 17.5 per cent.? The additional costs to the housing association working in partnership with a private landlord are passed on. We know that housing benefit levels are a barrier to welfare to work. Such building is not only environmental but social. It meets all the tests—social, environmental and economic. It is sustainable development.

The Government have not made as much progress as I would want. I have made my contribution in Adjournment debates, ten-minute Bills and early-day motions. My closing remarks in the first Adjournment debate were that the Government should not put the problem in the tray marked "too difficult". That was two years ago. It does not seem to have got out of the tray. Certainly, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions wants VAT harmonisation. Bodies such as the Civic Trust, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and every conceivable housing body that has a view about regeneration regard it as absolutely essential. I welcome the proposal on stamp duty, but I remain to be convinced that it is the way to deal with the thousands and thousands of empty properties. I shall now move on to more positive things.

By my rough calculations, £600,000 will go to the schools in my constituency. As a governor for many years, I know that they will welcome it. Earlier, we heard the Conservative Front-Bench spokesman complaining about disillusionment. I do not think that people will be disillusioned with the money and I do not see disillusionment when I open new nurseries or computer suites. I do not see disillusionment about the numeracy hour, the literacy hour or raising standards.

I welcome the Government's decision to give resources to head teachers to spend as they want. That is an important point. I shall deal with the restrictions on the standards fund in a moment. I think that we all agree with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State that head teachers are vital. It is important that they embrace raising standards in schools. In any successful school, one will

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find an energetic, committed, highly skilled head teacher. It is argued that, in the main, the new money should go straight to schools. Essentially, that is a good idea, but we should not ignore local knowledge. I certainly do not agree with the idea that we should have a national funding formula. I agree with the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) about that. I caution the Government against a national funding formula. If we lose that local knowledge, we will not necessarily target the money where it is needed.

Some schools in Kent have a large surplus, but others are struggling. The ones that are struggling are often the secondary moderns in deprived areas with up to 60 per cent. special needs pupils. It is not difficult to see how a head teacher in a school that does not have a sixth form and therefore has fewer pupils can feel a sense of injustice when he knows that the well-resourced school up the road receives more money. It is important that LEAs continue to have a role in distributing resources. I see from my notes that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said that he was committed to continuing partnerships with LEAs. I welcome that.

My right hon. Friend talked about the importance of enabling head teachers to spend their budgets how they want. Head teachers have told me that certain categories of the standards fund are too rigid. If small sums go from the local authority to the school, it is often difficult for the school to spend them with any effect. One head teacher told me that he received £250 for drug prevention. He was not allowed to buy books with it and there was not very much that he could do with it. But if a number of schools in an area put their £250 together, they could do something far more creative. I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to look into that. There are many other such examples.

If the schools do not spend the money, it goes back to the Department. I wonder how much money comes back each year because of the lack of flexibility. Rather than rigid categories, there should be broad headings with flexibility within them.

Mr. Allan: Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern about some of the comments that have been made about school funding? They seem to suggest that money allocated via LEAs is not entirely in the hands of governors and head teachers. Under the local management of schools system, heads and governors have always decided how to spend their block grant from the LEA. Often, the money from the Department for Education and Employment is more constrained than money from the LEA, which is a block grant for heads and governors to spend at their discretion.

Mr. Shaw: I presume that the money that has been announced will go into the delegated budgets to which the hon. Gentleman referred. Although we want targeted outcomes, with no money wasted on bureaucracy, we need to incorporate some flexibility so that head teachers do not return the money—as some of those to whom I have spoken suggested they might do. We need a broad approach, rather than such strict categories. I hope that Ministers will take note of that point, especially in the light of my right hon. Friend's remarks about flexibility. Overall, however, the extra spending is welcome—£600,000 for schools in my constituency cannot be sniffed at.

Equally welcome is the substantial boost for the national health service. A 6 per cent. increase will take the service into a new era and will meet the aspirations of the country. People want that massive expenditure.

Since we were elected, we have been building up the service. The accident and emergency department at Medway hospital in my constituency was dilapidated; there had been no investment since the 1970s. The final stage of its refurbishment is now being completed. That would not have happened without the additional resources that the Government have allocated.

The Conservatives have committed themselves to our spending commitments on health and—today—on education. However, they are also committed to cut overall taxation if they are elected at the next general election. How will they square all those extra billions of pounds that we plan to put in, if they bring about another recession? How will they pay the dole cheques? Who will be first in line for cuts in the public services? If it is not to be schools or hospitals, will it be roads or local authorities? Who will be first in the firing line? The hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) did not answer that question. I do not think that the Conservatives will give us an answer, but the question is legitimate and we shall ask it constantly. The electorate will want to know the answer, because Conservative policy does not add up.

Meanwhile, there will be many calls on the additional resources in the health budget. I shall make my pitch now. The Children (Leaving Care) Bill is being considered in the other place. The Bill is superb. I have worked with young people leaving care and am aware of the many deficiencies in the system. We all have responsibility for that—irrespective of political party. Up to 75 per cent. of young people leaving care have no educational qualifications. Up to 50 per cent. of those young people are unemployed and 20 per cent. experience homelessness within two years.

The Bill is excellent, apart from one aspect—the statutory age is raised only to 18. All the research, including that described in the splendid document, "Me, Survive, Out There?: New Arrangements for Young People Living in and Leaving Care", suggests that the age should be 21. The Government have stated their aspiration that it should be 21, if finances are available. However, if the money is not available now, it never will be. I make that pitch on behalf of those young people.

On average, young people in stable families with a reasonable upbringing leave home at the age of 23. The most abused youngsters in our community leave care at the age of 16 or 17—we are now raising the age to 18. We must raise it to 21.

Recently, I met a young man who had been in care, where he was managing to study for his A-levels—quite unusual among that group—but when he reached his 18th birthday, he was told, "You are leaving, you are going into a bedsit". That was four months before he was due to finish his A-levels. What a disgrace. Not surprisingly, he did not manage to complete his studies, although he has now started again. I am glad to say that the social services department has rectified the matter and he is now in supportive accommodation. But why should he have had to face that problem in the first place? That happens to hundreds of young people leaving care.

Finally, I want to mention the paper industry. Some 1.4 million tonnes of paper and board is produced every year in my constituency. Over recent years, the paper industry has contracted—a painful process, in which many skilled workers lost their jobs, due to overcapacity and the strength of the pound. There have been shut-downs because of global ownership. Last year, a mill in my constituency owned by Kimberly-Clark closed with the loss of 250 jobs. The mill was profitable, but, because of overcapacity, the company decided to close it. The other Kimberly-Clark mill is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham (Mr. Pond), who is in the Chamber. He was obviously relieved that his mill was not the one that closed. There are similar examples of mill closures in Kent and throughout the country.

However, there are major opportunities for the paper industry—not only through job creation, but in the protection of our environment. I refer to paper recycling. The UK's current recycling rate is relatively low compared with those of other major EU nations. We recycle about 40.5 per cent., compared with Germany's 70 per cent. and the Netherlands' 62 per cent. Figures from the Paper Federation of Great Britain Ltd. show that, for every thousand tonnes of paper that we recycle, we create 13 jobs—not necessarily at the mill itself, but in street collections and other processes in the green-collar industry.

Everyone is committed to recycling. We all think it is a good idea, nationally and locally—for example, through local Agenda 21 programmes. Local authorities in my constituency are no exception. However, in order for councils to collect paper or other goods for recycling, there must be somewhere for them to take the material—there has to be a processing site. At present, all the recycling mills in the UK are full to capacity. There are three such mills—one of them is in my constituency. If the councils have nowhere to take the material and cannot set up long-term contracts, recycling will not happen.

We need to consider other ways to finance recycling. If we could make more imaginative use of the landfill tax—perhaps by considering hypothecation to local authorities so that they can set up recycling schemes—there would be the capacity to provide mills and the paper companies would have the confidence to invest. It costs about £250 million to set up a mill with a capacity of 350,000 tonnes—that is about the minimum needed to make those operations work. The landfill tax is innovative, but we need to consider other measures. We need to involve local authorities, which will have to collect the waste paper, so that they can provide the amounts of paper needed by large mills to make the process viable.

Failing that, under the comprehensive spending review, the Government might consider providing financial assistance to companies who want to set up mills. At present, the risk is too great. If there is no revenue stream for the local authority to collect the paper, the step between collection and mill operation is too wide. Companies are not prepared to risk that investment and there is no sign that another mill will be set up.

That is my shopping list for my colleagues on the Treasury Bench. The Budget is welcome. It is a landmark for the NHS; it will provide more money for schools in my constituency and will continue to raise standards—all brought about by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor's excellent stewardship of the public finances.

4.30 pm

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Mr. Shaw). I have done that before and have learned to respect his expertise and experience in child care issues. I listened to his remarks on that and on the Bill going through the Lords with great interest.

I was delighted with the central section of the hon. Gentleman's speech and what he said about urban regeneration and the different taxation levels that there should be for brownfield and greenfield sites. He nearly said that the Budget was woeful in that respect; that is clearly what he implied. It has been a grotesque missed opportunity and it is not good enough for the Government to say—two years after they began to consider these issues—that they are attracted to the idea of offering relief from stamp duty for new developments on brownfield land. Such a proposal could and should have been in the Budget.

The hon. Gentleman said that he would oppose the concreting over of Kent. I take it that his speech was the start of his opposition to that. We shall learn on Monday the number of new houses that will be imposed on Kent by central Government. I hope that he will join me and many other Members in opposing the way that central Government have imposed extra houses on areas without seeking the consent of local people. The Government have not paid regard to the environmental consequences that will flow from new developments, to the infrastructure that needs to be built and to the quality of life of our constituents that the hon. Gentleman and I seek to protect.

Mr. Shaw: I hope that the hon. Gentleman remembers my other point. If we do not have any development, the indigenous population will be simply priced out of the market. A policy that says that only local authorities will provide planning permission is tantamount to saying, "Get off my land."

Mr. Blunt: I am afraid that I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman. Local authorities have a responsibility to all local people. If they fail to discharge that responsibility and fail to provide sufficient houses for the whole range of the population—including nurses, teachers, policemen, cleaners and all the other parts of our society that have to find houses even though they have different levels of income—they will fail in their duty to their community. If local authorities fail to make proper judgments in the interests of their whole community, they will pretty rapidly, and properly, be voted out of office. Local people will feel the consequences if services cannot be provided because people in the jobs that I have mentioned have been priced out of the market. There is no reason why local authorities are any more incompetent to take such decisions and face up to the facts than central Government are capable of somehow being omniscient. That is part of the problem with the Budget.

To pick up a final point from the hon. Gentleman's speech, he asked what the Conservatives would do if we had the tax guarantee and we went into recession. We would borrow in a recession, and not tax. That is what we did in the previous recession. We would ensure that the pattern of taxation did not rise unsustainably, and remained constant. Obviously, in a recession, the pattern of expenditure rises because of the demand from areas

[Mr. Blunt]

such as social security. However, we would try to keep taxation rates relatively stable, and we would worsen the recession if we did not borrow in such circumstances. However, such borrowing is not sustainable in the long term, and I shall return to the issues of debt and of borrowing.

It would be useful to consider the Budget in its historical context. We have been told that history began on 1 May 1997, but it did not. We need to examine the state of the United Kingdom economy and what we should be doing in the era in which we find ourselves. We are in a uniquely beneficent era for our country. We are at peace in the sense that there has not been a world war since 1945 and we have probably reached the stage where we have cleared off the debts of two world wars. Our country was bankrupt; it cost a quarter of the total wealth of the country and the empire to pay for the second world war. That was the cost of that conflict and, at that stage, we were still paying off the costs of the first world war.

Since 1945, we have had to find the costs of empire and the withdrawal from empire. Until 1989, we had to find the costs of combating the Soviet Union in the cold war. They were heavy costs borne by our country, which has proudly taken a leading role in the defeat of tyranny in the 20th century.

In addition to having unloaded the burdens of war, empire and the retreat from empire, we are now in a period in which there will be a unique boost to our economy. That boost is similar to the introduction of canals and tarmacadam in the 18th century, to the introduction of the railways in the 19th century, to the introduction of electricity and what that meant for telegrams and telephone communications in the late 19th century and to the introduction of the internal combustion energy and what that meant for the 20th century. For now and the 21st century, the revolution in electronic communication is as profound, if not more profound, than any of those.

All those changes to society brought with them above-trend economic growth. That is what we are enjoying now. However, in all those industries, individual companies sometimes found themselves in difficulty. People rushed to invest in new industries—railway stocks were all the rage in the 19th century—but they caught a pretty severe cold if they overestimated their worth. We might be seeing that happen to dot.com shares, but we are at an early stage of the electronic commerce revolution.

That revolution is providing a unique lift to our economy. That is why the United States has enjoyed an unparalled period of economic growth without recession. It is not that President Clinton has somehow managed to find a magic way to run an economy; there has been a profound change. The nation that is most exposed to electronic communication has been the first to enjoy its benefits. In Europe, this country is the leading nation in that respect and our economy is benefiting the most. That is a good thing and to be commended.

We should also consider changes in society and in the nature of ownership of assets in the past 100 years. We have seen the rise of the middle class and most people now own most of the assets. It is not like the 19th century when 1 per cent. of the population owned 60 per cent. of the assets. We have gone through a profound change. Most people have a pension fund, life insurance and own their own homes. Of course, there is a problem with what people have termed the "underclass". It makes up a significant section of the population, but it is not a majority. That is the change in the nature of the challenge that Government must face when they finance the services that they must provide to the nation.

We should remember that the glittering success of the 1980s in terms of personal pension provision has led to two great benefits for the United Kingdom. First, it has benefited individuals who now have a substantial amount of savings for the future that they would not otherwise have had if they had not been encouraged to save. Secondly, London and the United Kingdom manages more money that is invested for the United Kingdom around the world than any country except the United States of America. For example, a country such as Mexico has no particular link with the UK, but the second biggest investor in Mexico is the UK. That position is repeated all round the world and it is a result of the success of establishing a regime in the 1980s that encouraged people to save.

The Budget failed to address the big problem of the fall in the savings ratio from 11 per cent., which the Government inherited, to 5 per cent. That ratio is not predicted to change significantly; I think that it is to move by 0.1 per cent as a result of the Budget. That is a long-term serious problem for the UK and its people, who will have lower savings.

Mr. Gardiner: Does the hon. Gentleman accept the fact that, when interest rates in advanced economies have been low—it is reflected now—savings as a ratio have always decreased?

Mr. Blunt: I do not necessarily accept that. I would want the hon. Gentleman to produce evidence. I do not understand how interest rates can be directly linked to savings in equities. People invest in pension, life assurance and trust funds, but not nearly as much as they used to in building societies and cash schemes, simply because the historic rate of return is far better if one is free to invest directly in assets. That is what we should be encouraging people to do.

By worsening the taxation regime for savings, the Government have encouraged fewer people to save. If the tax regime were as generous to savings as it was in the 1980s and 1990s under the previous Administration, the ratio would not have fallen as much. We could all debate the effect of interest rates at the margin, but the fact is that the Government have made the position worse.

I listened with care to the arguments of the hon. Member for Dudley, South (Mr. Pearson), who appears a convert to the merits of competitiveness and competition. He had a vision of the future of competition and trade in the European Union that is slightly at variance with most of its member countries. I only hope that he is right and they are wrong; time will tell.

There should certainly be broad agreement on the fact that socialism and central planning, as a way of managing the economy, has failed, and that capitalism and free markets by and large work. Happily, Labour Members now admit defeat of the position that they would have held as recently as 10 years ago. They have undergone the

necessary thought revolution—not in the most exemplary fashion by the hon. Member for Dudley, South. We have seen how they have changed and how Governments no longer own industries, departing from the business of managing them.

Despite such a lesson, the most disappointing aspect of the Budget is the recurring theme of "Nanny knows best". Every time that the Chancellor gave out a bit of money, there were strings attached. Even those over 75 years old were given not money but free television licences. That is no good to someone over the age of 75 who does not want to watch television. It is no good if one's little gift from the Government is in the form of an asset that is of no use.

There are endless more schemes for enterprise funds and consultancy and investment incentives. The Chancellor is an accountant's dream. Life is now so complicated for businesses and entrepreneurs that they will spend far more time looking for pots of Government investment than working on ideas and investment that properly belong to them. During the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Mr. Fallon), I drew attention to how that approach is replicated in the variety of different funds, organisations and people who are responsible for elements of urban regeneration.

The Chancellor could not resist doing the same with health. Having announced the £2 billion for the national health service, the Prime Minister told us yesterday that there were strings attached to £660 million of it and that there would be quarterly reviews of the performance of health trusts before they were allowed the next tranche of money.

What has happened to the rest of the £2 billion that has been promised for health? I presume that it has gone to pay this year's accumulated debts of between £500 million and £1 billion, the £200 million underfunding of the most recent health service pay round and the £300 million that has to be reinvested in the health service pension scheme. That pretty much accounts for the £2 billion. Therefore, all that the NHS will receive next year is £660 million with strings attached. Again, that is central Government demanding control.

What was the reason for the difference in treatment of health and education? Why was the Chancellor so keen to passport money directly to head teachers? The answer, of course—this point was made by the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis)—is that £4 billion of education spending is already tied up with Government schemes of one sort or another. Such has been the outcry of pain among head teachers at the deluge of paper from Whitehall that the Government seem to have got the message. As a result, some schools are to receive £9,000, and some more. That money will go directly to teachers, and we of course say hooray for that.

Given the unprecedented benign conditions, we ought in the last Budget of the 20th century—those who think that the 20th century ended in 1999 should question whether they are right—to have begun repaying our national debt. If we do not do so now, we never will. I therefore welcome the steps that the Chancellor has taken towards that, although, given the circumstances, he has not gone far enough. Let us at least hope that that approach continues because the benign position will not hold for ever. We have not abolished the business cycle, whatever the Chancellor may think, and I fear that we have not abolished human nature and the need for Governments to perform the fundamental duty of protecting their citizens from internal and external threats.

Defence from external threat is the first duty of the state. The defence of collective interests was the reason why people in the end came together in this thing called the nation state. It is also the duty of the state to defend people from internal threats, through the criminal justice system. We accept that another proper duty is to protect people from extreme poverty and deprivation. That is why we have a social security system. The matter is all about security.

These days, the state provides great public services in education and health, but we must sit back and ask whether we should accept that it is its duty to underwrite such provision. There is a proper debate to be had about that, and a proper test to be done to find out whether the state should provide health and education services or simply underwrite access to those services.

In the national health service, the United Kingdom has very socialised, or socialist, health provision. In his statement on Tuesday, the Chancellor announced that there had been £49.3 billion of health spending in 1999–2000. I checked that figure in the Red Book and found that it was £40.5 billion, and I wondered what had happened to the difference. Of course, the difference is accounted for by Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. So much for devolution: the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland—or the Assembly, depending on who is in power—have been told exactly what to spend their money on and are not entitled to decide how much to spend on health and education in their own area.

In *The Times* today, Anatole Kaletsky makes a powerful case for a national health service, and gives four reasons for making such provision. First, he says,

> medical treatment is regarded as a basic human right in almost all modern societies.

That, of course, does not answer the question of whether the state should be underwriting access to the service or providing the service itself. He continues:

> Secondly, there is a huge inequality of knowledge between the consumers of medicine and the suppliers, the doctors and hospitals.

His third argument is that the consequences of making a wrong decision in choosing a type of health care can be fatal. Finally, he says,

> our lives and the lives of our families are so valuable, that our willingness to pay for even a small chance of survival knows no rational limit.

Mr. Kaletsky's conclusion is that the balance of market power is tilted so far in favour of the producers and against consumers that there is a strong case for a national health service. That is clearly where the balance of argument lies in our country today, so if we are to spend an enormous sum on the NHS, we have to find the best way of putting it into health care.

Historically, as societies have got wealthier, they have tended to spend an increasing proportion of their nation's wealth on health. The United States spends 14 per cent. of its wealth on health care and in EU countries the average is 9.1 per cent. Yesterday, the Prime Minister claimed that the Government will raise NHS expenditure to 7.6 per cent. of gross domestic product. Sadly, that is not the case. The Government's plans will take NHS expenditure up to only 6.5 per cent. of GDP; 1.1 per cent. of health expenditure is in the private sector.

[Mr. Blunt]

Labour Members need to appreciate that only the Conservative party can get to the EU average, because only the Conservatives have a commitment not only to spend the amount that Labour will spend on the NHS, but to find the mechanism to release money into the private sector through private health insurance and other schemes and to enlarge that sector.

Mr. Gardiner: I suggest to the hon. Gentleman that the only way that the Conservative party is likely to reach the European average is by cutting this country's GDP.

Mr. Blunt: The hon. Gentleman made a facile stab at an intervention. This is a serious point. The Government are to spend only 6.5 per cent. of our GDP on health and are so hostile to private health insurance that the Prime Minister said:

> A modernised health service, not private medical insurance, is the future.—[*Official Report*, 22 March 2000; Vol. 346, c. 984.]

That means that the UK does not have a cat in hell's chance of beginning to approach the EU average of 9.1 per cent. of GDP. We must find mechanisms whereby we encourage private as well as public provision. That is the lesson that must be learned about the future of health.

In education, the arguments are different. If we could find the mechanism whereby individuals could make marginal decisions about how much money they want to pay for their children's education, we could release a vast amount of extra money into education. We are left with the irony that, if the state controls people's choices about health and education, less money will be spent on those services than would be spent if people were able to make those decisions for themselves, according to their circumstances.

There is a rather perverse argument about the future prosperity of our country, which is that, if the state can act to depress expenditure on health and education in that way, people will be better able to save their money and it can be reinvested in the productive parts of the economy, to generate wealth further down the line. Those are difficult arguments for any Government to balance.

The basic job of Government is to ensure the security of our country and its people. The Chancellor told us that there would be 2.5 per cent. growth in public expenditure. The Secretary of State for Education and Employment told us today that his budget has gone up by 8 per cent., which I presume is a real-terms figure, but he may want to correct that. Health spending is going up by 6.1 per cent. a year over the next five years. The Government are faced with crime and asylum issues, and sorting them out will require a great deal more money than has been allocated at present.

The Deputy Prime Minister will have to have more money for transport if he is serious about restoring the roads programme that the Government have decimated. Moreover, the Government must deal with issues such as social security. If they believe that they have abolished the business cycle, they will have a rude shock when it turns down. In this context, the difference between boom and bust—Labour's favourite expression—is pretty fine. If the economy starts to turn down, the Government's figures will look enormously bad in comparison with the position that they and the country apparently enjoy now.

There is alarm and despondency at the Ministry of Defence. Defence is the one subject that has not been mentioned so far. It is clear that, if there is only a certain amount of growth in public expenditure and a huge amount has been devoted to other matters, defence will either receive no money or will pay for some of the extra spending. The Select Committee on Defence has said that the wheels on the strategic defence review are starting to wobble alarmingly.

In this uniquely benign era of peace and security for our citizens, the Government should remember that their first duty is defence. If the Government undermine the armed forces by failing to pay them properly, by failing to fund their equipment properly and by watching them descend into a spiral of decline as the good people leave and they become a demoralised body of soldiers, sailors and airmen, less capable of defending our country, their action will constitute a betrayal.

4.57 pm

Mr. Paul Goggins (Wythenshawe and Sale, East): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt). We may not share political views, but we share an office corridor. I have found from my contact with him that he has strong views, which he always expresses clearly. He may be interested to learn that, although he and my father may not agree on many political issues, they would at least agree on the way in which the centuries should be counted.

You and I, Mr. Deputy Speaker—along with Members in all parts of the House—spent a very special couple of hours yesterday attending the installation of Cormac Murphy-O'Connor as the new Archbishop of Westminster. In his homily, he described going on holiday to the outer Hebrides and finding a memorial stone dedicated to "pilgrim Cormac". Carved on the stone were the words

> He went beyond what was deemed possible.

I thought that the archbishop displayed characteristic good humour and humility, but I also reflected later on whether the Chancellor had drawn on the same Celtic spirit for his inspiration. He clearly went beyond what most commentators deemed possible.

Since Tuesday, most of the attention has rightly been focused on health. There is to be an extra £2 billion next year, and a 35 per cent. real-terms increase over the next four years. The agenda, as set out yesterday by the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Health, is no longer about how much is spent on the NHS; it is about how we spend money on the NHS.

I want to deal with four issues. The first is education, which is a considerable beneficiary. It is vital to my constituency. The constituency contains Manchester airport, which is bringing many new jobs to the area. The main obstacle that remains in the path of many of my constituents is what the Secretary of State for Education and Employment described today as poverty of aspiration. The huge challenge of raising standards while extending horizons remains to be met.

The excellence in cities initiative is going down extremely well in my constituency and throughout the city of Manchester and today we heard how it will be built on. We have an education action zone in Wythenshawe, which puts an extra £1 million a year into local schools. However, it brings into play not only money, but new energy and new partnerships in the education of our

young people. This week's announcement means that the six secondary schools, the four special schools and the 35 primary schools in my constituency—one of which was attended some years ago by my right hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards—will collectively receive about £600,000 next year. By happy coincidence, a similar sum is going to schools in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Mr. Shaw).

That money will go straight into local schools, but there has been some debate about whether it should have been routed through local education authorities. I thought that it would be a good idea to ring up the head teachers of some schools in my constituency to find out what they think. Let me share one or two of their observations with the House. The head teacher of a secondary school told me this morning:

> This will let us buy books and equipment to enable youngsters to engage in quality learning. It is a boost to teachers' morale when they feel properly resourced.

The head teacher of a primary school said:

> We will be using this money to help fund our new information technology block. It will go directly to support children in the classroom.

Finally, another secondary school head teacher said:

> We will be able to strengthen the programme for disaffected and low-achieving pupils at key stage four. It will give a much-needed boost to the school's new library.

It is clear that the new cash is very valuable to head teachers and pupils in my constituency.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): In the spirit of further informing the debate, did the hon. Gentleman also ask the heads whether they favour all their school budget or only that part of it being sent direct to them rather than routed through the LEAs?

Mr. Goggins: The head teachers in my constituency value the partnership with the LEA and they certainly value the cash that they are receiving from the Government in the Budget.

My second point—on transport—may also interest the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady). Yesterday, my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister announced investment of up to £250 million in the metrolink tram system in Greater Manchester. That will have a huge impact across the county as existing routes from Bury to Altrincham, which cuts across the western side of my constituency, and out to Salford Quays and Eccles will be transformed. The new links will go out to Oldham, Rochdale and Ashton-under-Lyne and could be routed through to Stockport via Didsbury. That investment, particularly in the links to Manchester airport and the communities of Wythenshawe, will give a massive boost to my constituents.

In the Wythenshawe area of my constituency, 50 per cent. of households do not have access to a car, so metrolink will provide people with much better access to work and to leisure opportunities. Manchester airport is pledged to have 25 per cent. of its passengers and work force arriving and departing by public transport and it projects that 40 million passengers a year will pass through by 2015. Clearly the additional capacity provided by metrolink will be vital. Metrolink will revitalise Wythenshawe town centre as the trams will pass directly through it and provide access to Wythenshawe hospital, which has benefited from a £120 million modernisation investment from the Government. The hospital is not only local, but a regional centre of excellence. As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said yesterday, metrolink is good for the economy and good for the environment.

On my third point—on employment—Labour Members and, I hope, all hon. Members rejoice in the fact that there are 800,000 more people in work than before the general election. Unemployment has fallen by 30 per cent. generally and there has been a 70 per cent. fall in youth unemployment. Those are dramatic changes and the trends are reflected in my constituency.

We have seen the impact of the new deal. It is depressing that the Opposition Front-Bench team remains hostile to it, instead of rejoicing in the fact that young people who would otherwise have been on the dole and on the scrap heap are in productive employment. A total of 900 young people in my constituency have joined the new deal, 400 of whom are in employment. I rejoice in that fact.

None the less, unemployment remains a problem for many people. Barriers to moving back into work remain for many. The Chancellor acknowledged that in his pre-Budget statement, in which he issued a statement asking all of us—Members of Parliament, private sector organisations and local authorities—to find new ways in which to reconnect people who have been outside the work force for long periods to employment.

In that spirit, I recently brought together a group of people in my constituency—long-term unemployed people, representatives of agencies such as the Employment Service and several significant employers—at a conference to discuss what the obstacles were to the employment of long-term unemployed people and what proposals should be made to the Chancellor and to other Ministers to remove them. I have communicated them to the Chancellor. I should like to raise a number of the points and recommendations that arose from the conference; some of them are dealt with in the Budget.

The first recommendation was that there should be greater flexibility in managing the exit from benefits. One of the things that people often face when moving from benefits to work is debt. They do not have an immediate cash flow and feel almost worse off in work. We must find ways in which to bridge the gap.

Those people will be delighted at the announcement of the job grants. The cash boost of £100 for anyone who has been out of work for more than one year will give a little extra help at that important time. They will also be pleased at the announcement that the disregard on income support is to be lifted from £15 a week to £20.

The second recommendation was that the Government should introduce a 24-hour freephone advice line to provide people who are considering taking employment with immediate calculations to show what the net benefit would be of the working families tax credit and other payments with regard to national insurance and tax: a better-off calculation over the telephone. It has worked with NHS Direct. The idea could be well worth considering.

The third recommendation was that, as far as possible, the restriction on eligibility for training and job-finding support should be lifted. I was pleased that, during Education questions, the Under-Secretary of State for

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Education and Employment, my hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Ms Hodge), reinforced the fact that the Government have a flexible approach to training. In the Budget, it was announced that the new deal would be extended next year to people over the age of 25, so that its benefits could be extended to other groups.

The fourth recommendation was that greater financial incentives should be given to employers to take people on. The idea was put forward of, for example, paid work trials and, based on the experience in Wythenshawe of using the European social funds, wage subsidies, which can give extra encouragement to employers to take people on and to take them off the dole.

As I say, some of those ideas have been reflected in this week's announcements. Ministers will assess the merits of those ideas, but the important thing to emphasise is that all the people at that meeting—agency staff, long-term unemployed people and local employers—shared the Chancellor's aspiration of full employment. What is more, they believed that it was achievable.

The fourth area that I want to cover is poverty and the Government action to tackle it. I must set the context. In 1997, one in four people in Britain lived in poverty. One in three children were born into poverty. Reputable studies at the time showed that, with the possible exception of New Zealand, the United Kingdom had become the most unequal society in the industrialised world. That is the starting point for the Government.

We know that enhancing employment opportunities is the Government's main tool for tackling poverty, and that that is the best way of boosting personal and family incomes. It has the additional beneficial effect of increasing tax revenues. If more people are off the dole and in work, more people are paying taxes, creating a virtuous circle. The fact is that 780,000 fewer people are dependent on income support now than in May 1997. As we heard in Tuesday's Budget statement, the amount spent on economic failure has decreased by £2 billion.

The Budget is not only about work. Extra help is also being targeted at specific groups, with families with children and pensioners as the obvious priorities. In a way, it is new Labour redistribution. It is not slicing or re-slicing a shrinking cake, but prioritising the poorest in the allocation of the extra resources emerging from a growing economy. That approach is certainly this Government's hallmark.

The practical consequences of the Government's approach are higher child benefit; the provision of working families tax credit to 4,000 families in my constituency; child care credit; and next year's introduction of the child tax credit, which will be worth £442 to each family. The main consequence is that 1.2 million children will be lifted out of poverty. Every hon. Member should rejoice in that.

It was also announced this week that the winter fuel allowance for pensioners will increase to £150, and that there will be increases in the minimum income guarantee. However, I am particularly delighted about the announcement of extra help for pensioners who currently just miss out on the type of special help being targeted at the very poorest pensioners. Capital limits for people claiming income support will be lifted. Those limits have not changed since 1988. Now, however, the lower limit will be doubled, from £3,000 to 6,000, and the upper limit will be raised to £12,000. That is tremendously good news for people who just fail to qualify for benefit because they have been prudent and saved a little money. It is a very welcome development.

The announcement on pensioner credits was another welcome development. They will be targeted at pensioners who are not in the poorest group of pensioners, but whose income does not exceed perhaps £100 per week for single pensioners, or £150 per week for pensioner couples. Although such people are above the minimum income guarantee level, they are by no means well off, and the credits will target extra help at them.

Those measures—in addition to free television licences for over 75s, extra winter fuel allowance and extra spending on the NHS, much of which will be enjoyed by older people—will ensure that pensioners benefit from improving living standards.

I shall leave the last word to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, which has produced, as it always does, a post-Budget analysis. The IFS is a very reputable organisation and produces very accurate analyses, and this is its conclusion on the Budget:

> Before the 2000 Budget, the three previous Budgets produced cumulative gains of around 6 per cent. for the bottom two deciles . . . The measures announced by Gordon Brown in his recent budget speech amplify and accentuate this pattern. The poorest decile now gains by 9.2 per cent, or around £9 per week on average. The second decile gains by around 8 per cent. and the third and fourth deciles by around 5 per cent. and 3 per cent. respectively . . . Overall then, new Labour has been a redistributing government.

Progress and justice was the slogan that won Labour the general election. In practice, it means policies being delivered that give practical solutions to millions of people who, until now, have been consigned to poverty. Those millions of people were cast aside by the Conservatives when they were in power, but they are a priority for this Government.

5.14 pm

Mr. Chris Pond (Gravesham): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the debate. I apologise for the fact that I may have to leave before the winding-up speeches, but I have been here since the beginning of the debate. I understand that the House considers that that practice should not be encouraged and I hope that Front-Bench spokesmen will recognise that it is an inevitability, not a discourtesy.

It is always a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale, East (Mr. Goggins). I do not share a corridor with him, but I share the same views, especially his concern about poverty and inequality. I share neither a corridor nor the same views as the hon. Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt). I was encouraged by the fact that he seems to have been persuaded by an article in *The Times* that there is a case for a national health service. We have a national health service and Labour Members intend to keep it.

The hon. Member for Reigate, like the hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Mr. Fallon), suggested that the circumstances in which the Chancellor was able to deliver his Budget were the result of the golden legacy left by the previous Government. If that is a golden legacy, it is fool's gold. When we consider the circumstances that we inherited, especially the level of debt, it is somewhat rich for them to suggest that they are responsible for our current position.

I want to concentrate on education aspects of the Budget and the speech made this afternoon by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment. I want to pay tribute to the schools in my constituency and all those who make up the partnership of the schools, including the staff, governors, parents and students. I am proud of their achievements in providing high standards of education, despite often having to operate in deprived sections of the community.

In her opening remarks, the hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) said that we should set the schools free. I do not think that the schools in my constituency considered that they were set free by the previous Government when they were struggling with inadequate buildings, leaking roofs and outside toilets and without facilities such as computer equipment or books. Three primary schools in my constituency were on special measures, as was one secondary school, which has since closed.

The hon. Lady also suggested that grant-maintained status gave schools rather more independence than they might have in partnership with the local education authority. When the secondary school in my constituency was in severe difficulties, it found itself, as a grant-maintained school, with no visible means of support. It had slipped deeper and deeper into problems until it was forced to close.

There is still much to be done for the schools in my constituency, but the children now have the prospect of obtaining the quality of education that they deserve. In the past few days, one of the secondary schools in my constituency—Northfleet school for girls—was honoured at an event at No. 10 Downing street as the fifth most improved school in the country. It achieved that despite the fact that when it asked for extra classroom space, Conservative-controlled Kent county council sent along two aged portakabins with unsafe floors and leaking roofs. Meopham school in my constituency this week celebrated an excellent Ofsted report, which is not the result of anything done by the previous Government or Kent county council.

The Secretary of State talked about schools coming out of special measures. Recently, three primary schools in my constituency have lifted themselves out of special measures and they deserve tribute. They include Westcourt school, which is a fine primary school and Chantry school. When I first met the head teacher of Chantry school on taking over as Member of Parliament he proudly showed me his stock of books—I should say "book" since he had only one book in the school. He had leaking roofs and draughty windows. That school has been highlighted in *The Times Educational Supplement* as one of our finest, having come out of special measures.

In the past few weeks, Northcourt primary school has received a letter of congratulation and encouragement from the Prime Minister for coming out of special measures. Its latest Ofsted report praises it for the improvements in attendance and behaviour, for the progress that pupils are making in 95 per cent. of the lessons and for the fact that attendance rates have increased dramatically. The school is an important focus for a deprived local community, but Kent county council wants to close it. The community and I consider that to be an act of wilful vandalism. It is now up to the independent schools adjudicator to decide whether the proposal should go ahead.

Those schools will welcome the announcement of the extra capital and revenue provided in the Budget. We have all been doing our sums and I reckon that schools in my constituency will be well over £500,000 better off. I hope that that matches the figures calculated by my hon. Friends the Members for Chatham and Aylesford (Mr. Shaw) and for Wythenshawe and Sale, East.

Schools will also applaud the decision to pay the funds directly to them. In the past, although there has been a significant improvement in funding for schools, Kent county council seems to have found that some of the money has stuck to its fingers. The figures published by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment show that last year Kent county council increased its spending on pupils by only 3.1 per cent.—half the average increase for England as a whole. Among county education authorities, only Hertfordshire increased its spending per pupil by less. Among all education authorities throughout the country, only the Tory boroughs of Bromley, Kensington and Chelsea and Wandsworth spent less, along with Hackney council, whose education authority had been suspended. That is why schools in my constituency will very much welcome the fact that they will receive the funds allocated to them by my right hon. Friends the Chancellor and the Secretary of State.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State talked about the need to ensure that children are not excluded without access to education. That is welcome, as is his statement that there is no intention to force schools to keep children whose disruptive behaviour may damage the educational prospects of others in the class. I fully support the policy of inclusion, particularly of special needs children. Too often, the special needs of children are not recognised and cannot therefore be properly addressed. In my constituency surgeries, I have met many parents who are at their wits' end, because they know that their children have special needs, but those needs are not recognised by the education authority.

That puts pressure on schools, which have to deal with those children without the extra resources that they need to ensure that their needs are catered for as well as the needs of other children in the school. At one school in my constituency, the special educational needs co-ordinator has found the pressure too great and has resigned. In another school, staff feel that they are struggling against impossible odds because of the behavioural difficulties of children. Another told me last week that pupils' disruptive behaviour is one of the biggest challenges facing schools.

In Gravesham we are fortunate to have Ifield school, which is a special school in every sense of the word. It has been praised by Ofsted and received a letter in the past few days from the chief inspector of schools congratulating it on its achievements and apologising for the fact that it had inadvertently been left out of the list of excellent special schools.

Ifield school has developed an initiative that I refer to my right hon. Friends the Secretary of State and the Minister for School Standards. It tries to provide to all schools in the borough the additional support that they need to deal with children with special needs. That should be non-judgmental advice and guidance that will help inform teachers and individual schools to deal with some of the behavioural difficulties that are created by children

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with special needs. It may help them to cope and to ensure that other children in their schools also receive the attention that they deserve.

The hon. Member for Maidenhead argued that schools must have the right to exclude disruptive pupils. As a parent whose daughter was excluded from a nursery at the age of three, I do not share that view. However, I recognise that schools sometimes face real difficulties because of the behaviour of some children. We must recognise that difficulty and provide them with the support that they need to keep those children within the mainstream environment wherever possible.

The ability of schools to deal with children with special needs is inevitably diminished when they are operating on the edge of financial viability. The extra resources that my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State have announced will help schools to provide the education that all our children deserve, and I very much welcome it.

5.26 pm

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak in this debate. I am pleased also to follow, even if at one remove, my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale, East (Mr. Goggins)—I am not that touchy about the small error made in the name of his constituency by the hon. Member for Gravesham (Mr. Pond).

The hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale, East seemed to be suggesting that the Chancellor's Budget was not really possible. I was wondering whether he would suggest that if it were not possible, perhaps it was all based on spin and unreality and that some discrepancies might emerge as it is unpicked. He promptly corrected that impression and returned to the loyal fold.

I support the hon. Gentleman in welcoming the investment in metrolink, which, as the Member for a constituency at one end of the existing line, I can wholeheartedly confirm is an excellent system. It demonstrates the advantages that good public transport systems can bring. It gets people out of their cars and on to the public transport network. In doing so, it has made an important contribution for my constituents and for others who have benefited from it already. As the hon. Gentleman said, it will be a great advantage having links to Manchester airport. From the point of view of my constituents, it will be important to have a link to Wythenshawe hospital, which currently has poor transport access links. It is good to see the Government building on the excellent start that was made by the previous Administration in the development of the metrolink.

Much has been said about the new deal. I know that some Labour Members think that the Opposition are churlish and that we do not accept the undoubted and unarguable benefits of the scheme. As a member of the Education and Employment Committee, I have taken a close interest in the new deal. I do not immediately discount the possibility that such schemes can bring benefits. However, there are some serious problems with the new deal—there are targeting problems, and there are certainly problems in evaluating the benefits that it is bringing and what benefits might have arisen regardless.

The new deal appears to be an expensive scheme in terms of the cost per job created. I know that Labour Members do not accept the figure of £11,000 per job that we have suggested, but they are not always credible when they produce their own figures. Recently, we heard from a Minister that the new deal for lone parents seemed to be costing several thousand pounds per job created. It seems that that is not the only part of the new deal that entails costs of that order.

Few would dispute that the scheme carries with it also an element of dead weight. The fact is that many jobs are created anyway in the economy, and inevitably a percentage of those who are on the new deal would have found employment without the benefit of the scheme. Whether it is 50 per cent. or 40 per cent. is hard to evaluate, and that is one of the things that the independent studies attempt to assess.

What is clear is that the rate of decline of unemployment—especially youth unemployment, which was the particular target of the new deal—was greater before the introduction of the new deal than it has been since. The new deal may have brought benefits for some people, but it has done so at a great cost and it is hard to quantify who has benefited and who would have found employment in any case.

The Government persist in saying that the new deal is working well and repeatedly ask whether we would get rid of it. My hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) made it clear that they will have to be patient to hear what we think. I am getting a little impatient to learn what they would do. Thankfully, it is looking less likely that the Labour party will form the next Government, but it is not clear what it would do with the new deal if it did. The Government say that it is an unalloyed success and has brought undoubted benefits, and they contest any suggestion that it is an expensive scheme that is not worth retaining, so would they retain it, and if so, how do they intend to fund it?

The Budget did not make it clear what the funding programme for the new deal would be, rolled out over a period of years. If the Government intend to maintain the new deal, do they plan to fund it through another windfall tax? Do they want to take another £5 billion from the utilities or, as they do not much like them at the moment, from the banks? Alternatively, will they look to raise £5 billion in taxes from other sections of the population? If they are asking us what our proposals are, it is time that they started to roll out in a little more detail what their long-term plan is for the new deal.

A lot has been said about health. As many Conservative Members have said, where there is new money for the national health service, we welcome it without question or reserve. In previous Budgets the Government have engaged in some creative accounting, and the figures announced for the money to be used for the benefit of patients have not always been accurate.

Certainly, when one starts to analyse the £2 billion increase for next year, it starts to look less generous than at first glance. We have to consider the fact that perhaps £1 billion of it will go to fund deficits, that £200 million will go to deal with unfunded pay awards and that £300 million is contingent on the possibility of an increase in revenue from tobacco duty.

That begs an enormous question, because the previous Government's policy, which this Government have continued, of increasing tobacco duty considerably above

the rate of inflation, has not achieved the objectives that one would have expected. It has not increased the revenue coming into the Treasury in proportion to the increases in tax revenue.

The Financial Secretary looks puzzled, but the Red Book figures show that the outturn of revenue in 1998–99 was £8.2 billion, and the projected outturn in 2000–01 is £7.4 billion. The steady increase in tobacco duty is not leading to a steady increase in the Government revenue derived from it; yet £300 million of the money supposedly promised to the NHS is contingent on the premise that there will be a commensurate increase in revenue from tobacco.

That point was confirmed to me a couple of weeks ago in a written answer from the Secretary of State for Health. It was made clear that the NHS was using the figure of £250 million as a planning assumption, and that that was how much the Government expected to be available from that source. The Government also do not appear to have achieved a cut in the number of people smoking. It is counter-intuitive, but seems to be the result of the dramatic increase in the levels of smuggling of tobacco.

We welcome genuine increases in health service spending when they find their way to hospitals and patient care, but the Government's measures will have to be judged by the quality of the NHS's output, not just on global figures for expenditure. The public are becoming more sophisticated in their judgments on the NHS. They now look for genuine performance, not only at statements from the Government about how much money they claim to be spending on the NHS.

In the past year or two, the realisation has developed that the situation in the NHS has not just been bumping along the same as before but has been getting worse. That point was made, of course, by Lord Winston in the interview in the *New Statesman*, in which he said categorically that the health service was getting worse. I hope, as do Labour Members, that the funding that has been announced will reverse that. I do not want to see the NHS continuing to get worse and I do not want more of my constituents joining the 160,000 who have had to pay for private treatment. They have done so out of their own pockets—not from insurance, but from savings. That is one of the most tragic and shocking occurrences of recent years.

For political reasons, the Labour party likes to claim that we want to privatise the health service, but our constituents are encountering an inadequate NHS that is not able to meet the health needs of the public and is not improving and providing treatment faster. The NHS is making people wait longer. They may be waiting longer to see a consultant rather than waiting after seeing a consultant before they get treatment, but the waits are still unacceptably long. Some 160,000 people have now waited for so long that they have had to find the cash from their life savings to buy operations in the private sector. The Government should take that seriously and stop trying to suggest that there is some false political debate between the two sides of the House about belief in the NHS. We do believe in the NHS, but the Government's record is not one of which they can be proud.

I am sure that hon. Members would be surprised if, after I have spent so much time trying to bring to the attention of the public and the Commissioner for Public Appointments the Government's policy on NHS appointments, I did not mention that issue briefly. When the Prime Minister made his non-statement about the NHS to the House yesterday, in which he raised a few questions and offered no solutions, one thing that was clear from his remarks was that to achieve real improvements in the NHS, it would be necessary to have good leadership, good control and good delivery in the management of health authorities and trusts. That is something that the Commissioner for Public Appointments made clear in her report yesterday is happening in some cases, but not all. It is worrying when an independent body suggests in a report that people who are entrusted with the management of our national health service are not always appointed on merit. It is a cause of grave concern. The commissioner spoke of a "disconnection" between the role of an NHS board and the ability of its members, which raises serious questions and must be tackled.

Education is the principal theme of this part of the Budget debate. We have heard from the Secretary of State the figures for investment in schools. All hon. Members—whatever their party—welcome investment in their schools, but it is no good if money is given with one hand and taken away with the other. We have heard that primary schools will receive between £3,000 and £9,000 and secondary schools between £30,000 and £50,000.

What about the other side of the equation? What about grant-maintained schools, to which some hon. Members have referred? Nearly all the secondary schools in my constituency were grant-maintained, and in most that status was voted for by large majorities of the parents who were consulted. Schools in my constituency have lost £80,000 or £90,000 in revenue as a result of the loss of GM status. That was not what was promised during the passage of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998.

Mr. Vernon Coaker (Gedling): Yes it was.

Mr. Brady: The hon. Gentleman, who is a parliamentary private secretary I presume, suggests that I have misled the House. I have not. I was a member of the Standing Committee that considered the Bill, as it then was. I can assure him that Ministers were clear that they intended to raise revenue levels up to those being given to grant-maintained schools. They made it clear that there would be no reduction in funding for such schools.

There were excellent grant-maintained schools in my constituency. I have frequently referred to one of the best, the Ashton upon Mersey school, which has been described by the Secretary of State as a beacon school. It has lost between £80,000 and £90,000 from its budget as a result of the loss of grant-maintained status. It might be small beer compared with the loss suffered by the London Oratory school and I am pleased that schools in my constituency have not yet asked parents to contribute, but the picture is typical—grant-maintained schools have lost the freedom to control their budgets as well losing as a considerable amount of revenue, which has meant the loss of teachers, facilities and the ability to do some of the wonderful things that they were achieving.

As I was able to mention during Education and Employment questions this morning, a further counterbalance to any increased funds that the Government say they are providing for the secondary schools in my

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constituency is the fact that Trafford borough council, which is under Labour control, is not funding the change in the post-16 curriculum—some hon. Members have tried to suggest that Conservative councils are not passing money on to their schools.

The Department for Education and Employment made it clear to all local education authorities that the change would result in a £35 million cost throughout the country and that funding was provided in the standard spending assessment settlement, yet Trafford borough council has told its secondary schools that there will be no funding to help to cover the extra staff costs or the cost of books and new examinations. That is a significant burden on schools in my locality.

The joint committee of heads in the borough estimates the cost to be £400,000. It wrote to the Secretary of State for Education and Employment on 7 March to express concern. I hope that it receives a prompt response—and a fuller response than that given by the Minister for School Standards to my question this morning. It is a grave concern for Trafford heads that they are being asked to implement a major change in the post-16 curriculum at the behest of the Government and yet they are being given no funds with which to do it.

Money is welcome, if it reaches the schools and increases pay for good teachers. It must not be countered by a loss of morale, of the sort that can arise when schools are reorganised.

The constituency of the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale, East covers part of the borough of Trafford, and includes Sale grammar school. We are on different sides of the debate, as he has made clear on many occasions. However, he will agree that the unfortunate effect of uncertainty for schools, parents and children is that the education system is put in the balance. The confusion apparent in our education system is causing morale to be lost and the direction that should be focused on achieving continued excellent results to be neglected.

The Government have other proposals regarding selection in some of their own pet schemes, which include city academies and initiatives promoting excellence in cities and in schools. I hope that the Government will give up their ideological view that selection in schools is always wrong, but they must make up their mind.

It is not acceptable for the Secretary of State for Education and Employment to say on one day that selection is completely wrong, only to claim on the next that he was only joking, that the Government have a different attitude and are not out to get grammar schools. Then, when the House of Lords amends legislative proposals, it was made clear that the Government would steamroller that decision and ensure that they got their own way.

The Government are all over the place with regard to selection in schools. A clear policy is needed, and I hope that it is one of the mature policies that the Secretary of State occasionally puts forward. He should recognise that some selection, in some circumstances, can be a good thing and can achieve good outcomes. However, we have not arrived at that stage yet. It would be a great tragedy if some of this country's excellent grammar schools and high schools were to be lost in the period between the Government abandoning their ideological obsession with abolishing selection and adopting the more enlightened view that selection is not always a bad thing.

I turn now to regional policy. The hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mr. Hall) is on the Government Front Bench. As a Whip, he cannot contribute to the debate, and that must be frustrating. In a spirit of good will, I shall tell the House that he has done much to fight for the retention of the synchrotron at Daresbury.

There is great concern in the north-west, among all local Members of Parliament and our constituents, that the Government have decided to invest in Oxford rather than in our area. The decision represents a massive loss to the economy of the north-west, as more than £500 million is involved. It has enormous implications for the scientific community in the area, and could be called a regional policy in reverse. It is a very negative outcome for people in the north-west.

The Government's policies in other respects are not in keeping with the broader regional agenda. An important example is the climate change levy, whose effect on manufacturing industry will be greater than on other sectors of the economy. The Government say that the levy has no net revenue implication, and I see that the Financial Secretary to the Treasury is nodding his agreement. There may be no net revenue implication for the Government, but there is for the people who pay the levy, regardless of whether they are in the manufacturing, agriculture or horticulture sectors.

The Budget contained some specific proposals regarding energy efficiency schemes, but it is absurd to apply the climate change levy to agriculture or horticulture, as those sectors, far from emitting damaging greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, actually remove them. To hit a sector of the economy that has a beneficial effect on climate change is absurd. I am disappointed that, having recognised the argument in respect of giving energy efficiency grants, the Government have not understood that there is no justification, in environmental terms, for taxing those sectors.

The climate change levy will have a negative effect on the north and the midlands. The cuts in employers' national insurance contributions, which are supposed to compensate for it, will have a disproportionate benefit for the service sector—more likely in the south than the north.

The overall effect of the Budget remains to be seen. It is encouraging that the press and other media have given it a more thorough assessment, and more quickly, than previous Budgets produced by this Government have received. There has been a more sceptical approach, and this Budget has been dissected a little more thoroughly, and there has been a greater readiness to look beyond the rhetoric and the headlines to understand what the real, detailed effect will be.

The overall effect, which the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale, East was happy to acknowledge and to trumpet in his speech, is that of a redistributive Budget that increases taxes. Labour Members may be happy with that; Conservative Members may be less happy. However, this tax-increasing Budget will prove acceptable to the British people only if those increased taxes are matched by increased delivery of services. So far, if we look at the Government's record, that has not been the case.

So far, a typical working family has paid some £600 a year more under this Government. Next year they will lose the married couple's allowance and mortgage interest relief at source. The rate of savings is going down dramatically, which will have a serious long-term effect on the economy. We have not, however, seen a balancing improvement in the quality of services. Nowhere is that more apparent than in the health service.

I conclude with a challenge to the Government. They have produced their Budget, setting out their strategy, in what is probably the last full year before an election. What is crucial is delivery of services. It has not happened yet—the public are waiting.

5.53 pm

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): The Budget Red Book has the title "Prudent for a Purpose". That raises two obvious questions. How have the Government been prudent, and what is the purpose?

We have been prudent in putting in place a new framework for our economy—or, rather, three new frameworks. We have a new monetary framework in which to deliver our low inflation target of 2.5 per cent. We did that principally by giving the Bank of England responsibility for setting interest rates in line with the target set by the Government. We have put in place a new fiscal framework that regains control of public finances by adhering to two strict fiscal rules. There is the golden rule that over the economic cycle we borrow only for investment and not for consumption, and the sustainable investment rule that net public debt as a proportion of gross domestic product should be held at a stable and prudent level.

Labour inherited a £28 billion borrowing requirement when it came to power in 1997, with the national debt running at 44 per cent. of GDP. This year, the national debt will be just 37.1 per cent. of GDP, and by the end of 2001-02, that figure will represent almost exactly one third of GDP, at just 33.6 per cent. We have already paid off £30 billion of the debts of failure that we inherited, and this year we will make a debt repayment of £12 billion.

The third new framework is the one that we have set for public spending. We have moved to three-year spending plans to provide, through the comprehensive spending review, a basis for long-term planning in the economy to give the certainty that business needs for investment.

Last night, when I was driving home in my car on the A40, I had a frightening experience. I heard the voice of the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo) delivering his shadow Chancellor's Budget message on the radio. Among many of the inaccurate things of which he accused the Government, he talked of their muddled spending. We have done more to pay back the debt that this country built up as a result of his muddled spending than his Government ever repaid. Today's Labour surpluses are paying back yesterday's Tory debt.

So, yes we have been prudent, to answer my first question. What about the purpose? In this Budget, the purpose is the same as it has always been. The newspapers label Budgets. They have labelled this one the NHS Budget. The Budget last year was for working families. The one before was about the new deal for the unemployed. Nonsense. All Labour's Budgets have had the same objective. This one is no different. That objective is to achieve high and stable levels of both economic growth and employment. Only if we have a stable economy do we have the basis for long-term success. Only if we have economic growth do we have the resources to achieve all the other aims of the Government of creating a fairer society with real economic opportunity across the board for all—a better society with the public services to which a modern country should aspire.

Education occupies a unique position in the relationship between wealth creation and public service expenditure. It is a key public sector recipient of Government spending. Critically, it is also the very engine of wealth creation that provides revenue to the Exchequer in the first place. It is because the Government have always recognised the interdependence of education and economic growth that so much has already been achieved in our schools. It is also why the Government's aspirations for our children are so far from being exhausted.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State's announcement that we are now spending for the first time more than 5 per cent. of our gross domestic product on education is one that every hon. Member should applaud. They should applaud it as teachers, heads and parents applauded up and down the country when the extra £3,000 to £9,000 for all primary schools and £30,000 to £50,000 for all secondary schools was announced on Tuesday. May I tell my right hon. Friend what that shot in the arm will mean for just one school in my constituency of Brent, North?

Wembley high school was the only secondary school in Brent, North to remain with the LEA when all the others went to grant-maintained status. Much was said earlier by the shadow Education Secretary about grant-maintained schools and grammar schools. It seemed to me that we were replaying the arguments of yesteryear. The Tories are obsessed with the structure of schools when that argument has moved on. The argument is about standards—how to raise the educational achievement of all children in all schools.

Wembley high school was the only secondary school in Brent, North to remain with the LEA. Because of the disparities in funding, introduced by the then Conservative Government, the school found itself with growing deficits as neighbouring schools accumulated substantial surpluses. Wembley high faced the coming financial year with a dynamic new head teacher and a dedicated teaching staff, to whom I pay tribute; and a deficit of £400,000 and a recovery programme.

The extra money for schools announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor on Tuesday will make the most enormous difference to that school. It will enable the school to wipe out a large chunk of that deficit—if it chooses to do so—and to take on an extra teacher, because the school has struggled to maintain its staffing level.

I welcome the excellence in cities programmes and their extension to my borough. New initiatives such as those—creating learning support units and mentoring schemes—will complement the splendid work already undertaken by Brent education authority in matters such as pupil exclusions. The additional £33 million for excellence in cities announced by my right hon. Friend

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the Secretary of State for Education and Employment is one of the most effective ways of tackling social exclusion; I am delighted to support it.

On Tuesday, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor did not link only education and economic growth; he linked support for children and the family with a healthy, productive society. He said:

> A sure start for all Britain's children is not only right but it is the best anti-crime, the best anti-drugs, the best anti-unemployment and the best anti-dependency policy for this country's future.—[*Official Report*, 21 March 2000; Vol. 346, c. 865.]

That is what the Conservatives fail to understand. The hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Mr. Fallon) displayed that lack of understanding when he insisted that the Government should cut the social security budget, as he claimed they had promised to do. He sees the increase in maternity grant from £200 to £300 as a 50 per cent. increase in unnecessary spending. He sees the massive 40 per cent. increase in child benefit since 1997 as a failure. The Labour Government see it as an investment in our children and in the future of our nation.

The Budget will make a low-paid, two-child family, earning £10,000, better off by £2,700 a year under Labour than they were under the Tories. To Conservative Members, that 27 per cent. rise in family income is reckless spending, but to Labour Members, that is exactly what the phrase "Opportunity for the many and not the few" is all about.

The Government did not promise to cut the social security budget; they promised to cut the cost of social and economic failure. Our measures have created 800,000 new jobs. They have reduced unemployment to its lowest level for 20 years. That is the way to cut the cost of failure—not by keeping four in every 10 children living in poverty, as they were when the Government came into office.

Social security spending is right and proper when it gives a guaranteed minimum income to pensioners and when it gives pensioner households an extra £150 with which to face their winter fuel bills. It is right and proper when it rewards families for going out to work, rather than sitting idly at home on benefit.

Social security spending is part of a decent, caring society—a society that cares for the old, the sick and the vulnerable. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor and the Government are proud of the increased provision that they have made for those groups, but they are equally determined that social security spending should not be a soft touch for the idle or a pacifier for those who are there as a product of economic failure.

The real question about social security spending is not whether it is rising or falling; it is why it rose by 4 per cent. a year under the Conservative Government and is rising by only 1 per cent. under Labour. The real question is whether we are spending rightly on protecting those in our society who need it, or wrongly on paying the cost of economic failure and for millions of people unemployed and on the dole.

This morning, I held a Budget breakfast for businesses in my constituency. I was delighted that my hon. Friend the Financial Secretary to the Treasury was able to come to speak to the business community there. I was delighted to organise the event with a well known firm of accountants, BDO Stoy Hayward. I confess that I was somewhat less delighted when the first speaker rose to say, "As an accountant, I do not vote Labour." However, he won me back when he said, "But, as an accountant, I judge people on their results and I have to say that young unemployed people are now going back into work under this Government." That is what we mean by cutting the cost of economic failure.

I want to discuss some of the Budget's specific measures for business. The hon. Member for Reigate—and codswallop—(Mr. Blunt) called the Budget an accountant's dream in its complexity. That was certainly not the view of my Tory accountant friend from BDO Stoy Hayward this morning. His words about the capital gains tax provision—I think that I quote him exactly—were, "I know this may put me out of a job, but there are fantastic privileges for business asset ownership here. This is going to change your lives, guys."

Instead of a complex system of tapers over 10 years going down to 20 per cent., my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has cut capital gains tax to just 10 per cent. after four years—the lowest rate in the developed world and even below that of the United States of America. That is more than a radical simplification of the tax, it is a dramatic fillip to business investment. It is likely to bring massive liquidity into the business transfer market. Critically, it is also likely to have a saving effect on the businesses of many farmers for whom the tax impact of selling their businesses will now be halved.

The making permanent of the 40 per cent. rate for capital allowances was welcomed by many businesses. However, I am aware of at least one business that was incensed by the 100 per cent. capital allowance for information technology equipment. That business went out and purchased its new IT equipment yesterday on the strength of Tuesday's Budget. I remind hon. Members and other businesses that the 100 per cent. allowance comes into effect only after 5 April this year.

My right hon. Friend the Chancellor and his Treasury team colleagues have listened carefully to business representatives. I cite as an example the enterprise investment scheme, which was limited to qualifying trades and excluded those where income came in royalties. That therefore excluded software companies whose incomes come substantially from licensing deals. Under the new provisions in the Budget, such companies will now qualify for scheme relief, providing a real boost for the IT sector.

Another example of how my colleagues on the Government Front Bench have listened to business has been the change to the regulations governing group relief. A non-resident parent company with two subsidiary companies in the UK was previously unable to obtain group relief where one subsidiary made a loss and the other a profit. Now, such an offset can be made and assets transferred within companies without any gain arising. Those are not the marks of complication, as alleged on the Opposition Benches, but simple changes that will simply make Britain a more attractive place to do business.

I recall the story of the man who went to his bank manager in the early 1990s under the Conservative Government. He asked what he needed to do to set up a small business. His bank manager advised him to buy a large one and wait. Under Labour, and with this Budget, small businesses are growing organically into large ones.

I come to the billing that the media have given the Budget: the NHS Budget. Of course, like all hon. Members, I have pressing constituency needs in health care. My local hospital, Northwick Park, witnesses unacceptable queues at its accident and emergency department. The Government have just given £800,000 of capital investment for the refurbishment of that department, but even when that building work is completed and five new cubicles have been arranged, it still will not be good enough.

There are managerial and structural problems in that hospital. There are problems about the provision of beds beyond casualty, which are two floors above—not on the same level, not easily accessible. The blocking that therefore occurs must be taken care of by different managerial and structural arrangements—by modernisation not simply of the hospital's fabric but of the processes and protocols in it.

Although I welcome the 6.1 per cent. a year increased spending on the NHS up to 2004—double what it was during the Conservative years—and the £2 billion that is being put in this year, I welcome far more the Prime Minister's statement yesterday, in which he linked that investment with the process of modernisation that will bring best practice to all NHS hospitals.

The past few weeks have been dogged by sterile political debate of whether the burden of tax in this country is rising or falling. It has not centred on whether living standards are rising or falling, but that is what is most important to people. Living standards, particularly for those who have suffered so long from the polarisation of wealth and poverty over the past 20 years, are inexorably rising under this Government. Indeed, we have heard that Institute of Fiscal Studies figures show that living standards and the income of those in the poorest decile have risen by almost 10 per cent.

The focus of the Budget, and what the debate should be around, is not whether we are paying more or less tax but what we are spending that tax on. Are we spending it on a society that is becoming increasingly divided, and in which the costs of unemployment and failure are rising, or on caring for the people who need care in our community and on making sure that the engine of education and investment in the economy is providing the sustained long-term growth that we need?

6.15 pm

Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory (Wells): This is the third day of the Budget debates, and already a number of unexpected and unannounced nasties are emerging from the Budget and the Red Book. I shall refer to those in due course.

The overall picture that has emerged from this and previous debates is that the Government use the rhetoric of modernisation, but in practice they have a huge, growing sum that they recycle through the state. That is best illustrated by the enduring fact that, whatever the temporary balance between taxation and expenditure, and whatever the temporary surplus or deficit, those two giant pillars of public expenditure and taxation are getting ever higher. In the coming year, the Government will break the £1 billion-a-day public expenditure barrier with no comparable improvement in efficiency.

We would argue that this entire churning mechanism, whereby ever greater sums are taken from taxpayers, filtered through the state and given back to people in benefits, allowances, reliefs and services, is itself a cause of inefficiency. Instead of people making choices and judgments about their expenditure patterns and preferences, the state makes those choices for them. That is building up into a national overhead, not only on businesses, which have to grapple with the increased complexity of the tax and benefits systems, but on everyone who is ensnared by the tax system through work or the benefits system.

All of that is well demonstrated by the short history of the working families tax credit, which was the flagship benefit or tax credit to which the Government first referred. I am afraid that the Red Book, which the Chancellor published on Tuesday, continues the by now familiar fiddle of treating the working families tax credit not as an item of public expenditure but as a tax cut. That is how it is laid out in all the tables in the body of the Red Book, even though at the back, in the small print, it is explicitly referred to as an item of public expenditure.

Page 220 refers to

> income tax credits which score as public expenditure under national accounting conventions.

That could hardly be clearer. The treatment of the working families tax credit in all the Chancellor's pronouncements and in the rest of the Red Book completely conflicts with that. It is laid out as a tax cut, most noticeably in table C7 on page 200. The reason that the Government have done that is not hard to divine: they are trying to show that they have not raised taxes.

Even if one does not include the working families tax credit, it is clear from that table that the burden of taxation has gone up. It was 35.3 per cent. when the Government took office in 1997—that figure comes from another table in the Red Book—and in the coming year it will rise to 36.9 per cent. As I said, if we add another 0.5 per cent. for the working families tax credit, in line with the Government's convention, we arrive at an even higher figure. It amounts to the equivalent of an extra 8p in the pound on the rate of income tax.

The story of the working families tax credit does not stop there. However justified its aims may be, the fact remains that it is creating a fearsome complexity in the zone of interaction between low incomes, the benefit system and taxation. The overall system is becoming incomprehensible. Perhaps that is why the working families tax credit is to be scrapped. After a short three-year life, it is to be no more. It will be replaced, we are told, by some other system of tax credit, as yet not fully defined. This shows that the Government have got themselves into an almighty muddle.

The Government started out with the view that taxation was not just a matter of raising revenue; it influenced behaviour. We agree with that. At least, we agree with the part of the Labour manifesto for the last general election, which stated:

> Taxation is not neutral in the way it raises revenue. How and what governments tax sends clear signals about the economic activities they believe should be encouraged or discouraged.

I agree with that. I also believe that taxation can have damaging social consequences, and the Government must believe that as well. In the past fortnight, they have spoken of the importance of marriage. That has arisen

[Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory]

from the fiasco of their attempt to abolish section 28, which has at least forced them to recognise that marriage has a social value. Why, then, are they persisting in the abolition of the married couples allowance, which sends exactly the opposite signal?

Let us take another example: criminality. We all want to suppress or reduce criminal activity, but why are the Government pushing excise duties to breaking point? My hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady) mentioned tobacco. Tobacco smuggling has become something of an epidemic. The Government are doing nothing to suppress the smoking habit—the number of young people taking up smoking is rising—and the revenue is also being hit. The yield from tobacco duty in the current year is substantially lower than last year's yield. The Government's action is not only inducing criminal behaviour—smuggling, and gangs crossing the channel—but causing tobacco and cigarettes to be sold to young people and others in uncontrolled outlets and, moreover, hitting the public revenue. These are the economics of the madhouse.

The Government came to office promising to be tough not just on crime, but on the causes of crime. One of the causes of smuggling is the large and growing differential, in a single market, between our home taxation system and that on the continent. Rather than dealing with that cause of crime, the Government are making it worse by widening the duty differential.

Mr. Blunt: According to a report that I have seen, the Government propose to spend £209 million on anti-smuggling measures. If the increase in tobacco duty works, it will yield only £300 million.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: My hon. Friend makes an additional point to bolster my argument and I am grateful to him. All the extra civil servants and customs officers in the world will not prevent smuggling when it is so clearly advantageous to buy cigarettes at £2 a packet less on the continent and resell them in this country illegally. That is a serious and growing criminal activity. Ministers recognise that in parts of their speeches, but do nothing to tackle the root cause.

The uprating of fuel duties is a mystery. The Chancellor said in his Budget speech that he would increase the duties on diesel and petrol in line with inflation, but now that we have had a chance to examine the Budget documents it seems that they are going up by about 3.2 per cent. Inflation is not 3.2 per cent. The mystery deepens when we notice that the inflation-based increase in personal allowances is only 1.2 per cent. When it suits the Government to have a nice low uprating of personal allowances, they use an inflation figure of 1.2 per cent., but when uprating benefits the Revenue they use 3.2 per cent. We have discovered a new stealth tax and it took us only two days to find this one.

Plenty more stealth taxes are still being discovered, but the House of Commons Library has done a quick estimate. It believes that the extra revenue from that over-indexing of fuel duties will net the Treasury £472 million a year. That is practically the definition of a stealth tax. The Chancellor asserted in terms that those duties would rise only with inflation, but, to the enormous benefit of the Exchequer, they are increasing by far more than that.

My other points about the damaging effect of taxation settle on savings. The significance of the savings habit was well described by my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt), who pointed out the importance of a vigorous savings culture to funding the necessary investment and encouraging desirable social ends. We cannot responsibly kick people off welfare and withdraw their benefits unless we encourage them to save and make saving attractive to them, but everything that the Government have done has undermined that. They have abolished personal equity plans and tax-exempt special savings accounts and have hit pensions with a continuing extra tax burden of £5 billion a year. What message does that send to the public? It says, "Don't save. The Government will always let you down."

The Government have also skewed the income tax system away from saving, particularly by low-income groups. That is not theory—it has had an effect already. The savings ratio is down from more than 10 per cent. when we left office to 5.5 per cent., which is lower than predicted in the 1999 Budget. The savings ratio is collapsing under the Government and that will have serious social and economic consequences.

Leaving that aside, I want briefly to explore the tax relationship between business and the Government. It is beyond dispute that the tax burden on business has gone up. That is clearly laid out in the Budget arithmetic—they are at it again. Stamp duty has gone up. The Government pretend that it is all paid by people with large houses, but that is completely untrue. Most is paid by the commercial sector. It is a straight business tax.

It is also a tax against mobility and flexibility. When the Prime Minister—or even the Chancellor—dilates on the subject of the British economy, he likes to pretend that we are following the American model of wage and price flexibility, adaptability and enterprise, but everything he does converges not on that economy, but on the European Union economy. He talks about the Anglo-Saxon model, but his actions are all European. Again, it will have severe consequences for the competitiveness of the British economy.

Not just traditional industry, but the service sector will suffer from another omission. The Government have failed to do anything about the stamp duty on shares and we are now way out of line with other tax jurisdictions. We have the highest stamp duty, or equivalent, of any G7 country. Increasingly, transactions and deals will take place not in the City, but in Germany, where there is no stamp duty on share dealings.

Mr. Gardiner: Is the right hon. Gentleman aware of the technique of avoiding stamp duty on shares? On the purchase of shares, the stamp duty is only 0.5 per cent., but it can be on a very substantial price; he properly makes that point. However, consideration takes the form of convertible debt with a low face value, and the duty is charged on the face value. The debt converts to shares at full value after, say, one year and there is then no duty. That was the standard technique for the avoidance of stamp duty on shares. From Royal Assent, that will be stopped. Does he not applaud that?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: The situation is even worse. That tax is being avoided, too. The Government are ignoring the big avoidance: the moving of transactions

overseas altogether. They are attempting to stop a comparatively minor avoidance scheme, while ignoring the overall point: the measure will undermine the City of London as a place where those deals can take place.

The Government are fond of talking about the need for a partnership with industry. The quarrying industry is important in my constituency. It thought that it had reached a partnership deal with the Government over higher environmental standards. It discussed those with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and came up with an imaginative and far-reaching package on the extractive industries, after-care of sites, the transport of stone and other aggregates. However, at the last minute, the Treasury stepped in, completely sabotaged the discussions and is about to impose a new tax: the aggregates tax, a blunt instrument, which will make no differentiation between extractors and quarrying companies that are good and responsible, and those that are not. That is another clear instance of the Government instinct to tax, rather than to engage in thoughtful discussion with an industry that genuinely wishes to raise the environmental gain.

That sends a bad message to other industries that the Government have in their sights. The Red Book describes the possibility of not going ahead with the pesticides tax. It says that, instead, the Government want to reach a voluntary agreement with that business sector. Based on the experience of the quarrying industry, I seriously advise the sector not to bother. If it does discuss those matters with the Government, particularly a Department outside the Treasury, there is no assurance whatever that the Chancellor will not step in at the last minute and simply tax in order to spend.

One issue has been raised several times in the debate: the rules governing controlled foreign companies and the system of double taxation relief. My hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Mr. Fallon) made a truly outstanding speech. He demanded to know, among other things, exactly where the Government stood on their revenue forecast from that supposed tax reform. The Government have, in summary, been found out on this one.

My right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition mentioned a news release from PricewaterhouseCoopers, which shows that the Government's estimate of an extra yield of £300 million a year from those two reforms is a grotesque underestimate. I trained at PricewaterhouseCoopers, so I must declare that interest, but I had absolutely nothing to do with its comment on this issue.

I was quite interested that the only excuse that the Inland Revenue could come up with was to suppose that the difference between the Revenue's estimates and those of PricewaterhouseCoopers was accounted for by what the Revenue called "behavioural changes". What that means is that the Government are relying on the fact that those companies will not lose quite so much money, because they will simply leave—they will not be here at all.

Therefore, in future, perhaps companies such as Rio Tinto or—a better example—the new companies from South Africa that have set up in the United Kingdom with London as a headquarters will not lose too much revenue from the measures, because they will not be in London at all. Is that really what the Government mean by a partnership with industry? Is that really what they mean by trying to encourage the competitiveness of British industry?

PricewaterhouseCoopers is not the only company to have come up with alternative figures. Deloitte and Touche—another very well-known and very large accountancy firm—has calculated that the two changes, but particularly the one affecting double taxation relief, will cost well over £1 billion, rather than the £1 million claimed by the Government. Deloitte and Touche released that information today. Its specialist corporate tax partner, Mr. Stephen Charge, is quoted as saying:

> Contrary to government estimates, the abolition of dividend mixing will cost business well over a billion pounds a year. At a time when European competitors such as Spain and Germany are reforming their tax systems to attract commerce, the UK is set to become a much less favourable location for international business.

The point is that those companies are not seeking a privilege. All they are seeking is to be taxed on the same basis that they would be if they were based on the continent or in the United States. Those other countries do not have the concept of taxation by source. In other words, multinational companies based in America are already able to mix their sources of revenue, and to be taxed accordingly, without the need to establish those so-called offshore mixing companies.

Therefore, by signalling their abolition of that taxation planning route, the Government have disadvantaged companies in the United Kingdom as against what they experience in those other tax jurisdictions. It is a very clear signal to multi-national companies: "Do not bother to locate in the United Kingdom. If you do, the Government will kick you in the teeth."

There have been many references in the debate to the extra £1 billion being provided next year for education and to the larger sums that have been announced for the national health service. Yesterday, we had an admission from the Prime Minister that the money spent so far has been largely wasted. The £21 billion that was announced in 1998, which also was described by my hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks, has not led to any necessary improvements, but has largely been wasted. The Prime Minister had no answer to the question of how those improvements are to be made.

In announcing those extra measures in a Budget statement, the Chancellor has breached his previous assurances that all that should be done in the comprehensive spending review. In last year's Red Book, he pointed out that there would be no short-term planning of public expenditure, but that it would all be done

> subject to firm multi-year limits covering a three-year period.

Instead of that, for purely political reasons, he has released some sums of money with none of the supposed disciplines and constraints of the comprehensive spending review. That is why the failure to deliver, which has been such a marked feature of the first half of this Parliament, will continue into the second half.

6.40 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Stephen Timms): On Tuesday, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor set out for the country the next step on the road to a stronger and fairer Britain. Building on the platform of stability that we have been creating over the past three years, he explained how we are able to meet

[Mr. Stephen Timms]

our rules of fiscal prudence—locking in the fiscal tightening over the next two years to an even greater extent than projected in the previous Budget—while at the same time, releasing significant new investment for the nation's priorities, which include boosting jobs and enterprise, improving services, tackling child poverty and helping pensioners.

The problem for Opposition Members—it has been evident in this interesting debate—is that they know that the economy is being immeasurably better managed today than at any time under the previous Government. I am talking not about the last five years of Tory Government—there would be no dispute about the fact that the economy was badly managed then—but about any time during their 18 years in office.

After the election, our first economic objective was to achieve a new stability after the decades of boom and bust. The Budget speech confirmed how, in a remarkable way, that has been achieved. We are delivering a platform of stability and steady growth. We have low inflation and public finances are under control. That is how the Chancellor intends it to stay.

Inflation in Britain today has been lower for longer than at any time for over 30 years. It is now the lowest of any member state in the European Union. For the first time, after many years of weak investment which left us lagging behind, Britain is now investing a bigger share of our national wealth than any other major EU competitor and more than the United States. More people are now in work than ever before in our history. That factor was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr. Khabra). The rate of unemployment is at its lowest for 20 years and 1 million vacancies are on offer across the United Kingdom's regions.

I want to draw the House's attention to just one immensely significant change resulting from the success of the new deal—it was referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale, East (Mr. Goggins). Youth unemployment has fallen by 70 per cent. since the election. The number of young people now unemployed for more than six months is lower than at any time since the middle of the 1970s and at any time under the previous Government. I ask the House to reflect on the incalculable gains that we will see from that one huge change since the election. It is a gain for young people, but it is a huge gain for our entire society. We are all affected by what happens to those around us, especially our young people. There is such a thing as society and gains today mean incalculable gains for years to come.

The young people of this generation have been given a chance. They have not been abandoned on the scrap heap like far too many youngsters over the past 20 years. Young people are used to getting up in the morning and developing the habits and confidence that come from working. They are able to look forward to a lifetime of independence and being able to support themselves and their families. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment said, they are enjoying an optimism that will be passed through the generations.

That is what has been achieved through the new deal and, with the Budget, we are extending that approach and recognising people's rights and responsibilities. We are extending that approach to older people, lone parents and those who have been written off in the past.

A few weeks ago, launching his pre-Budget tour, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor visited my borough of Newham in east London. He met many of the people who have benefited from the new deal. He had the sorts of discussions to which my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Mr. Shaw) referred earlier. Some radio journalists were trying to persuade some of those youngsters to complain about some aspect of the new deal, but they replied:

> All we can say is that it has worked for us.

It has worked for them and for nearly 200,000 other young people across the country.

These are seismic changes, beyond the wildest dreams of the Tory years. We are determined to lock them in for good and to reap the benefits for the long term. As my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, North (Mr. Gardiner) said, our prudence has been for a purpose. That purpose was at the heart of the Budget and on Tuesday we took the next steps towards our four ambitions set for the coming decade: our prosperity ambition, to bridge the productivity gap with our competitors; our full employment ambition, to achieve employment opportunity for all and the highest rate of employment that we have ever had; our education ambition, to get half our youngsters going on to university by 2010; and our anti-poverty ambition, to halve the number of children living in poverty within 10 years, on the way to meeting the Prime Minister's target of eradicating child poverty within 20 years. Those four ambitions encapsulate our commitment to a modern and decent Britain in which opportunity and security are not just for a few, but for all.

I shall to respond to a number of points that have been made in this interesting debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Dudley, South (Mr. Pearson) made a particularly interesting speech. He welcomed the substantial boost for the health service. He appealed for more sensible Tories to engage with the process of planning for how what he described as the wall of cash will be used. We have not had too much encouragement that his appeal will get a positive response from the Conservatives, but who know? There were not many Conservative Members present today and there may be others who will respond more positively.

My hon. Friend rightly welcomed the changes for charities. They are a big step forward. My hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman) intervened on him to point out the particular opportunities for universities. I know that universities are alive to those opportunities.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dudley, South rightly argued that there is more to be done for manufacturing. As he knows, I very much agree with him on the potential for the commercialisation of research ideas in our universities. I have visited Warwick university, with which he is familiar, and a number of others in recent months. We are making progress in encouraging commercialisation to get new ideas into business and made them successful, creating new jobs and new enterprise.

My hon. Friend also called for more investment in infrastructure. As a result of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor's announcements, net public investment will more than double over the period 1997 to 2003–04 from 0.7 to 1.8 per cent. of gross domestic product. That will create the infrastructure for which my hon. Friend rightly called. There is an additional £1 billion of capital spending within departmental expenditure limits for the coming financial year.

The hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) generously and rightly welcomed the additional education spending. He was also right to point to the massive bureaucracy that would be required to support the Conservative idea of a centralised body to direct all funding to schools. He also criticised what he described as the centralisation involved in establishing the learning and skills councils. I do not agree with him on that. There will be 47 learning and skills councils and a lot of local discretion will be available to them. Local people will rightly take decisions in the light of local circumstances.

I apologise to my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford, North (Ms Perham), because I was not here when she addressed the House, but I know that she gave a well-informed and thoughtful speech. She has a long-standing interest in the problems of age discrimination and has repeatedly pressed the Government to do more about it. She was right to welcome the new deal for the over-50s and the improvements that we are making.

The hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Mr. Fallon) appeared to be unaware that the 10p starting rate of tax had been extended to savers. He complained that e-commerce appeared to be the only form of enterprise on the table. That is not the case. It was evident from the business breakfast to which my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, North referred that it is recognised that the massive, ambitious and fundamental changes in the Budget to capital gains tax, the permanent capital allowances and research and development tax credit will be available to businesses across the board. They will extend to manufacturing firms and other businesses of all sorts. That is why those proposals are welcomed, especially by growing businesses.

The hon. Member for South Antrim (Mr. Forsythe), who is a fair man, rightly welcomed a number of features in the Budget. I was pleased to hear him refer to the new arrangements for graduated vehicle excise duty. I am glad that he is pleased about the proposals. They will bring about a good change for the environment. Under the new arrangements, 95 per cent. of new cars will attract a lower vehicle excise duty than they would under the existing system.

The hon. Gentleman asked what would happen to the ring-fenced transport fund, given that there has been an inflation rise only in fuel duty. The £280 million fund is being provided for transport improvement. Under the normal arrangements, there will be an element for Northern Ireland. I think that the House will agree that the sooner that we have again a Government in Northern Ireland who will be able to make decisions about allocating funding in Northern Ireland, the better. All of us hope that that will happen soon.

I was glad also that the hon. Gentleman welcomed the five-year exemption from the climate change levy for gas supplies in Northern Ireland, to encourage the development of that new business. I am grateful to him for many of his remarks.

The hon. Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) made an interesting speech. He argued that, when there is a downturn, we need to start borrowing to pay social security bills rather than doing anything with tax. That reflects the previous Government's thinking. It explains clearly why we ended up with a £28 billion deficit under that Government, whereas we are this year making a £12 billion debt repayment. Clearly the hon. Gentleman does not believe in the golden rule that the Government have set, and to which we are adhering. The policies that he was promoting would take us straight back to the days of boom and bust.

Mr. Blunt: I thought that the golden rule was something to do with the cycle. Has it somehow changed?

Mr. Timms: The hon. Gentleman is right. The golden rule refers to the cycle as a whole. If he is saying that he supports the golden rule, that would be a step forward. However, the hon. Gentleman appeared to say that, as soon as there is a need to start spending more on social security, it is necessary to start borrowing for it. That is not the approach that we have taken. We want a sustainable level of debt, and that is what we have achieved and will continue to achieve. We will not go back to the days of boom and bust. That has been a key element in our success in managing the economy.

I draw the hon. Gentleman's attention to the radical implications of our changes in capital gains tax. After four years, with the accelerated taper for business assets, the rate of capital gains tax will fall to 10 per cent. That will undoubtedly unleash a huge new wave of enterprise and investment in every community throughout the country. We should all be pleased about that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale, East referred to the complimentary remarks of the new Archbishop of Westminster about the Budget. I am glad that he did that. He welcomed particularly, as did the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady), the new investment in Manchester metrolink. I was interested in what my hon. Friend had to say about the work that he has been doing in bringing together unemployed people, employers and others in his area, to discuss how best we can together tackle the barriers that still face people in moving into employment, and in his proposals, which were based on the discussions that have taken place. I shall examine them closely.

My hon. Friend is right to say that the really significant change over the past three years is that there are nearly 800,000 fewer people on income support now than there were at the time of the general election. All those people are no longer receiving benefit and are paying taxes. That is why we are able to make the huge new investments in education and the health service.

As well as welcoming the Manchester metrolink announcement, the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West said—I think that I have this right—that he does not immediately discount the possibility that the new deal may have done some good. He got really carried away later on and said that it had probably brought some

[Mr. Timms]

benefits. That is as close as we will get to a recognition from a Conservative Member of the triumph that has been achieved through the new deal.

Mr. Brady: I have been consistent in the Education and Employment Select Committee and in the House in recognising that some benefit may have come from the new deal, but one expects quite a lot of benefit if one is spending £5 billion of public money, and it is far from proven that the Government are getting the bangs for their bucks.

Mr. Timms: The evaluation shows clearly that we are. The figures are in the Red Book. Long-term youth unemployment is 40 per cent. lower, according to the independent evaluation, than it would otherwise have been. That is a massive change for the better in the life chances of tens of thousands of young people who were abandoned by the previous Government and who can now look forward to a decent future. The whole House should welcome that. The hon. Gentleman has had the benefit of examining the details in the Select Committee. We are grateful to him at least for some grudging welcome of what we have achieved, but he has not recognised its true scale.

Mr. Blunt: The Labour party in opposition had a target of taking 250,000 young people off benefit and into work. The only sour fact is that the total was collapsing so fast when the Government came to office that there were only 187,000 people in the entire group. They inherited the welcome trend of a collapse in youth unemployment.

Mr. Timms: The hon. Gentleman misunderstands. We will have achieved 250,000 youngsters going from benefit into work in the life of this Parliament, as we said that we would.

I was grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, North for what he said about the excellent business breakfast that he organised this morning. The occasion was encouraging and useful.

The right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) talked about the aggregates tax. The Treasury and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions have worked closely together on the matter. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor said at the time of the pre-Budget report that we were minded to introduce an aggregates levy unless there were a substantial improvement in the voluntary package that had been put together by the industry under the leadership of the Quarry Products Association.

The QPA has undoubtedly worked hard. It has had difficulties, because some of the smaller quarries defected and made it clear that they did not like the package that was being developed. It then started to add new strings to the package, and one aspect of its proposals was seriously anti-competitive and not compatible with European Union law. The reality is that, when the time came for us to reach a decision, which we said we would do in time for the Budget, there was no viable package on offer from the industry, so we went ahead, exactly as we had said in November that we would, with the announcement of a revenue-neutral aggregates levy to take effect from April 2002.

There was some confusion among Conservative Members about tobacco smuggling. The costs of the Budget announcements on that are indeed £209 million over three years, but the yield could be as much as £2.3 billion over the same period, massively exceeding the costs. Our approach—being tough on smuggling and ensuring that the benefits of higher tobacco charges are carried through into the health of the nation—is absolutely right.

We have made important announcements about how we will create stronger, more enterprising and innovative British business. The significant measures that we have announced include the radical changes on capital gains tax and the 40 per cent. first-year capital allowances being made permanent for small and medium-sized firms—a measure that has been demanded by such firms' representatives for a long time. We have—

It being Seven o'clock, the debate stood adjourned.

Debate to be resumed on Monday next.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, at the sitting on Thursday 20th April—

(1) the House shall meet at half-past Nine o'clock, and shall between that hour and half-past Twelve proceed with a motion for the adjournment of the House made by a Minister of the Crown;

(2) the subject for debate on the said motion shall be 'matters to be considered before the forthcoming adjournment';

(3) at Eleven o'clock the Speaker may interrupt the proceedings in order to permit questions to be asked which are in her opinion of an urgent character and relate either to matters of public importance or to the arrangement of business, statements to be made by Ministers, or personal explanations to be made by Members;

(4) at half-past Twelve o'clock, the proceedings shall be interrupted and the motion for the adjournment shall lapse;

(5) a further motion for the adjournment of the House shall thereafter be made by a Minister of the Crown, and, subject to the Order of 1st March, if the Question on the said motion has not previously been agreed to, at One o'clock the Speaker shall adjourn the House without Question put; and

(6) there shall be no sitting in Westminster Hall.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Competition Act 1998 (Director's Rules) Order

Ordered,

That the Competition Act 1998 (Director's Rules) Order 2000 be referred to a Standing Committee on Delegated Legislation.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

Asbestos-related Diseases

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

7 pm

Dr. Peter Brand (Isle of Wight): I am grateful for the opportunity to raise what is an important issue to a modest but growing number of people. They suffer the results of working in industries that used asbestos. Asbestos can cause pleural thickening, which is not in itself a great problem, but it can lead to further disease. It can cause asbestosis, which can be a crippling respiratory disease, but most importantly, it can lead to malignant mesothelioma, which is an especially pernicious cancer that is extremely resistant to any treatment and is usually fatal within six to 48 months of diagnosis.

Malignant mesothelioma typically occurs 20 to 40 years after exposure and, interestingly, in 1968, it caused 200 deaths, in 1999 there were some 1,500 deaths, and in about 10 years' time, it is projected that there will be some 3,500 deaths. That trend will probably continue for the next 15 to 25 years.

It has been understood that asbestosis carries a risk for some time. Undisturbed asbestos is not a great problem, but disturbed asbestos, as seen in industrial applications, has been under suspicion since the early 1950s. It is sad to record that no meaningful legislation was introduced until the 1970s. People now face the consequences of having worked in what were essential industries, such as shipbuilding. My interest is predominantly in those people who worked in the shipbuilding industries on the south coast, notably in Cowes on the Isle of Wight, and who are now presenting with that malignant disease.

I am aware that the industrial injuries disablement benefit applies to employed earners who contract the disease and I know that payments are made under the pneumoconiosis workers compensation legislation. I have also noted the update that will be applied this year. However, the payments under those schemes are hardly generous. They do not compensate the sufferer in any way for the disease, nor do they compensate the family and carers of the individual concerned.

People are, therefore, encouraged to turn to litigation to obtain compensation and to take actions against their former employers. That is a difficult job for those vulnerable people. If one knows that one has only 12 to 24 months to live, one does not really want to spend some 12 to 18 months going through the courts.

The state benefit system requires strict proof of the disease and, in that instance, the diagnosis is not usually in doubt. Bronchoscopy usually produces a specimen that can be proven histologically—it is awful that someone in my trade still stumbles over the technical terms—which means that it can be proven microscopically. There is no doubt of the type of disease that the claimant is suffering. It is particularly irksome, therefore, that when people are encouraged to go through the courts, many of the procedures are repeated and multiple expert opinions are sought while litigation is resisted.

I have been encouraged to seek this debate by a constituent, who visited me a week after the successful completion of his court case last month. He was given the diagnosis of his fatal disease on 4 January 1999 and it took him 12 months, which is a short time for such cases, of the rest of his life to establish decent compensation for himself and his family. He has written me a good letter, which I will quote. He says:

> The existing law in these cases is ludicrous!!. At the present time the defence pleads "not guilty" routinely and to obtain proof of guilt the claimant's legal team have to employ a number of "experts" to prove the case. Defence then employs a similar number of "experts" to disprove these arguments.

He makes some useful suggestions, to which I will return. He believes that

> in MOST cases the following would be a better procedure.
>
> 1. A suitably Qualified Surgeon and a Pathologist make a diagnosis. (this is the basis that later "experts" use to write their . . . reports.
>
> 2. A suitably experienced Litigation Executive should then prove where the claimant was employed, exposure to asbestos, loss of earnings, pension rights, etc.

The matter could then be placed before a judge or a tribunal and a decision made expeditiously.

At the moment, the company responsible uses time in a war of attrition, hoping that it will wear out the claimant and the case will be dropped. I have been told that there have now been many hundreds of cases, which have been strongly resisted but have all been settled, often just before the court hearing, and that 95 per cent. of those claims have been successful.

The present situation is not reasonable. The state system compensates, and rightly so, but the compensation is inadequate. Companies and their insurers know that they have a liability—there is enough case law now to know what is likely to succeed in court. The contribution made by the companies to the Government scheme is grossly inadequate to provide decent compensation.

We now have an opportunity to get the companies together with the Government and the legal side to find out whether a more meaningful compensation scheme can be constructed. As a minimum, one would expect a more expeditious legal way for people to claim—perhaps with specialist judges, or by having expert lawyers and with the acceptance that one does not have to replicate everything whenever an expert opinion is sought.

There is much interest in the House in the issue. Parliamentary questions have been tabled by the hon. Members for Hendon (Mr. Dismore), for Clydebank and Milngavie (Mr. Worthington) and my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock). The House of Commons Library has produced an excellent research paper. The all-party group for occupational safety and health, which is chaired by the hon. Member for Barnsley, West and Penistone (Mr. Clapham), has recently set up an asbestos panel.

The only people to benefit from the present system are some of my medical colleagues, and lawyers. I hope that the Government will develop a system under which the people who benefit are those with a reasonable claim to have suffered a disease that was foreseeable because of the industry involved. The industries that I am thinking of were often of strategic significance to this country. A system such as I have advocated would allow us to deal with the anomalous situation faced by ex-service men, which I know has exercised the House a great deal.

I am grateful to the Minister for being here. I was not sure whether the most appropriate Minister would have come from the Department of Health, the Department of Social Security, or the Lord Chancellor's Department. I am very

[Dr. Peter Brand]

glad that the Minister attending this debate represents the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, which has the widest experience of dealing with industrial claims of this sort.

I hope that the Minister, who is well known for expertise in her field, will also do a bit of joined-up governing and negotiate with her colleagues to see whether a system cannot be set up that would be in the interests of my constituent and people like him, and in the interests of insurance companies and former employers. Those organisations must be wasting a vast amount of time and money contesting claims, 95 per cent. of which fail in the courts.

7.11 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Angela Eagle): I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Dr. Brand) on securing this Adjournment debate. I am glad to be able to respond to the important issues that he has raised.

The hon. Gentleman is right: I used to be a Minister at the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, where I had responsibility for the Health and Safety Executive. I also worked very hard—and, thankfully, with success—to produce agreement in Europe regarding a ban on white asbestos. That was the final form of asbestos, which was legal at the time. The ban came into effect in the United Kingdom and the European Union last year, and I am very proud of that.

However, I am now a Minister in the Department of Social Security.

Dr. Brand: May I therefore say how grateful I am to have a Minister from the Department of Social Security responding to the debate? The rest of my remarks still apply.

Angela Eagle: I acknowledge the hon. Gentleman's gratitude, as the Department of Social Security has prime responsibility for running the industrial injuries disablement benefit scheme. That scheme provides some compensation for people who can prove that they have developed one of the four prescribed diseases as a result of being exposed to them in the course of their work. Members of the armed services have their own scheme, which is part of the war pensions benefits regime.

The people who really lose out are those who suffer environmental exposure, with the result that they cannot prove that they have been exposed in the course of their work. They therefore do not qualify for the industrial injuries benefit but have to make do with the ordinary disability benefits available to people with chronic or disabling diseases not acquired at work.

Different schemes and different approaches exist, but that reflects the industrial preference that any industrial injuries benefit scheme must, by definition, inject into a system. I agree that there is some complexity in the existing arrangements.

The hon. Member for Isle of Wight spent some time describing a process that will be only too familiar to many hon. Members. Companies seek to avoid their liability for personal injury suffered by people whom they employed in order to avoid having to pay compensation. Many people would recognise the hon. Gentleman's description of the delays that can occur when attempts are made to take cases through the courts.

I promise to pass on what the hon. Gentleman said to the Lord Chancellor's Department. His description of what happens in these difficult cases is familiar to anyone who pursues a personal injury case through the courts, especially when there may be a significant number of potential beneficiaries. Often companies do not and will not admit liability. There are examples of that in the litigation against tobacco companies in other countries, as well as the more obvious cases in this country to which the hon. Gentleman referred. The Lord Chancellor may have views on the future of personal injuries litigation in order to ease some of these difficulties, but that is a matter for him rather than me. However, I promise to pass on the hon. Gentleman's comments.

There are other difficulties with long latent diseases, such as the four prescribed asbestos-related diseases that the hon. Gentleman has mentioned. It sometimes takes so long for them to become apparent—it can take up to 40 years after exposure before some symptoms become obvious—that employers have often disappeared, and the companies responsible for the original exposure of individuals have long since gone out of business. That is why the industrial injuries disablement benefit scheme exists. When I was a Minister at DETR, I had responsibility for matters arising under the Pneumoconiosis Etc. (Workers Compensation) Act 1979, which is linked to the industrial injuries disablement benefit.

We do what we can to provide cover for asbestos-related diseases within the industrial injuries disablement benefit scheme. The four prescribed diseases in the regulations are pneumoconiosis, mesothelioma, primary carcinoma of the lung and diffuse pleural thickening. The benefit scheme covers all employed earners, and there is no need to establish whether anyone was at fault. With many such no-fault compensation schemes, the compensation awarded tends to be lower because there is no court case and no fault is proved. The benefits are paid in addition to other incapacity and disability benefits, and they are not taxed.

Industrial injuries disablement benefit pays up to £108 a week, which will go up on 12 April to £109.30 if someone is assessed as 100 per cent. disabled. Additional benefits can be paid if someone is in need of constant care and attention, and when such a need is likely to be permanent. The additional benefits can amount to another £131 a week. I know that when people's health is affected, no figure can ever seem like reasonable compensation. This is merely the Government saying that they recognise the legacy of exposure to asbestos and the damage that has been caused. We want to give extra assistance to those who have been disabled in this way by their work.

Over the past five years, about 1,200 people a year have been awarded industrial injuries disablement benefit for the four prescribed asbestos-related diseases. For sufferers of mesothelioma, the majority of awards of benefit are paid at the maximum 100 per cent. disablement rate. For the other three prescribed diseases, benefits are paid on average at the 20, 30 and 40 per cent. rates of benefit, attracting weekly payments of between £21 and £43 a week. The payments continue for all the time that the person is disabled—usually for life, in these instances.

The Government get advice on which diseases should be included in the industrial injuries disablement benefit scheme from the Industrial Injuries Advisory Council. The council is an independent, expert body that includes representatives of both employers and employees as well as medical and other experts. Its most recent report on these diseases was published in 1996. It reviewed in detail the coverage for asbestos of the prescribed diseases and occupations within the industrial injuries disablement benefit scheme.

The council recommended improvements to the rules in respect of these diseases. Those were agreed and came into effect in April 1997. In particular, the removal of the usual 90-day waiting period for sufferers from mesothelioma helps to get benefit to people more quickly. The considerable widening of the range of occupations included in benefit provisions for this disease helps to get benefit to more people. That touches on the issue that the hon. Gentleman raised with respect to the shipbuilding industry. I represent Wallasey, which is on the River Mersey and has a great tradition of maritime activity, so this is also an issue for me as a constituency Member of Parliament. There is regrettably a great legacy of exposure to asbestos in such industries.

It is a continuous part of the IIAC's role to monitor scientific research and publications on all occupational diseases. This monitoring includes asbestos-related diseases. In the 1996 report, the council considered whether lung cancer without asbestosis or pleural thickening following substantial exposure to asbestos should be prescribed. I know that there has been some pressure from, among others, the hon. Members whom the hon. Gentleman said take a particular interest in the issue, to extend the prescription of disease to lung cancer. The council recommended to the Government that prescription was not appropriate in the light of current scientific evidence. However, the council will look again at any issue if new and robust scientific evidence emerges or is brought to its notice by whatever means.

It is important to remember that the industrial injuries disablement benefit scheme is an occupational scheme designed to compensate employed earners. If it is clear that in a particular case a person has contracted an asbestos-related disease from exposure that was nothing to do with their work, then industrial injuries disablement benefit is not payable. However, these diseases, particularly mesothelioma, can take many years to develop and it is important for anyone claiming benefit for this disease to tell the Benefits Agency about any jobs that they did when they were younger in which they could have been exposed to asbestos—even if the jobs were only of short duration. It is important that people who develop such symptoms think long and hard about where they may have been exposed.

There are also other forms of compensation for asbestos-related diseases. I mentioned earlier war pensions provisions for service men and women whose service has resulted in their contracting the diseases. As the hon. Gentleman explained in some detail, people can make civil claims for damages against a negligent employer, but no one would discount the difficulty of proving such claims and taking such litigation through the courts. I accept the points that he made about that.

The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions is responsible for a compensation scheme for people who have contracted certain lung diseases, including the diseases caused by asbestos, compensation for which is paid under the DSS scheme. The scheme is designed to pay mainly slate, quarry and some pottery workers who were subject to dust and developed pneumoconiosis as a result.

The schemes can appear complex. We try in the DSS to ensure that when we are made aware of a case we fast-track it as much as possible. We require medical evidence and we have to go through processes to check the claims, but, especially with mesothelioma, we fast-track cases to get a result as quickly as possible.

Dr. Brand: I put it on record that my complaint and that of my constituents is not with the Minister's Department or the way the scheme operates. I know from my clinical experience how co-operative people in the Benefits Agency can be in these circumstances—they are invariably helpful.

Will the Minister consider whether there is any chance of the companies currently at risk of litigation making substantial contributions to improve the very efficient but, I am afraid, not very generous state-run benefit system?

Angela Eagle: I cannot vouch for those companies, nor can I speak for them. Perhaps this is one of my more pessimistic days, but, given that the Health and Safety Executive suspects that there is a great legacy of exposure to asbestos—about 3,000 people a year develop the disease—it would be an issue for Lloyd's of London and other insurers as to the likely compensation and liabilities after years of use of asbestos, before we knew that it was as fatal as it can be. I think the hon. Gentleman may be optimistic in his assessment of the number of employers who would come forward. We can always ask, but I suspect I know the answer. Companies continue to fight every personal injury case that goes to court. They do so for a reason. We can only speculate about that reason, but I have given the hon. Gentleman some ideas about that.

The Government can ban the remaining available types of asbestos. As one of its priorities, the HSE is taking action to ensure that the asbestos that remains in many buildings and public spaces that are in constant use is properly contained. We can ensure that the regulations for change of building use or for demolition are more effectively policed and that they continue to offer and increase protection for those who may be exposed in future to latent asbestos in buildings.

There are compensation schemes. We are working carefully through the HSE and the construction industry to ensure that the legacy is dealt with in a way that minimises the chances of future exposure. However, we must realise that there is a legacy from past exposure, and that some of the diseases can take between 20 and 40 years to manifest themselves.

I understand and share the hon. Gentleman's concern. I shall pass his comments to the Lord Chancellor's Department, and shall be happy to keep in touch with him about any other individual cases.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-seven minutes past Seven o'clock.

House of Commons

Friday 24 March 2000

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Orders of the Day

Urban Regeneration and Countryside Protection Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

9.33 am

Mr. Anthony Steen (Totnes): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

This is the first opportunity that I have had to introduce legislation. For 25 years, I have signed the ballot for private Members' Bills. I have chosen all sorts of strange numbers, in the belief that I might come out of the hat in the top seven. This year, I did not bother with the numbers but just signed the book. To my amazement, I came in at No. 7, which I feel is quite an achievement after a quarter of a century. Some hon. Members never get this opportunity, Madam Speaker, so I am glad that your hand gravitated towards my number on the piece of paper.

First, may I thank my right hon. and hon. Friends for turning up to this important debate? I shall pass over the fact that there is only one Liberal Democrat Member present.

I hope that the House will recognise that I am trying, by legislating to deal with a new problem, to make our country a better place in which to bring up families. Where do we put the 3.8 million new homes that everybody says are needed by 2011? We have 11 years in which to find land for 3.8 million new homes. The Bill provides the ground rules for putting the new homes in the right place, making developments sustainable and maintaining the quality of life for existing communities.

Some hon. Members may think it strange that I am introducing additional legislation, given that, for the past 10 years or more, I have campaigned to deregulate. I have consistently and persistently campaigned to reduce the number of statutes, to repeal rules and regulations and to minimise the number of laws that intrude on every aspect of our life. The snag is, I am ensnared in this institution of which I am part. The Chamber is about passing laws, not repealing them. I would like to think that we could come here every Friday to find laws to repeal. However, as I am on the treadmill, I must instead add to the weight of statute law.

If my Bill becomes law, more and more officials will be employed for the purposes of regulation and enforcement. The consequence of passing law is that larger bureaucracies arise—the very thing that I have fought against consistently. Yet here I am, in a Chamber which passes laws, introducing yet another one. I hope that the House will forgive me. As is fashionable, I apologise for introducing what I hope will become another piece of legislation.

I have good reason for attempting to introduce new legislation. My Bill is not proactive; it responds to the situation that has been forced on us. We need more homes for our population. In the past, there was probably sufficient housing stock. Three or four generations often lived in one house. Today, the same four generations require between four and six houses, and often as many cars. In the past, grandparents lived with their children and their grandchildren. Today, with people living longer, one grandparent may be living in their own house, another in a residential home. Their children will have a household of their own, with their children. As those children grow up, the family may well split. The number of divorces and separations continues to increase, each resulting in the creation of two households instead of one. For every divorce or separation, an additional home is required.

Children used to stay in the family home until they were married. Now they leave the nest earlier to follow an academic course at university, or—as today's generation are more upwardly mobile, aspiring and materialistic than their parents—migrate to areas with better job prospects. The nuclear family, therefore, while in semblance still alive, is spread laterally across the country. There has been a shift from vertical integration, with three or four generations living in one house, to families being spread laterally over more than one home.

It is not only in this country that that is happening. The break-up of the family unit is occurring all over Europe. The resulting pressures are the same—more housing, transport links and health and education facilities are needed to meet the increased demand. However, there are fundamental differences. Mainland European countries have more land available, and they use it more effectively. They have different planning systems, and their housing tenure differs, with more property being rented and fewer individual freeholds owned.

In the United Kingdom, 67 per cent. of the population own their own homes, compared with around 41 per cent. in Germany and 54 per cent. in France. Buildings on mainland Europe are more appropriate to continental housing needs.

We must not conclude, however, that the need to build houses is a peculiarly British problem—it is a European problem. Our land values are higher than those of other European countries. Individuals in the United Kingdom are prepared to spend a higher proportion of their earnings on property than are people in continental Europe. The French spend more on food; we spend more on houses. The well-coined phrase "An Englishman's home is his castle" is apt. Everyone seems to want to buy his or her own home, to own land and to have a defensible space.

In many other European countries, houses are leased or rented, and there is an attitude towards property not found in the UK. Our approach to housing needs and how to pay for them must be more flexible than our "must-buy" psyche allows. A common European solution to planning and housing problems simply would not work in the UK because different countries take different approaches to sociological and demographic problems. The problem

[Mr. Anthony Steen]

facing Britain is peculiarly British. The European Union principle of subsidiarity must apply, and Parliament alone must address housing and planning.

How can we tackle the housing requirement? We have had many debates about the numbers involved. Under the previous Administration, I was one of the Members who said that 4.4 million new homes for England and Wales by 2011 would be far too many. I was not afraid to say that that number was unsustainable. I challenged the figures and the mythology. I constantly questioned whether officials in Kingsway who dream up the figures had used the right science, and asked whether the Office for National Statistics could review the figures.

The science has become sophisticated, and predicting population numbers and where people will wish to live is a science that few understand. When the Conservatives were in office, we coined the phrase "predict and provide" as a means of justifying numbers. The science was to predict the numbers, and the aim to allow developers to provide the homes that statisticians said were required.

With the arrival of a new Administration, and following the national outcry over the 4.4 million figure and the discrediting of predict and provide, the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions replaced that philosophy with the phrase "plan, monitor and manage". Whatever that may mean, it has allowed the Government to justify reducing by 600,000 the number of new homes required over the next 11 years. Despite the science practised in Kingsway, the 4.4 million required has miraculously dropped to 3.8 million.

How do we plan, monitor and manage? Surely, one can plan only if one predicts. One can monitor the number of new houses, but how can one manage once they have been built? With a little thought, it becomes apparent that plan, monitor and manage is nothing more than a new slogan. Like the emperor's new clothes, it makes no difference in practice, but it makes all the difference to statisticians who can justify a drop of more than half a million new homes. It is also a nice spin for the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions who, offering a new philosophy, can justify a reduction in numbers.

Planning policy guidance note 3, page 7, paragraph 8, is headed "Plan, monitor and manage". I do not know whether the House will understand it better than I do; I realise that I have some limitations, but the House may find that it has some too. It states:

> It is an essential feature of the plan, monitor and manage approach that housing requirements and the ways in which they are to be met, should be kept under regular review.

That sounds very sensible. It continues:

> The planned level of housing provision and its distribution should be based on a clear set of policy objectives, linked to measurable indicators of change. These indicators should be monitored and reported in the RPBS'—

regional planning bodies'—

> annual monitoring report. Such monitoring should be the basis on which the RPB periodically reviews and rolls forward its housing strategy. Review should occur at least every five years and sooner, if there are signs of either under or over-provision of housing land. Advice on the indicators which can be used for monitoring is set out in paragraph 77 and in PPG11.

I hope that the House found that helpful, because I do not know what it means. I hope that the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Ms Hughes), will explain it; it is good of her to be here. No Opposition Member quite understands it.

The Minister could also explain the difference between predict and provide and plan, monitor and manage.

Sir Nicholas Lyell (North-East Bedfordshire): May I suggest that PPG3 means that the Government are frightened of the large figures for housing that they have had to announce, particularly in the south-east? They are also frightened by reaction to the Crow report, and have consequently had to fudge the issue with obfuscatory language.

Mr. Steen: That is the answer, and I am grateful to my right hon. and learned Friend for clearing the matter up immediately.

How have the Government responded to the shift in thinking from predict and provide to plan, monitor and manage? The response came in the shape of PPG3. It may sound more like a new Porsche than a major change in planning policy, but that is what it is. One can hear people whispering around the corridors, "Have you seen PPG3?", and everyone's eyes light up as they say that they have read it, but most of them do not understand it. It is an academic document that will be read by planners and politicians but few others.

In no way does PPG3 respond to the remarkable report by Lord Rogers, the head of the urban task force, entitled "Towards an Urban Renaissance". Nor does it respond to the splendid book that I wrote in 1981—"New Life for Old Cities"—which reached similar conclusions to those reached 20 years later by Lord Rogers. Nor does it solve the problem of how to deal with 200,000 acres of public vacant land—or dormant, derelict or under-utilised land, principally in our cities—that I raised in a book published in 1988 called "The Public Land Utilised Management Scheme", nicknamed Plums. That scheme echoes part of the approach of PPG3.

Twelve years ago, there were 200,000 acres of vacant land that would not have been developed but for financial incentives, and the situation is virtually the same today. My book was published when a Conservative Government were in office, and it therefore suggested a private enterprise solution. It promoted the use of private regional management companies to which all vacant public land in the region would be transferred on day 1. Owners would be given share certificates equivalent to the value of the land, and regional management companies would market it. The value of the land would increase as development took place. The value of the shares would increase when revitalisation happened.

The scheme would have had similarities with recent events in Hull, where the city council kept shares in the local telecommunications business—Kingston Communications Group. When it sold them, it received a huge windfall for the benefit of local people. The lesson is that investment pays dividends.

The baton was passed in 1988 to my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Sir M. Spicer), and I am pleased that he has found time in his busy schedule to attend the debate today. When he was the Housing Minister, he took up my idea. As with water or electricity privatisation, land in public ownership would be regionally privatised and given to the private sector to

market and sell. Local authorities would have received share certificates to the value of the land, and they would have made a killing. Unfortunately, the circular that my hon. Friend was about to publish was halted because he was promoted. That meant that the baton passed to another Minister, who had sterling qualities but not those needed to promote the circular.

Dr. Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test): Would not that fine idea have fallen foul of the previous Conservative Government's legislation on local authority-influenced companies, whereby the maximum shareholding that a local authority could have in a company was 20 per cent? Otherwise, the company would have been deemed to be part of the local authority, and thus subject to local authority rules on capital expenditure and so on.

Mr. Steen: The hon. Gentleman is extremely well informed. I am always surprised at the range of knowledge in the House. He makes an obscure point, but I am glad he has that information at his fingertips. He is right, of course.

When my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire and I were working on the matter, much land—for example, that in the midlands towns—did not belong only to the local authority; some belonged to the water board and some to the electricity, gas or rail boards. The amount owned by the local authority might have been 20 per cent. or less—it was not the same everywhere. However, that problem underpinned our thinking; it may even have been one of the things that resulted in my hon. Friend's promotion. It is a good idea to get the private sector to promote and sell land that has become stuck in local authority and public ownership.

That public vacant land is now private vacant land, because many of the public bodies which owned it in the 1980s were privatised. Overnight, public vacant land became private. However, the problem is that there is still much public vacant land.

Mr. David Maclean (Penrith and The Border): May I help my hon. Friend by refreshing his memory? I have been reading his excellent book. It seems to me that the answer to the question put by the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr. Whitehead) lies in the introductory summary of the book. It states that there will be a new

> limited company with a board of directors in whom the public wasteland is vested.

It is not so much that the local authority would be a partner in a company where it would have to exceed the limits set on it by the previous Government, but that a new docklands-type of corporation would be set up—such a new separate public limited company would not have those limitations imposed on it.

Mr. Steen: My right hon. Friend has given me the answer by reading my book; I am most grateful to him. That is the answer to the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr. Whitehead).

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex): I have not had the benefit of reading my hon. Friend's book, but I shall do so.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): It will only take five minutes.

Mr. Soames: In that case, reading it will be even more worth while.

My hon. Friend's idea is a good one. Of course, the Labour councillor mentality of those on the Government Benches will always look for a way not to do something. The way to carry out the idea would be to establish a new type of company, in which the legislation that prevents the circumstances referred to by the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr. Whitehead) would be waived in respect of a company holding such land for those and connected purposes.

Mr. Steen: Mr. Deputy Speaker, you can hear the creativity and ideas emanating from the Conservative Benches; it is sadly lacking on the Labour Benches.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): I was terribly impressed with that brilliant idea. As it is incredibly creative, why does the hon. Gentleman not suggest that such a company should take over private vacant wasteland? We could have great fun. We could take over responsibility for any private land and create a company that would be extremely profitable—then, everybody could benefit.

Mr. Steen: I am always interested in hearing the hon. Lady's remarks. We should not rule out her proposal. There is considerable hoarding of private land in urban areas, so there must be some incentive for private enterprise to sell that land. If private owners do not sell their land, there must be either an increase in their rates—because they cannot hoard land indefinitely—or a device whereby public and private vacant land that is held for too long is marketed and sold.

I realise that some hon. Members might point out that that would be to deprive private owners of their land but, if our aim is to protect the countryside—it will become clear as I develop my argument that it is certainly my aim and that of my hon. Friends—we must package, in a regional development company, private land that has not been developed for, say, 20 years, as well as public vacant land. It would be worth considering that matter. I am grateful to the hon. Lady for that creative and interesting idea.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): Does my hon. Friend agree that although there is great suspicion, for example on the part of Lichfield district council that huge tracts of land in Birmingham, West Bromwich or the black country are not being utilised, part of the problem is that such inner-city land is contaminated? Because of that, it is difficult to sell the land at market value for housing and other purposes.

Mr. Steen: As always, my hon. Friend has foreseen the next paragraph of my speech. I was about to make that point, but I am grateful to him for raising the matter.

There is much land in public ownership that has acquired an artificial value, because every year the district valuer is obliged by law to carry out an uprating. The value of vacant, derelict or dormant land in public ownership is uplifted—the price goes up and up because the district valuer has to reflect its actual value. As a result, the value of the land often becomes so high that it is impossible for the local authority to sell it. If the authority tried to sell the land on the open market at a reduced price, it would be challenged by the district auditor who would say, "You are selling the land below the market price."

[Mr. Steen]

That is a problem that Labour Members might use their creativity to consider, because at present artificially high values of public vacant land make it impossible for local authorities to sell it at a knockdown price—or even at a reduced price. There are no takers.

The problem has not been addressed by PPG3, which, rightly, requires local planning authorities to direct development to brownfield sites. However, the guidance does not make that mandatory or statutory. The sequential approach is questionable. Paragraph 30 on page 12 of PPG3 states:

> In identifying sites to be allocated for housing in local plans and UDPs—

I do not know what UDPs are. The document is full of such odd acronyms—UDPs, RPGs, NLUDs—but no one explains what they are—*[Interruption.]* An hon. Member has just explained that UDPs are urban development plans.

The document continues:

> local planning authorities should follow a search sequence.

That is another interesting phrase, but they are weasel words. What is a search sequence? The document states that the search sequence should start

> with the re-use of previously-developed land and buildings within urban areas identified by the urban housing capacity study, then urban extensions, and finally new development around nodes in good public transport corridors. They should seek only to identify sufficient land to meet the housing requirement.

I hope that the Minister will give me a wink to let me know whether I am right, because I am not sure whether that will mean that developers can build first only in urban areas and that planners can turn down greenfield site developments until the urban land is filled up. Does it mean that planners will be especially sensitive to brownfield sites, under local plans, but that when developers see those plans, they can apply for either urban or greenfield sites? Unless there is a no to greenfield sites until the brownfield sites are filled up, I do not understand what PPG3 will achieve.

I therefore do not believe that the problem is addressed by PPG3, which rightly requires local authorities to direct development to brownfield sites but does not make it mandatory or statutory. Although I welcome the recognition of the point that I made in the early 1980s, I do not understand how PPG3 will succeed unless there is a stick and carrot approach, involving financial incentives and disincentives.

The problem with PPG3 is that it is just planning guidance. It is also deficient in many respects—in matters not of detail but of substance. If we are to protect greenfield land and ensure that urban areas are developed first, something more radical, innovative and creative is required. That is what my Bill offers.

If the Government fail to support me, they will lose a unique opportunity to place on a statutory basis fundamentals of planning law and to direct the location of 3.8 million new homes which must be built in the next 11 years.

Above all, if my Bill fails, it will encourage the continued urban sprawl and what Professor Alice Colman described as the "rurban fringe". The rurban fringe is beyond the council estates of the outer city. It is not countryside but a wedge of spoilt land which is neither urban nor rural; it has been destroyed by the urban area and is not quite rural. My Bill would tackle not only the destruction of the countryside but the increase in the rurban fringe.

My Bill is therefore aimed at protecting our countryside from indiscriminate urban growth. It is both complementary to the Rogers report and consistent with PPG3; it adds to both. It embodies a practical approach and moves the process forward.

Mr. Fabricant *rose—*

Mr. Steen: Before I explain how it will do so, I give way.

Mr. Fabricant: My hon. Friend is as generous as ever in giving way to me a second time. Does he accept that the Bill protects not only the countryside but the inner cities? Is he aware of the problems that exist in, for example, the United States, which has similar house ownership patterns to those in the United Kingdom, and where people have moved from the inner cities to the countryside or the rurban areas, thus creating no-go areas of deprivation in the inner cities? Does he agree that housebuilding of a good standard in the inner cities will ensure that inner cities continue to live?

Mr. Steen: I do not know whether my hon. Friend is aware of this, but I was fortunate enough to be given a scholarship by the State Department in the United States, and I visited 28 American cities in 29 days. That enabled me to write "New Life for Old Cities". Therefore, I am familiar with the point that my hon. Friend raises. It is a good point, and I agree with him.

Let me deal with my Bill, because I believe that the House wants to get on with it. My Bill will address once and for all the failure of successive Governments to motivate developers to revive rundown areas in towns and cities, principally inner and outer cities.

Central downtown areas containing small businesses and housing were demolished after the war, when the push by all local authorities was to build houses fit for heroes. The population of the inner city were decanted to the outer city where vast council estates were built, especially in the midlands and the northern cities. The more prosperous and the more upwardly mobile people moved to the new towns, beyond the boundaries of the city, and to the countryside, leaving in the inner city the poorest, the unemployed and the elderly. That pattern is unchanged. The doughnut has lost its jam in the middle, and the upwardly mobile—the skilled—moved out to new towns and the countryside.

As a result, many of our larger industrial cities still have depressed inner cities—and depressed outer cities, where there are large council estates. In the course of the transfer from the inner to the outer city, land and buildings in the inner city became vacant, dormant and derelict, in public and private ownership. During the 1960s and 1970s, much of it was in public ownership, in the hands of British Rail, the electricity and water boards and British Gas. They all had sites and sidings in towns and cities.

The ownership of land has now drastically changed: publicly owned land has moved into private ownership as a result of the privatisation of the utilities. Yet, oddly,

despite 18 years of Conservative Governments' commitment to get rid of it, the amount of derelict land continues to increase.

In 1993, 600 sq km of land in England and Wales was derelict, vacant or under-utilised—an area the size of Leeds. The number of empty homes has increased: last year, there were three quarters of a million—772,300, to be exact. If all those empty homes were filled and all the land was filled, we would be able to reduce the figure for new build from 3.8 million to nearer 2.8 million. Similarly, if all derelict land were fully utilised, the countryside would be protected and vibrancy would return to our cities.

Bearing in mind that the urban areas of England grew by 40 per cent. between 1950 and 1990, the House will immediately recognise the importance of trying to use existing space before eroding the countryside and covering it with urban sprawl.

Sir Michael Spicer (West Worcestershire): I very much agree with the thrust of what my hon. Friend is saying, but is he aware that the Country Landowners Association in particular is saying that in some way or other his Bill will forbid the development of, or make it impossible to develop, derelict and contaminated land in rural areas? That cannot be right, can it?

Mr. Steen: No, it is not. I have a high regard for the Country Landowners Association, but it has got that wrong, and I will tell you why it has got that wrong, Mr. Deputy Speaker. My Bill states that brownfield sites in district council areas—that means rural areas—must be filled before green fields are built on. I shall explain that in a moment. The country landowners may have misunderstood that, but I believe that if they listen to what I have to say, they will understand that they have got that wrong.

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon): I am listening with interest to what the hon. Gentleman says, because on 16 December 1996 he said the following:

> The idea that green-field sites might end up full of tarmacadamed drives, stable blocks . . . and swimming pools seems to suggest that people who own their own land will lower the value of that land. Self-interest and private enterprise are hallmarks of the Conservative party, and deregulation is at the centre of our economic policy . . . the use of alternative land means that green fields go fallow. That is a tremendous burden on the public purse, and the money could be used for something useful.

It seems to me that what he said in 1996 is diametrically opposed to what he has just said and to the Bill. He might like to comment on that.

Mr. Steen: I did not understand what the hon. Gentleman was saying.

Mr. Soames: He was gabbling.

Mr. Steen: That may be part of the problem. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman would explain it again.

Mr. Dismore: I am interested to hear what the hon. Gentleman says, because I was actually quoting from his own speech, in which he seemed to be suggesting that greenfield land should be used because

> the use of alternative land means that green fields go fallow,

which he said was

> a tremendous burden on the public purse, and the money could be used for something useful.

Those are his words, and that seems to be entirely the opposite of what the Bill is about and what he has just been saying to the House.

Mr. Steen: I do not think that that helped the House any more than it did previously, but I hear what the hon. Gentleman says—[Hon. Members: "What you said."] I heard what I said, but, with all respect to the hon. Gentleman, I am not quite sure what relevance that profound statement has to what I am saying now.

Mr. Dismore: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will let me try a third time. Basically, what he is saying today in his Bill—[Hon. Members: "Slow down."] What he is saying in his Bill is that we should be using brownfield sites, not greenfield sites; but what he said in 1996 was entirely the opposite:

> the use of alternative land means that green fields go fallow.

The words "alternative land" could in practice mean only brownfield sites, and the hon. Gentleman said:

> That is a tremendous burden on the public purse, and the money could be used for something useful.—[*Official Report*, 16 December 1996; Vol. 287, c. 735.]

How can he say that in 1996 and say entirely the opposite now?

Mr. Steen: I think that the hon. Gentleman has missed the point. The most important thing is to deal with the Bill. I want to deal with clauses 1 and 2, which address a very simple issue—the identification of where vacant, dormant, derelict land is located, together with its size and ownership. Some land may not be derelict, but it can be under-utilised, and PPG3 rightly recognises the need to maximise land use.

In Plymouth, for example, acres of land are under-utilised. King William dock has thousands of feet of vacant, unused buildings. All over the country there are buildings, which, if fully utilised, would counter the never-ending push outwards to the countryside.

My Bill will highlight in an annual audit exactly where the land and buildings that are vacant, dormant, derelict or under-utilised are situated. It will put a searchlight on who owns the land and buildings that are not fully used. It will increase transparency, and I think that is just the thing that the new Administration would immediately seize on and applaud. As things stand, few people know where partly empty or under-utilised land is and they do not know why thousands of houses are unoccupied, why housing has been abandoned and why land has been left idle. The publishing of an annual audit locally will, for the first time, make owners sit up and face the publicity resulting from their hoarding of land and buildings. It is not an intrusion into privacy. If we are to save our countryside, it is an essential requirement that we use the unused land in our cities and that we fill the buildings that are empty.

[Mr. Steen]

Local authorities will have to publish the audit. The aim is to bring pressure on public authorities and private owners not to hoard land or accumulate empty properties. The aim is to use what we already have. That is why clause 5 will place a duty on planning authorities to maximise their use of previously developed land.

My Bill will require local authorities to produce capacity studies and audits. The Government may well say—I can see the Minister already rehearsing her lines—that they do not need the clause because of the national land use database, NLUD, which is worth considering for a minute. It is a partnership between the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, English Partnerships, local authorities and the Ordnance Survey. Its aim is to collate and publish information on brownfield sites available for redevelopment.

The information has been collated and assimilated and, according to the Deputy Prime Minister, it will be published shortly, but will it? Rumour has it that there is a problem about ownership and that the Government have not got the legislative authority to publish information that identifies the owner of a site. If that is a problem, the Bill, if enacted, could provide that authority. Will the Minister say whether those rumours are correct?

NLUD should have all the information available. I say "should have" because that depends on whether local authorities have provided the information. NLUD is only as good as the information that it receives. That is unlike the provision in the Bill that will put a duty on every local authority to identify every piece of land and building surplus to requirements and publish details in an annual booklet that is updated regularly. The NLUD proposal is hit and miss, and akin to the national register that we had in the 1980s when we were in office and set up a national register.

I believe that NLUD is too remote from the people. Only developers will want to use it. If an audit is published locally and is available in local libraries, people will have better access to it. That is the proposal in my Bill. If the purpose is to use brownfield sites and derelict buildings, what better way is there than to ensure that local authorities produce the audit and publish it themselves rather than Governments centrally having to have that information? It is not that a central Government audit will not work, but that it will not work as well as publishing an audit locally at every local authority level.

People may think that that is a slightly prejudiced view, but, in his report, Lord Rogers said about NLUD:

> a national survey to compile consistent statistics will not cover the variety of local circumstances that can be addressed in a locally defined urban capacity study.

Lord Rogers does not agree with NLUD; he agrees with my Bill. The Minister should take that point very seriously. One of the aims of my annual audit is to put community pressure on land hoarders to do something with their lands and buildings, and that just will not happen under NLUD.

It is far easier to infill urban areas where the infrastructure is already available if that creates fewer problems than greenfield site development. I was surprised therefore that, on Tuesday, the Chancellor of the Exchequer did not mention any incentive in the Budget to disfavour greenfield site development in favour of brownfield site development. If there is no financial incentive to develop brownfield buildings and land, developers will always use greenfield sites because it is cheaper. The House will know that no VAT is charged on new build, but it is levied on the materials used to renovate existing structures. That is a reduction of almost one fifth on the cost of new build and an increase of one fifth on the cost of redevelopment. That is an important point. In the Budget—*[Interruption.]* I can hear my right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King) talking and what he says is important. He says that the Chancellor told the House that there would be an inquiry into the costs of stamp duty.

Mr. Tom King (Bridgwater) *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Steen: If it was not my right hon. Friend, can someone else put me right? What am I bid? I understood that there would be an inquiry into some on-costs.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): I would like to help my hon. Friend. There was an opportunity in the Budget to change the levels of stamp duty on brownfield and greenfield land and to equalise the rate of VAT on the development of new build and repairing older houses. Unfortunately, the Chancellor missed the opportunity in the Budget to introduce legislation to do that, but he has promised an inquiry. The Government have been considering the matter for two years, but, regrettably, they are still considering it and have not acted.

Mr. Steen: I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for that explanation. That is just what I was going to say, but I did not have the words. The Chancellor missed a great opportunity because there will be no incentive to build on brownfield rather than greenfield sites.

I need to move on from my consideration of the first half of the Bill. I think that the House will have got the idea. Local authorities will publish an annual audit. It will be a booklet or a glossy report that one can pick up at the service station or the library and it will contain information on where the land and buildings are situated and on who owns them. It will create a strong community pressure that will be brought to bear on the people who own the land. For the first time, there will be a local index of who owns what. NLUD is a national register in the Department, which one can see on the internet, but it will not have much local impact.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas (Harrow, West): If one accepts that such an audit is required, does the hon. Gentleman think that it should also include housing stock that is in need of repair and refurbishment and that is in danger of becoming derelict and vacant?

Mr. Steen: I am not against that at all. The Bill refers to land and buildings, so it may include such buildings in a wider definition. I want every local urban authority to feel responsible and motivated to create new vitality in towns and cities by identifying vacant land and buildings and by allowing community pressure to do something about that. A central Government register on the internet is remote and impersonal and can do very little to put pressure on the owners of land or buildings so that they

release them for the good of the community. My audit will be transparent and act as a motivator to get land and buildings fully used.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: As my hon. Friend knows, I strongly support the concept behind the Bill. On the question asked by the hon. Member for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas), does my hon. Friend recall that, from the mid-1970s and onwards, Lambeth borough council had what it used to call "housing action areas". They were large areas of semi-derelict housing on which Lambeth council took no action, but which would have been identified under the proposals in this Bill?

Mr. Steen: I agree entirely with my right hon. and learned Friend. Many initiatives have been taken and good work has been done. However, more needs to be done and that is what the Bill is about. I do not believe that PPG3 will change attitudes or take the debate or action forward.

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire): I apologise to my hon. Friend for missing the first few minutes of his speech.

Mr. Steen: It was the best bit.

Mr. Paice: I am sorry that I missed the best bit.

I wholly support my hon. Friend's motives and objectives, but I want to challenge him because, several times, he has used the phrase "community pressure" as the means to encourage the owners of derelict land to develop it. Does he think that that is enough, or do we have to find a carrot to try to encourage development by some fiscal measure, such as a transferable development voucher to be used for urban areas rather than greenfield sites?

Mr. Steen: That is absolutely right. A number of measures are needed. A local annual audit, which is attractively produced and available for 25p in every newsagent and service station, is a start. We must have incentives: there must be a carrot for those who want to develop in urban areas and a stick for those who want to build on greenfield sites. It is criminal that we allow so many more acres of land to go under concrete when we know that there is empty land that could be filled and 750,000 houses are empty.

Mr. Maclean: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way because I know that he wants to make progress. One point concerns me about clause 2. If he is to publish a readily available guide in every locality of every vacant and under-utilised building, will he not in effect be publishing a squatters' good hotel guide, with all the dangers that that implies?

Mr. Steen: That is an interesting question. I do not have an answer to it, but with the Government's help when we get the Bill into Committee, I am sure that we can find a way round it. However, we do not want to throw the baby out with the bath water, because the Bill has a lot to commend it, as my right hon. Friend knows.

I turn now to the countryside. My aim is the same as that of PPG3. I can see the Minister already mouthing the words, "We don't need this Bill. We have it all in PPG3." She is wrong because, as I have explained, PPG3 is wishful thinking and moonshine. It does nothing other than express sentiment.

Mr. Paul Stinchcombe (Wellingborough): The hon. Gentleman will be aware, because he is experienced in these matters, that under section 54 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, every planning application has to be determined in accordance with the local plan and other material considerations, of which PPG3 will be one of the most significant. It is not just wishful thinking; it is policy guidance that will shape the determination of every planning application.

Mr. Steen: That is an interesting point, and I want to deal with it. Every local authority, with the help of the community, will produce local plans and draw rings round villages and towns for development land. They will try to satisfy the demand for the number of new houses and industrial buildings. PPG3 will be a factor in determining whether land should be developed, but if a greenfield site is in the local plan and designated for housing development, how will a planning authority say no to development on that site because it knows that there is brownfield land a few miles away?

Mr. Stinchcombe: The hon. Gentleman will appreciate also that PPG3 gives express guidance to local planning authorities as they draw up their plans, so it has an effect then as well.

Mr. Steen: I am grateful for this debate. When authorities draw up their plans, they must provide enough land for the housing requirement in that district. For example, my district council, South Hams, must provide enough land for 12,000 homes. It must draw round villages, hamlets, new towns and, obviously, brownfield sites. There will not be enough brownfield land to accommodate all those households. That is true of Torbay, which is also part of my local authority area. Probably between 30 and 40 per cent. of the housing requirement in the South Hams and Torbay will be met by brownfield sites, but the rest will have to be met by greenfield sites. The local plan will be therefore be partly brownfield, but mostly greenfield.

If a developer comes along in the first year of the plan and says that he wants to develop greenfield sites, will the planning authority be able to say that it will not give permission for greenfield site development until the brownfield land has been filled up, and would that decision be upheld on appeal? PPG3 is silent on that.

Mr. Soames: In this splendid Bill, my hon. Friend deals with a matter of cardinal importance, particularly to constituencies in south-east England. Is he aware that in West Sussex there is hardly any brownfield land at all? Although I know that it is a matter of interpretation, I think that PPG3 causes the job to be done better and is a good rather than a bad thing. However, can he suggest how, through the Bill, PPG3 can be made flesh by planners in an area where there simply is no brownfield land, without them resorting immediately to massive development on greenfield sites?

Mr. Steen: It cannot. My concern is that the requirement for nearly 1 million new houses in the

[Mr. Steen]

south-east is too great and cannot be comprehended. If we do not use brownfield land, we will have to build on greenfield sites, unless boundaries can be crossed, and PPG3 is silent on that. In Plymouth, Exeter and Bristol, there may be more brownfield sites than are required. If the South Hams planners could jump over boundaries and say that Plymouth or Bristol should take more houses, that would be a way to use more brownfield land and reduce the impact on the countryside.

Dr. Whitehead: The hon. Gentleman's suggestion is most interesting but unfortunately is nowhere contained in his Bill, which simply refers to local planning authorities being subject to certain requirements in their own patch.

Mr. Steen: The hon. Gentleman is right, and the reason is simply that I have tried to make the Bill as uncontentious as possible and simple for anybody to understand. I knew that if I started talking about jumping over local authority boundaries, the Labour party would jump on me, so I decided to make the Bill so simple that nobody in their right mind could object to it.

I have spent nearly an hour on my feet, and I do not think that that is too long, but there are many hon. Members who want to speak, so rather than go through another 10 pages of well-prepared notes, I propose to short circuit my remarks on the rest of the Bill. The House has got the idea of what I am about. [HON. MEMBERS: "Good idea."] My hon. Friends think that it is a good idea.

Having dealt with the problem of land in urban areas, I want to move on to what happens when all the brownfield land has been filled. I am a little doubtful, however, that the new PPG3 takes such a sequential approach, because it is different from the draft PPG3, which suggested that there would be such an approach. The new PPG3 has weakened that slightly. Let us presume that brownfield sites in the cities and the countryside get filled up, and more housing is still required. That is where the next part of the Bill starts to bite.

First, any developer who wants to develop a site of more than five homes has to have in his application to the planners a statement that he has looked over the district and cannot find a more suitable brownfield site to develop. That is not dissimilar to the legislation introduced by the previous Administration about the impact of new legislation on small firms. There had to be a statement that the impact of legislation on small firms would be nil, or that there would be additional costs because of fire regulations and so on. This measure is similar. There must be an assessment by the developer that there is no more suitable piece of land in the district to develop. That encourages the developer to look for brownfield sites.

The most contentious part of the Bill—although, in many ways, it is the most important part—concerns infrastructure. In any planning application, the developer must satisfy the planners that sufficient infrastructure is available for the people moving in to the new homes. The thinking behind that is self-evident in some parts of my constituency.

In Totnes, the primary and secondary schools are full. In Kingsbridge, the secondary school is full to bursting. In Ashburton, the position is similar. Children from the new homes in Totnes must travel 20 miles each way in a bus because the infrastructure is not there. In Dartington, the sewer that was built in the 1920s and 1930s is inadequate to deal with floods. When there is a heavy downpour, the sewer overflows and backs up into the basins of the primary school.

The Bill states that new homes cannot be built on green fields or brown fields unless the planners are satisfied that the infrastructure can cope. That means not just school places and sewers, but recreation and leisure facilities. Many new towns have more and more homes, but fewer and fewer facilities for young people.

I believe that the Bill does something that PPG3 does not. Developers must ensure that there is enough room on the roads, and sufficient parking spaces and school places. Infrastructure also means the health service—doctors, dentists and hospitals. More and more homes are going into south Devon, with 12,000 going to South Hams. How do we cope when hospital lists get longer?

Mr. Dismore: Will the hon. Gentleman join me in condemning any person who, in developing agricultural land in front of their property, encroaches on to the public highways by perhaps a metre, thus reducing the amount of highway available to the public?

Mr. Steen: I will not condemn anybody; the hon. Gentleman can if he wants to. I am trying to encourage people and make life better, not worse.

Quality of life is also important, not only for those moving in, but for those who live in an area already. Nobody thinks about those people. However, new development on greenfield sites is not all bad news. Some villages will benefit from in-filling and new development. Many rural primary schools have suffered from reduced numbers of pupils, and village post offices have been crying out for opportunities for more business. New housing and in-filling will benefit those schools and post offices.

I give the House a warning. We cannot build new housing on the scale proposed without an enormous increase in the road network. Torbay is hemmed in by a totally inadequate road structure. The failure of the Government to fund the Kingskerswell bypass means that Torbay cannot absorb the number of homes planned for it. People moving in must realise that they may not be able to get their cars out of their driveways, let alone drive on the roads. In the summer, the A38 through Totnes back to Paignton—about 15 miles—is nose to tail on Saturdays. I foresee that, this summer, it will be gridlocked, with cars unable to move in either direction. Already the infrastructure in south Devon cannot cope.

Clause 7 will ensure that we do not go on building more and more housing without ensuring that the road system can cope. Planners have to be able to start saying no. Politicians have to back them up, from the Deputy Prime Minister to the local chair of planning. My Bill will encourage that.

In the past 20 years, the population of South Hams has risen by nearly 20 per cent. The west country has seen charabanc-loads of retired people moving in from the south-east and the midlands. The result is that the population has become out of balance. There are increasing numbers of retired people, and local people can no longer afford to live in the area. That means that the

retired find it difficult to get help in their homes for cleaning, cooking and odd jobs. Local businesses find it difficult to recruit staff, as the young migrate out of the area that they cannot afford.

Clause 7 gives the planners and politicians a real chance to halt and re-direct new development to where existing infrastructure is not overstretched. That will help to reduce the price of homes, and more local people will be able to afford them. If my Bill becomes law, local plans would ensure that new development is not permitted where infrastructure is already under pressure unless the developer or public authority provides the additional infrastructure that is deemed to be lacking.

Developers, of course, will not have the finance for the additional infrastructure if they build just a few houses. If enough developers build a few houses, we end up with hundreds of homes and still insufficient infrastructure. PPG3 is silent on the provision of infrastructure. I suppose that the Government will say that that is because everyone knows that it has to be provided—but it is not, and it has not been.

Paragraph 5.2 of page 19—entitled "The Sustainable Development Strategy"—of the Devon county structure plan, states:

> The development strategy for Devon must be sustainable in environmental, economic and social plans.

Of course it should be, but it is not. It continues:

> By explicit consideration of these longer-term issues through each stage of the plan-making process, the principles of sustainability and sustainable development have been carried forward into a development strategy in the policies and proposals which flow from it.

Who writes this nonsense? It has no meaning or effect, and it does not work.

In spite of the laudable and appropriate sentiments, 90,000 new homes have to be accommodated in Devon, with some 12,000 in South Hams. As I explained, sewers are overflowing, schools are packed full, roads are crammed, dentists and doctors are not available and hospitals have ever-increasing waiting lists. Against that background, how can one possibly accommodate more people and more households? My Bill echoes the sentiments of PPG3, but will turn them into concrete rules on planning policy. PPG3 aims to achieve that but it will not.

Here is perhaps the key reason why my Bill is needed; this is the punchline. The Deputy Prime Minister has talked of

> variety and choice in housing to meet the needs of the future.

That may mean moving away from the psyche of the "Englishman's home is his castle". If that is what the Deputy Prime Minister is saying, I am not sure that everyone will like it. However, there will need to be a change in attitudes to housebuilding and home ownership at the national level.

If a change in public attitudes is required, legislation is needed. Planning guidance used by developers and planning officers will not awaken the mass public conscience to the problem—or, indeed, to the solution. Mention PPG3 to most people and they will not have a clue what is being talked about. Law made by this House is clear and unequivocal. The public understand law; law is profound, made by the body that represents this country for the benefit of this country. Passing this Bill will send out a message that the Government are serious about saving our countryside and regenerating our cities.

The Minister may well get up and argue that legislation is not required to change public attitudes, but that runs against precedent. When other sea changes in public opinion and perception have been needed—the equal treatment of women, race relations, abortion—law made by this House has been the foundation for such change. I do not suggest that my Bill is on a par with such classic pieces of legislation; I merely use them to illustrate the point that law has been and is used to change public perceptions and values. That is what the Deputy Prime Minister, rightly, wants. We fight attitudes as well as bulldozers. If attitudes to housebuilding and home ownership change, so will our attitude toward what bulldozers should be doing, from turning up our green fields to clearing up our brown fields. Law can achieve our shared goal: policy can deal with policy, law can deal with attitudes.

It has taken me 25 years to get a chance to introduce a Bill, and what I propose is both needed and wanted. If the Government want to help and make themselves popular by dealing with one of the major countryside issues, they can achieve that by adopting my Bill in recognition of the fact that that is what the nation wants. We have talked about the subject ad nauseam. In the 1970s, the Wilson Government launched schemes to revitalise the inner cities. I ran one of the programmes under the Home Office urban programme to revitalise urban areas and recruit young people to help in community work. In 1980s, the former Prime Minister Mrs. Thatcher released my right hon. Friend the Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine) to spearhead new approaches to urban regeneration. More effort is still needed. My Bill wrestles with the problem in a new way, not through Government diktat or through financial incentives alone, but through community pressure and market forces, coupled with legislation that makes greenfield development more difficult.

England boasts a landscape of priceless variety, from sweeping mountain vistas to gentle rolling pastures, from winding hedgerow-fringed lanes to broad expanses of wild moorland. Every square inch of our beautiful countryside needs to be protected from the constant threat of destruction or damaging development. My Bill will achieve precisely that: the Government ignore it at their peril.

10.42 am

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): It is always a delight to follow the hon. Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen). He adds greatly to our entertainment and it would be a sad day if, for any reason, his idiosyncratic delivery were ever lost to the House of Commons and we could no longer hear his speeches, which are interesting not least because of his ability to perform a 180-deg turn within the confines of one of them. The hon. Gentleman is a living example of the principle that he now appears to believe is most important: that is, having fled Liverpool for the delights of the South Hams, he believes that what happens in urban areas should be strictly divorced from anything that happens in areas such as the one he represents.

Long before the hon. Gentleman thought of moving to Devon, I was a councillor in the very area that he now represents. I hardly like to remind him that there have been not one or two Conservative Members of Parliament for that area, but hundreds of them. During their tenure, the very infrastructure that he now demands has never

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been made a priority. The sad story of Dartington primary school is well known to me, because my children went there. I was also, for my sins, a Dart commissioner, so I know that Devonians have, for many generations, been slinging their muck into the Dart. There was no functioning sewerage works until the 1960s. It used to be well known that most of the streams leading from the Dart and most of the springs in Totnes were so alive with every known bacterium that families had to have lived in Totnes for five generations to acquire any immunity to the water. People who lacked such an immunity came to a sad end. One of my favourite aldermen used to say to me, "There's nothing wrong with that spring, my dear—nothing wrong with it at all", but when we had it analysed, we discovered it was so solid with bacteria that they nearly walked out of the water on their own. Therefore, I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will forgive me if I do not echo his calls for Devon to get new infrastructure; it has needed new infrastructure since the time of Drake, but none of its Conservative representatives have ever done much about it.

We should discuss seriously the issues of housing and the balance between rural and urban areas. The hon. Gentleman had difficulty with the word "suburbia", meaning the bit between rural and urban areas. However, most of us understand the implications of an expanding population and accelerating social change. It is no use wanting four generations to live in one house. Most of the working-class houses of my youth did not have room for four generations of one family, even in the highly insanitary conditions in which many people were then forced to live. The notion that people will do that now is not realistic: I have 10 grandchildren, I love them all, and I am delighted when they go home with their mothers and fathers.

Planning policy is now attempting to reverse the events of 20 years. Conservative Governments were happy to let developers buy bits of land wherever they could and put up little boxes. They paid no heed to locating those developments near transport facilities, schools, shopping or other useful infrastructure. They were quite happy to allow the development by private enterprise of any packet of land it could get its hands on, without making a correlation between such development and the interests of rural or urban areas. That could not be allowed to continue. Because of those policies, we in Cheshire now face real difficulties: the expansion of market towns has been such that it will soon be difficult for people to find school places, road space, shops and other facilities essential to a good quality of life. That is not because of changes that have occurred in the past three years, but because of the expansionist policy pursued by Conservative Governments.

For the first time, planning guidance makes a sensible attempt to ensure that serious consideration is given to the location of desperately needed new housing, how it will relate to other developments, and what developers should provide to enhance the quality of life of the people involved. All planning guidance emphasises that, if developers build estates in areas that have no public transport, or that are divorced from public transport routes, a car-using populace is thus created. People have no choice: Crewe has large estates where there are no shops and where, to get a child to school, a car must be used, no matter how broken down it is, because of the distance to be covered. Inevitably, that has an impact on the quality of life experienced in the whole area. PPG3 and the other guidance notes try to weave the different strands together in a coherent whole. That is a difficult task.

I believe that, today, we should not be considering the likes of the Bill—which, apart from anything else, does not appear to be the one to which the hon. Member for Totnes was speaking. We should be telling the Government that, having set out the three-dimensional jigsaw and having stated how they want all the pieces to fit together, they must take care to ensure that their demands for the future match up with the plans of the building and transport industries. That is not an easy task. Most developers hold land banks covering the sites they want to develop for as far as five years ahead. They think constantly about how to make a profit, which is their reason for being, and sometimes their interests will not match those of the local community. Most sensible developers are aware of their greater responsibility, and there has been an encouraging extension of dialogue between developers and central and local government. They are trying to concentrate on local needs and plans, and to relate what they are doing to the in-depth discussion that will inform the future of planning. However, there are still genuine problems, of which I shall highlight one or two.

Transport is essential to the argument. Schools are obviously vital, but transport is so fundamental that we should be putting tremendous pressure on developers to think about sites in relation to the way in which people move about. It does not matter how green the policies are, how middle-class the population is, or how many members of well-known pressure groups are involved; if every house becomes a two-car household, an instant problem is created.

That will be addressed only by the provision of good public transport, and someone must pay for it. In many areas, buses are disappearing. The problem is not just that bus services do not extend into new estates—they simply disappear. In his attempts to bring back rural buses, the Deputy Prime Minister rightly said that there should be support for new services, and he has now agreed that maintaining the network of bus services is almost as important.

The Government recognise that, but do the transport companies? Do members of the Association of Train Operating Companies realise that they must stop thinking in narrow terms about protecting their own tiny bit of the system, and start thinking about how they can get many more people out of their cars and back on to the train system? They will not do that with their present fare structure and their existing attitude towards the development of new, flexible services, and they will certainly not do it unless they get new rolling stock and a little more responsibility for planning their services.

Having thought through the problem, the Government are suggesting that the crucial issue is not only infrastructure in the sense of roads and transport facilities, but the development of jobs. Something that the hon. Member for Totnes did not say this morning, which he might have said, is that rural and market towns face a problem when they look for existing brownfield sites, not because they do not have them, but because such sites are used by facilities that may be marginal, but provide jobs.

If small businesses are constantly subjected to pressure and told that they will be given £250,000 to shut down so that five houses can be built on their wood yard, that produces two results: development takes place on brownfield sites, certainly, but the local population is deprived of some form of employment. That balance must be considered with far greater urgency than some of the arguments that we have heard today.

The Government must seriously consider their attitude to what they call "clusters". I understand their desire for a developing—especially a high-tech—industry to attract others of its ilk, to set up a centre of excellence and to provide jobs for the future, because such new industries are capable of replacing older ones and attracting new investment. The difficulty is that the Government, in the person of Lord Sainsbury of Turville, have said that they believe that a cluster cannot be created, but must be nurtured. Lord Sainsbury gave evidence this week to one of the Select Committees. I believe that he ought to have reconsidered his position as a Minister.

Although the Government cannot nurture or create clusters of excellent industries, they can destroy existing ones. The case that I have in mind is that of the synchrotron in Cheshire. The message that has been sent to the scientific community, and above all to the population of the north-west, by the decision to allow the synchrotron—which is the only such facility in the United Kingdom, and which has been in Cheshire for 20 years—to move from its existing site southwards to Oxfordshire is that the Government are not only not capable of controlling new tech industries, but do not use their existing muscle to ensure that those facilities are retained where they are both needed and highly developed.

That is so short-sighted, damaging and unimaginative that the Government must think again. They still have time to do so. It is the taxpayers who will provide the bulk of the finance for the move of the synchrotron and its further development, and it is the taxpayers whose interests should be defended by leaving that site in the north-west and allowing it to develop naturally and attract even more science-based jobs.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way. She names her noble Friend in the particular context, but would not the decision have been taken by her right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry?

Mrs. Dunwoody: As the hon. Gentleman knows, because he was an adviser to the previous Government, who adopted all the disastrous policies that we are discussing today, if a Minister has a special responsibility, as Lord Sainsbury has for science, he is presumably the person who takes decisions that affect science and the science-based industries. If that is not the case, someone should make that clear to the general public, who have a valid interest in such decisions.

The Bill is slightly confused. It is not necessary. The Government have at long last begun to think seriously about how to balance the myriad interests and bring them all together in a useful and civilised way. Because this country is a small island, our future lies in our learning to live together. The Government have day-by-day responsibilities to take decisions, such as the one in relation to the synchrotron, which will give plain guidance as to their long-term objectives.

The Government are going in the right direction. In general, they are doing many sensible and useful things. Without being too cruel to the hon. Member for Totnes, I must tell him that his Bill does not substantially enlarge the horizons. If the Government are to keep on board the affluent areas of the south-west and the south-east, as well as the industrially energetic and demanding areas such as the north-west, they must think seriously about the day-to-day decisions that they take in relation to industrial development.

10.57 am

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody). The common sense that she brought to the debate is much to be welcomed.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen) on his good fortune in having the opportunity to present the Bill, and on addressing a particularly important subject, although one that has not gone undebated in the Chamber during this Parliament. Indeed, it is one of our most regular subjects for debate, with good reason. Great concern is felt across many parts of the country, including my part of the south-west, about the consequences of decisions taken back in 1995, which are now working through the system, and the effects that they will have on our rural areas.

If I have a criticism of the way in which the matter has been debated on previous occasions, it is that there has been an over-emphasis on the green belt. The green belt is important, but it is not the sum total of the concerns, as the hon. Gentleman made clear. Many important landscape areas far away from the green belt are being put under pressure by housing policy.

I also have a concern, which I express in the most gentle way, about the preponderance of contributions to the debate to date from hon. Members representing the south-east. Undoubtedly, that is the area where the pressure is greatest and where there is greatest new household formation, but concentrating on the arguments relating to the south-east, as has been the case in previous debates, means that there is a danger of the argument in the south-west, for example, being lost by default. It is undoubtedly the case that, if we do not have the framework for proper discipline, for every house that is not built in the south-east, an extra house will be built in the south-west. I am worried about that because I represent a south-west constituency.

We are considering an important matter. Sadly, the previous Government are culpable through their predict and provide policies. To his credit, the hon. Member for Totnes admitted that predict and provide was a disastrous policy. The numbers were unsustainable. Before I became a Member of Parliament, I was involved in the argument between local government and central Government. We failed to make an impression on the previous Government when we made the case for a more sustainable policy.

Our views crossed party lines. The right hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King) was in the Chamber earlier; I do not know whether he intends to contribute to the debate. *[Interruption.]* I am pleased to hear that he intends to do so, because our views of the effect of such policies on Somerset have been similar. When I was a member of the county council before 1997, and I qualified the structure plan and stated that the plan for the numbers that

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the south-west and our county were asked to accommodate was based on false premises and needed revision, the view received cross-party support.

My experience in local government was not in local planning. I greatly admire those who sit on district and borough councils and have to deal with local planning issues. It is an extraordinarily difficult task. Councillors who do that often receive insufficient credit for the care with which they formulate their arguments and the difficulties that they experience, not least through the process of appeal and local government inspectors being prepared to overrule local decisions and impose an alternative view, which local communities and councils do not support. I was involved with strategic planning, which was difficult enough.

We argued that the figures, which were produced for all sorts of reasons, such as lack of economic opportunity and inward migration not meeting the expected requirements, were deeply suspect, and that a better methodology was needed. Ministers are beginning to take note of such arguments, and I give them credit for the adjustment in Government policy. I am worried that it does not go far enough or act on existing structure or local plans, which are on deposit or have reached a later stage. There will be a time lag during which plans that are destructive to the open countryside remain in place. However, a start has been made.

The hon. Member for Totnes asked pertinent questions. He is absolutely right about many matters. He considered urban regeneration, which is the other side of the coin from rural protection. We cannot have one without the other. It is a simple equation. Unless our cities are not only habitable but attractive places for people to live, the countryside will suffer further pressure. The means getting the social environment of cities right. Schools must provide a level of education that is attractive to parents. Public transport, to which the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich referred, must be up to the task. A solid block of congestion through a city means that anyone who could possibly avoid it would not want to live there.

This country is different from so many countries in western Europe, where the social pressure is to live in the city rather than outside it, and there are rural depopulation problems, although we may eventually experience such problems if the agriculture crisis continues in the most rural areas. There is a lack of investment in the sort of infrastructure that makes it a pleasure to live in an inner city rather than a suburb or a rural area.

The hon. Gentleman also discussed the problems of unoccupied or under-occupied land and buildings. That is another crucial issue. It covers not only local authority and central Government land and property that is not used to its full capacity but that in the private sector. The move away from flats over shops in town centres is significant. Many town centres are devoid of life. That is a problem for the urban environment in the evenings when it sometimes seems that there is an urban wasteland in town centres. If people live in the town centre, above the shops, a community takes up that empty space and makes its home there.

The hon. Gentleman was also right to argue that we should be clearly predisposed to previously used land when possible. Our planning procedures should provide for that so that planning authorities consider the extent to which they can identify and make available previously used land. I am glad that we have not got into a futile auction in the percentages of brownfield sites in people's plans. That is a sterile pursuit that gets us nowhere. What matters is not the targets, but the outcomes. I am glad that we are making improvements, partly through the Government's urgings. I congratulate them on that.

The hon. Gentleman is right to consider the effects on infrastructure. Planning authorities constantly experience the problem of infrastructure development not keeping pace with the demand for development. I do not know whether that is a planning or a local provision problem. Which comes first: the responsibility of local authorities—including statutory undertakers—to provide the facilities that are needed to underpin new development when the planning has been determined or whether they have the resources to do the job? The latter is often a critical factor for many local authorities, especially as regards school places. It also affects policing, which has not been mentioned, the fire brigade and all the different public services that are needed to make a community effective.

We must also consider whether the necessary private sector services exist. We held a big debate on the future of sub-post offices. Shopping facilities and privately provided leisure facilities must also be taken into account. In the 1970s and 1980s, massive urban sprawl, with estate development that included none of the facilities that I mentioned, was too often created. People did not have access to private or public community facilities, or easy access to employment opportunities. That created an environmental problem of travelling to work across town or out of town. The result was a less satisfactory community.

I have a problem with what the Bill says rather than what the hon. Member for Totnes claims that it says. The hon. Gentleman takes an impressionist view—he is a sort of Vincent van Gogh of the Conservative party, although, happily, he has two ears—of his intentions and the extent to which the Bill provides for it. He may also take an impressionist view of the positions that he once adopted. I have serious anxieties about some of the wording in the Bill. If it is considered in Committee, those matters will have to be discussed carefully.

Let us consider urban capacity studies. There is nothing wrong with the principle. The hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich asked about how to determine the balance between housing and commercial and industrial usage. It is not correct to say that every bit of underused, pre-used land presents a housing opportunity. Clearly it does not and we need to have an internal debate about that.

We must consider the extent to which land is contaminated—that point was raised by the hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant)—and what procedures local authorities should have to deal with such land. That is a big issue in some parts of the country, and I think that the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr. Whitehead) has experience of it in Hampshire. We must also consider the extent to which what would be useful land for housing development purposes is effectively taken out of the equation by contamination.

The Bill provides for audits of buildings and land and I have serious concerns about the definitions. It refers to "under-utilised buildings". What is an under-utilised

building? One person's under-utilised building is a manor house with a couple in it as opposed to a two-up, two-down house accommodating a family of six. Listing all those in the property-owning class whose houses have insufficient citizens under their roofs is a rather Maoist concept. The hon. Member for Totnes said that the list would be published at 25p and available at every service station so we would be able to discover exactly who is in the property-owning class. Presumably, the next stage would be the red guards coming round to sort them out. The right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) has made a good point about that.

Ownership is also a difficult issue as land ownership changes all the time. How often should the ownership list be revised? Should we have an army of people whose job it is to provide a rolling register? I happen to believe that an overall and easily accessible land register should be established, but I am not sure that the Bill is the mechanism for doing so. However, local government and central Government should clearly understand what surplus land they own and the extent to which publicly owned property is unused. The lack of progress in so many local authorities on this issue always amazes me.

When I was leader of Somerset county council in the 1980s, I was astonished to find that it had no overall property terrier. There was no list of the land owned by the county council as it was all held by different departments. I put in place a comprehensive property terrier using information technology. It dealt with property holdings and took in a rolling review of property to check on its cost-in-use and the extent of the capacity for disposals. Every local authority should have such a terrier as a matter of course, as should central Government. Were such terriers to be established, we would find that a lot more land is available than we think. Although the Ministry of Defence has disposed of land recently—I am glad about that—it is one of the biggest offenders. For too long, and for its own purposes, it has hidden behind matters of national security to hold land and property that it does not require.

The Bill refers to maximising use of previously developed land, but we have a problem with definition. How is use maximised? What is the preferred density of use? Will that be determined at national level or would it be better decided locally? I do not know. We need to explore that and the assessment of alternative sites. I am worried because, at face value, the Bill could paralyse the planning process. I do not think that that is what the hon. Member for Totnes intends, but the reality is that we could end up with no decisions being taken about anything. On occasion, local government has a capacity not to take decisions if given the opportunity to do so. That is the danger of the Bill.

Clause 7 deals with the effects of development on the infrastructure. The hon. Gentleman has identified a crucial point, but what will be the practical effect of his chosen way of addressing it? I suggest that the proposal is a charter for every NIMBY protester in the country to say that they do not want anything to happen. Every development will have some effect on the infrastructure and some effect, professed or otherwise, on the quality of life of somebody somewhere. The art of planning is mediating between those conflicting pressures to make sure that the outcome is right.

The hon. Gentleman spoke about the need for some development in rural areas. He is absolutely right. We do not want a dead, sterile countryside in which every village is protected by an envelope so tight that nobody can ever live there and village children can have no hope whatever of living in their own community, as that would effectively force them into internal exile in their own country. We want some development and some opportunity, but we do not want suburbanisation that changes the character of our rural villages and makes them quite different.

I fear that the Bill will not allow any development anywhere outside clearly definable urban pre-used sites. That would undo some of the measures that the Government have put in place through the latest planning advice, which begins to move towards a sequential view. The hon. Gentleman seemed unsure about whether he liked the sequential approach. I like it, and we need it for the release of land because it gives some control.

Mr. Steen: I like it too.

Mr. Heath: The hon. Gentleman clearly takes that view as well.

The Bill raises important questions, although it takes such a form that it is difficult to believe that it will achieve its objectives. However, that is not to say that it should not be supported as we must discuss many issues, one of which is the key factor that we cannot change our planning system and the attitude of developers entirely by planning means. There has to be a fiscal aspect and the big question for the Government is why the consultation process on how we deal with brownfield versus greenfield development in fiscal terms appears to have started only as a result of the Budget. Why have not we made more progress? What is the timetable for putting in place measures to deal with those issues and value added tax in respect of re-use and refurbishment of derelict property as against new build?

Local government issues also need to be addressed. One of my hobby horses in local government was precedent. We could not do what was transparently sensible as a planning authority because that would have set a precedent that would be used by others to breach the ramparts that had been erected against sensible development. Precedent comes up so many times in local government and we should address it.

The cumulative effect of applications is also an issue. Other than at the local plan and structural plan formation stages, local authorities can deal with single applications only on their merits, irrespective of the cumulative effect of a number applications. That poses a problem not so much for housing development, but for mineral development. An application may have a certain effect on the water table so what effect would half a dozen different ones for the same confined area have on the water table? Such consideration cannot be undertaken because it is outside planning law.

We need to consider the appeal system very carefully. Of course some system is needed in extremis, but local authorities constantly run scared and make decisions that they would not otherwise make simply because they are afraid that they might end up in a worse position after an appeal. We need a system that bolsters local decision making, except when that is irrational or unreasonable, not one that imposes an alternative view from the national level.

[Mr. Heath]

The Government are beginning to address those issues, and I am glad that they are. Our debates over the past couple of years have improved all hon. Members' understanding of some of the issues, not least because of the influx, at the last election, of a number of Members with local government experience who know something about the practicalities. I look forward to more of the same, because we are not there yet. We do not have a fiscal framework that directs development to the right places, and we do not have a planning framework that is sufficiently robust.

The Bill is welcome in that it raises important issues, but, sadly, it does not address the practicalities effectively enough. That is not to say that we cannot improve it in Committee, should it reach that stage.

11.20 am

Mr. Paul Stinchcombe (Wellingborough): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to make a brief contribution, and for allowing me to make it early. I apologise for the fact that I may not be able to stay for the whole debate because of other engagements.

It is a pleasure to speak about the Bill, for which I have some warm feelings. It is a particular pleasure because this is the first time that I have spoken in the House about planning matters, although for 12 years prior to my election I seem to have spoken of little else. I must make some declarations of interest at the outset—first as a planning barrister, secondly as a columnist on *Planning* magazine, thirdly as the former chair of development control in an inner-London borough, fourthly as a life member of Friends of the Earth, and finally as chair of LPEG, the Labour Planning and Environment Group, a national organisation of Labour party members with an interest or expertise in planning and related issues. It was established by my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush (Mr. Soley) when he was Opposition environment spokesman. A couple of weeks ago, it publicly endorsed the campaign of the Empty Homes Agency for the availability of new economic and statutory tools to return more empty homes to use.

The interests that I have declared are not just interests; they represent several years of experience, and what I shall say now is the product of that experience—of the hundreds of inquiries in which I have participated, of the experts whom I have heard and cross-examined, of the consultations that I have had with developers, objectors and local planning authorities—some represented by Opposition Members—of the planning committee meetings that I have chaired, and of the planning applications that I have helped to determine.

In the light of that experience, I believe that the hon. Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen) has done the House a great service. He has raised issues of fundamental concern. As he said, all the experts anticipate that we shall need to find some 4 million homes in the next 10 to 15 years. That is a huge potential need to be met on an island with limited space. As a member of Friends of the Earth, I do not just confess but positively assert that I want to protect habitats from bricks, mortar and concrete. I want as many houses as possible to be built in towns and villages rather than in the open countryside. I want them to be near transport hubs and near destinations to which residents can walk, rather than destinations that are miles away and accessible only by car. I want them to be built on brown fields rather than green fields. I want us to learn how to recycle land, just as we have learned to recycle glass, tin and paper.

I know that I am not alone in wanting those things—one has only to witness this debate and our recent political history, when Front Benchers of all the major parties outbid each other in terms of setting targets. If the Tories managed to build only four homes out of 10 on brown fields, we asked for six, and others asked for even more.

Yet as we have been saying all these wonderful things, and have all been agreeing on the laudable objectives, three quarters of a million homes have been standing empty. A quarter of a million have stood empty for a year or more. Those homes are not all owned by absentee landlords or speculative developers; some are owned by Government Departments, and 140,000 are owned by public authorities. According to a parliamentary answer that I received yesterday, 11 per cent. of homes owned by national health service trusts are empty. That is a shocking state of affairs. Some empty homes are owned by councils that are both local planning authorities and housing authorities, but that often do not even have an empty homes strategy to guide them.

Most experts agree that, as well as those empty homes, we could find a quarter of a million more in the spaces above shops in the high streets in our town centres. That is the most sustainable location that could be provided for new homes. Goodness knows how many more homes could be created in empty and derelict factories—not just Manhattan-style lofts for e-millionaires in Clerkenwell or Shad Thames, but homes for the homeless in the old boot and shoe factories in Wellingborough and Rushden.

The present position is madness. Four million homes are needed, and there is a cross-party political commitment to protecting green fields, yet still we see bulldozers in fields as urban properties stand idle, empty, underused and unused.

As I have said, I have warm feelings for the Bill. It is clearly well intentioned, and it strikes at a legitimate target. I only wish that it had been presented when Nicholas Ridley was Secretary of State for the Environment, and was lighting his bonfire of planning controls—introducing planning policy guidance 6, and positively encouraging the building of hundreds upon hundreds of out-of-town superstores accessible only by car. As I speak, they are still blighting the town centres and the atmosphere.

When the Opposition were in power, a Bill such as this would have made a real difference, but this Bill is not being debated in those circumstances; it is being debated now, just weeks after the Government's introduction of PPG3—the most significant advance in planning guidance in respect of housing for a generation. Through PPG3, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has implemented many of the good intentions in the Bill, but in more workable ways—as the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) pointed out in what I thought was a very good speech. It is clear from the Bill, however, that the draftsman not only could not have seen PPG3, but had not anticipated it, notwithstanding the four documents that led to it: "Planning for the Communities of the Future", "Planning for Sustainable Development", "Towards an Urban Renaissance", and the consultation draft of PPG3 itself.

From those four documents, it was already apparent that new planning imperatives were being developed following the 1997 election. It was clear that a new PPG3 was coming, and that it would direct more new development towards brownfield sites and away from greenfield land. It was clear that it would direct new housing towards existing urban areas. It was clear that it would do all the things that the Bill seeks to do.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: The hon. Gentleman knows what he is talking about, but the key aspect of the Bill is the fact that it will provide a study and a public record of all the land that may be available. Does PPG3 do that?

Mr. Stinchcombe: I shall come to that point in due course.

In its published form, PPG3 has fulfilled each of the expectations that its precursor documents created. Even the most cursory reading of it demonstrates that. Paragraph 2 tells us that local planning authorities should

give priority to re-using previously-developed land within urban areas, bringing empty homes back into use and converting existing buildings—

converting them into homes, that is—

in preference to the development of greenfield sites.

Paragraph 21 states the Government's commitment to those ends—a commitment to

concentrating most additional housing development within urban areas;

a commitment to

making more efficient use of land

and to

maximising the re-use of previously developed land and the conversion and re-use of existing buildings.

It speaks of

assessing the capacity of urban areas to accommodate more housing; adopting a sequential approach to the allocation of land for housing development; managing the release of . . . land

and reviewing not only all local planning policies, but

planning permissions when they come up for renewal.

Paragraph 23 sets the formal target about which we have been speaking for so many months—the building of 60 per cent. of additional housing on previously developed land. PPG3 goes on to tell us exactly how that target can be achieved: through the sequential approach. In so doing, PPG3 pre-empts much of the Bill. The elements that it does not pre-empt are in any event not very good, as I hope to show.

Mr. Gray: I am listening carefully to what the hon. Gentleman has to say, most of which is good sense and has cross-party support—with two exceptions. First, he ignores the seamless continuation of the policies of the previous Government, at least since 1992, when my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer) came to the Department of the Environment, through until now. PPG3 is merely a revision of a previous PPG. The hon. Gentleman is wrong to suggest that something new happened in this context on 1 May 1997.

Secondly, the hon. Gentleman's point about PPG3 being fantastic may be true, but it has no statutory power. The Bill proposes that the principles in PPG3 should be put into law.

Mr. Stinchcombe: I absolve the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer) of much of the blame that I attached to his predecessor, Nicholas Ridley. Even when the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal was Secretary of State, however, he did not introduce a sequential test for housing. He may have done so for retail property, but not for housing. That is a significant change. Indeed, it is so significant that it is the very purpose of the Bill. When the right hon. Gentleman was Secretary of State, he did not do it, whereas PPG3 does. Thank goodness a Government have been elected who will put into practice what the hon. Gentleman says is common sense and on which both our political parties agree.

Mr. Steen: I just want to correct the hon. Gentleman on one point. The ballot for private Members' Bills was in late October or early November. I am glad that the Government have finalised PPG3 having seen my Bill in draft.

Mr. Stinchcombe: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that illuminating intervention.

I shall take the House briefly through the Bill, clause by clause, to show either that we have already delivered its intentions or that they are unworkable or impractical. Clause 1 requires urban capacity studies to be carried out. Paragraphs 24 and 27 of PPG3 already require such studies. Clause 2 requires land use audits; we have already started work on the national land use database.

Mr. Blunt: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Stinchcombe: I have given way several times, and I want to make progress because many other hon. Members want to speak in the debate.

Clause 3 requires local planning authorities to take into account such studies and audits when preparing their plans. In paragraphs 29 to 34 and others, PPG3 already requires local planning authorities to undertake just such a systematic approach to plan making, and gives us detailed advice on how to do so and how to achieve the 60 per cent. target.

Clause 4 requires the Secretary of State to publish guidance to all local planning authorities. PPG3 is exactly that guidance. Clause 5 imposes on all public bodies a duty to maximise the use of previously developed land. In paragraphs 21 and 22, PPG3 uses the words

maximising the re-use of previously-developed land,

and gives advice to local planning authorities on how to do so. The hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) said that PPG3 does not have statutory force. It does, through section 54A of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990. Under that section, anyone who makes or determines a planning application has to take into account PPG3 and all the national guidance applicable to that proposal. Therefore, it has appropriate statutory force in a plan-led system.

Paragraphs 57 and 58 of PPG3 provide new density standards which are higher, and so they should be. Gone are the days when we considered that all dense developments must be the product of cynical or greedy developers engaging in urban cramming. We now recognise, as a result of Lord Rogers's report, that dense developments can be vibrant places in which to live. We have learned the lesson that other cities across the globe learned many years ago—that, when properly designed, even high-rise buildings, can be nice places to live.

[Mr. Stinchcombe]

The failures of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s should not prevent us from developing well-designed, high-density developments in appropriate places for the next millennium. We have learned that the common parts do not have to be on the outside of council blocks—they can be put on the inside, and balconies with views can be put on the outside instead of passageways and stairs. We should go that far but no further, unlike the Bill.

The Bill would impose on all public authorities the statutory duty to maximise land use when making planning applications. That would be unworkable for the reason that the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome explained. It would freeze up the planning process and ensure that public authorities would not be dealing with other matters to fulfil their legitimate public functions, because they would be doing their land use audits instead.

Clause 6 is also misguided. It requires the assessment of alternative sites for development whenever a planning application is made to it for five or more houses on undeveloped land. I have a certain sympathy for that clause, but I do not think that it could possibly work. What about the greenfield sites that have already properly been allocated for residential development through the local planning process, and in respect of which we want proper, comprehensive development? Four million homes will have to be built not just on brownfield but on greenfield land as well. Some of the allocations will be, and should be, on greenfield land.

I have to declare an indirect interest because my father-in-law owns some such land. In Wellingborough, 4,000 homes will have to be built. The question was asked where they should go. Following the intervention of environmentalists, it was decided to put them next to the railway station, which is the most sustainable location. Not all the sites were brownfield—some were greenfield—but they were rightly allocated for development because they were in the best possible environmental location. Having made that decision, it would be absurd for every planning application to build on that allocated land to have to go through the statutory procedure required in the Bill. It would be prejudicial to the proper and comprehensive development of those sites, and would fly in the face of section 54A of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, which requires us to decide in accordance with the plan, unless material considerations indicate otherwise.

The hon. Member for Totnes focused greatly on clause 7, the infrastructure clause. He said that PPG3 is silent on infrastructure, but it is not. Paragraph 31 requires local authorities to consider the capacity of existing and potential infrastructure, and mentions exactly those factors that the hon. Gentleman mentioned: public transport, water, sewerage, other utilities and social infrastructure such as schools and hospitals. Infrastructure considerations are not only in PPG3, but in every local or unitary development plan that I have ever seen. I cannot conceive of a planning application for which those factors are not proper material considerations always to be taken into account. Clause 7 therefore also misses the target.

Clause 8 requires local planning authorities to make available for inspection by the public all the relevant documentation. As far as I can remember, ever since the access to information provisions were inserted in the Local Government Act 1972, the public have had the right to see the documents that the local authority holds.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: The hon. Gentleman has reached the point at which he could answer my previous question. The Bill anticipates a proper register. If that is provided under PPG3, will there be a nice clear register that people can see?

Mr. Stinchcombe: It is a good moment for me to deal with that point. Notwithstanding some of my criticisms, I still have warm feelings about the Bill. The urban capacity studies that all local authorities are required to undertake as a result of PPG3, as well as the information gathered for the national land use database, will enable us to achieve exactly that. It will not be directly through PPG3. Other action will have to be taken to assemble all the information and then to use it wisely. By raising that issue in the Bill, we can tell the Minister that that is what we want. If we have studies nationally and in all local planning authorities areas, we must ensure that the information that we gather is assembled, assimilated and used wisely. I appreciate the right hon. and learned Gentleman's intervention.

Mr. Phil Sawford (Kettering): Clause 2 provides that

> Details of the ownership of buildings and land identified in the audit shall be published as part of the audit.

Clause 8 provides that such documents should be available at reasonable cost. Has anyone tried to put a figure on that? With the shifting patterns of ownership—shared ownerships, corporate ownerships and even disputed or contested ownerships—it is a huge task to impose on a local authority to determine the exact ownership of the land and to publish it at reasonable cost. At what cost to the local taxpayer? How much will the glossy brochures in local garages cost? That cost should be carefully examined when considering the Bill.

Mr. Stinchcombe: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. It would be a hugely expensive exercise to pursue the Maoist tendency of the Conservative party, as the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome identified. There are more practical ways to achieve the desirable objectives. Through the national land use database, PPG3 and the urban capacity studies, we will be able to do the job more quickly, more cheaply and better. However, as I have said, I still want us to make best use of the information that we then gather.

The Government should introduce three additional measures. First, the tax regime needs to be altered so that we can better fulfil the laudable objectives of new PPG3. At the moment, that regime stands in the way of achieving those objectives. Good though the Budget was, there were a couple of omissions. It is crazy that there is no VAT on building new homes on green fields but that it costs 17.5 per cent. in VAT to refurbish empty homes.

All hon. Members know that it is more expensive to build on previously developed land in any event. We do not want economic tools to put a further obstacle in the

way of recycling land. We want them to encourage the recycling of land. Therefore, I urge the Government to look swiftly at that issue.

Mr. Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) *rose—*

Mr. Gray *rose—*

Mr. Stinchcombe: I give way for the last time.

Mr. Gray: I thank the hon. Gentleman and my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) for allowing me to intervene.

I must correct the hon. Gentleman slightly. There is no suggestion that VAT is charged on building on brownfield land. VAT is charged only where there is refurbishment of existing buildings. That is what Lord Rogers seeks equivalence on. Does he agree with him that that equivalence should be at 0 per cent., or does he propose that the Chancellor should impose a 5 or 10 per cent. tax on new housing?

Mr. Stinchcombe: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's first point. I am aware of what VAT is attached to, but I welcome the clarification that he gives and the chance to correct the record to that end. Personally—it is dictated in many respects by European law in any event—I think that we should have equivalence of VAT at between 5 and 7 per cent. However, we must get rid of the existing disparity, whereby there are tax incentives to build new houses on green fields and tax disincentives to refurbish existing buildings in urban areas.

Secondly, at the risk of looking like another stealth taxer, I think that local authorities should be empowered to charge double council tax on homes that have been empty for more than a year for no good reason. It is acceptable for people to say that they have a good reason for a property being empty and to demonstrate it, but if they are sitting on empty homes for no good reason, when there are homeless people and when we are building in the countryside, something should be done.

Thirdly, I believe that every local authority should be required to develop its own empty homes strategy. Many already do, but not all. Wellingborough borough council is developing one—East Northamptonshire district council has established its strategy—but many local authorities have not gone even that far. As they are often the housing authority and the planning authority, that is lamentable, especially when so many of their homes still stand empty. As long as they stand empty, we should not stand idly by.

Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to make my contribution.

11.44 am

Sir Nicholas Lyell (North-East Bedfordshire): I am glad to follow the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr. Stinchcombe). He has warm feelings towards aspects of the Bill. In the best traditions of Friday debates and private Member's Bills, I find myself sharing his approbation of the Bill and, indeed, many of his reservations.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen) on coming high in the ballot and on, after 25 years, having the opportunity to ride his hobby-horse, which he has been riding throughout that time. He was one of my mentors when I came into the House in 1979. I remember him coming to my then constituency, Hemel Hempstead, to talk about this subject.

I hope that the key point of the Bill—perhaps only the key point—will find its way on to the statute book. Unless the Minister can satisfy me that that is not necessary, we need a little statutory prod to get the key point home. I hope that the Bill will be narrowed to that focus and that, in about three or four clauses, it will find its way on to the statute book.

What is the fundamental point? As Disraeli said—no doubt other people said it, too—what people want in politics is information. That is what we need with regard to the wide political problem of housing development, urban regeneration and protection of the countryside.

The Bill's fundamental point is that information should be ascertained and published. That is what clause 2 asks for. It says:

> Each local planning authority shall . . . prepare and publish an audit of derelict, vacant, under-used and under-utilised buildings and land in their area.

I do not want to quibble about the precise wording. The clause may be a little too prescriptive, but I should like such a study to be carried out. I would like the local authority to publish it, although not necessarily every 12 months; that may be a bit too much. Those who are responsible for the public utilities, which used to be in public ownership, but which now for good reasons are in private ownership, should be expected to rally round and to provide information about the land and buildings in their ownership so that the register can be built up.

Clause 8 says that local planning authorities should make that information available for inspection at reasonable cost. The hon. Member for Kettering (Mr. Sawford), who I know has local authority experience because I have heard him speak before on the matter, talked about excessive cost. Private Members' Bills should not impose such costs on local authorities or anyone else. They should make simple suggestions that will do good. That is at the heart of the Bill.

I do not know the answer to my next question, but I raise it for the Minister in the hope that it will be noted by her officials and that she will be given the answer. Once we have identified where the land is, information on its ownership will be available probably through the Land Registry. I do not know to what extent the information on the registry is publicly available, but I have always thought that there was a case for some wider availability. I do not want to break too many barriers of private information, but that might provide a way in which to obtain information for those who were seriously interested in such developments at a reasonable cost.

Mr. Gray: I am slightly concerned about the part of the Bill on information. Hon. Members on both sides of the House are, I think, of one mind on the aim of saving the countryside, but surely the production of lists and information of the type that the Bill describes and that my

[Mr. Gray]

right hon. and learned Friend praises is an excessively bureaucratic and costly way in which to cure the problem. Providing a list does not necessarily provide a solution.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: I normally agree with my hon. Friend. I think that it is just that I do not understand exactly what he is saying. If we do not have a list with a map attached that shows what land we are talking about, it will not be of any help to anyone.

Mr. Gray *rose—*

Sir Nicholas Lyell: May I continue? I am sure that my hon. Friend will develop his reservations in his speech, which I hope that he will make shortly. We must have something that people can look at so that they know what they are talking about in any particular area.

I suppose that I should declare some sort of interest. I have done nothing like as much planning work at the Bar as the hon. Member for Wellingborough, but I have done planning work in the past. It is possible that I might do so in future. I and my family own, or in future, may own small or modest amounts of property, which might be affected by the Bill. I make that clear. What I am asking for probably militates against my immediate interests, but that does not absolve me from declaring the interest, so I do so.

Let me come back to the reasons for having a nice, straightforward register indicating these areas of land. We should not necessarily let the best be the enemy of the good. Something that covered 80 or 90 per cent. would be a real help. It would give an opportunity for smaller developers to be involved, and for competition. Excessive bureaucratisation and over-elaborate planning guidance mean that developers have to be bigger and bigger to succeed in this area. The smaller developers find it more difficult to obtain the information and more expensive—or too expensive—to carry out the necessary studies that the Bill would add to. That is disadvantageous.

As areas develop and small towns are provided with bypasses—rightly, under the previous Government—the land between the outside perimeter of the town and the bypass tends to get infilled. That is sensible, but, sadly, it is often badly done. The quality of the planning is not good enough, partly because it tends to be done by big developers who do not have the time and energy to concentrate on the detailed planning. Information means opportunity, opportunity means competition, competition means higher standards. Those are all thoroughly Tory principles, which I hope will find an echo throughout the House. I know that other parties will say, "Don't claim these good ideas just for yourselves", and I am very happy to spread them around. They are wise principles.

I want to say a word about how this may help Bedfordshire, part of which I represent, and the scale of the problem there. Many hon. Members have talked about the Crow report and the problems that the Deputy Prime Minister is having to tackle—which we would have to tackle if we were in power—about how to place all these homes. We are deceiving ourselves by saying that we are likely to achieve 60 per cent. of building on brownfield sites in many areas. The Government would be deceiving themselves if they seriously believed that that could be achieved in Bedfordshire. Even with the greater intensity of building that is permissible under PPG3 in relation to the housing development projected for Bedfordshire—which is an increase under the Crow report from 43,000 to 64,000 dwellings—it would be only just possible to get the 43,000 dwellings on 50 per cent. brownfield sites. The figure of 60 per cent. is pie in the sky in Bedfordshire.

When I asked the Deputy Prime Minister about this when he made his statement the other day, he said that the Government were modifying the Crow recommendations and that I was exaggerating. I hope that I am. Crow suggested an extra 21,000 dwellings. The Government have not published their figures, but the newspapers suggested 15,500. If the increase is anything like as much, the figure for what can be built on brownfield sites will reduce to nearer 30 per cent. I did not make these figures up—I got them from our non-political experts on Bedfordshire county council. That is the sad fact. That is why it is so desirable to know that brownfield land really is available across the country, and to have it published, as the Bill suggests.

Knowledge of this nature will be valuable with regard to urban regeneration in the inner city. I used to live in Lambeth, and people did not know what was available. There were also old political battles—dragons that are now slain—and the desire for huge municipalisation clogged up the proper development of Lambeth for 10 or 15 years. I am glad that that is no longer the case. None the less, knowledge of what derelict and brownfield sites are available in an inner-city area such as Lambeth or in a country market town such as Biggleswade will be helpful in enabling the greater densities of building and the better development of either of those communities.

Urban communities, large or small, have a head start with regard to the local transport infrastructure. In a town such as Biggleswade, one can pretty well walk from many of the sites to the centre, and vice versa. There must be a great deal of under-used property, sometimes on the first or second floors of buildings, which nobody has thought of using but which could provide high-quality residential development, particularly for older people. I am pushing in that direction myself—I was brought up in London until I was about 16, and then lived in the country, where I have remained for most of my life except for the 10 years when I had a house in Lambeth. I can quite see that in later life it might be more pleasant to live in London. There are parts of London that could be developed to house far more people, not just in the centre, but out in areas such as Brent. The Bill would help, by making it clear where places, which are at present unattractive but have huge potential, could be developed by a whole host of small, largely private, developers doing good things and allowing a thousand flowers to bloom.

I hope that the Bill will be considered in Committee. I would be very sad if it were talked out, although I have no reason to believe that the Government wish to do so. I hope that there are 100 of us here, if necessary, to see that it gets through. However, I want to see the Bill narrowed down in Committee. Without being precise, I want it narrowed down to roughly clauses 1, 2, 3 and 8. I simply want it to result in the register. My hon. Friend the Member for Totnes put the idea in his book in 1981. It was a good idea then, and it is a good idea now.

I was grateful to follow the hon. Member for Wellingborough. It is one of the strengths of the House when hon. Members, from whatever party, bring with

them a deep knowledge of a particular subject. He did so, and illuminated the debate. However, I think that his answers to my questions show that, although PPG3 is benign, it will not do the trick. There should be a statutory requirement for local authorities to obtain the information for the registers and publish them. It would take too long, it would be too diffuse and it would not work, without the prod that the Bill provides.

In summary, I support my hon. Friend's Bill. I hope that it will get into Committee, and that, when it does, he will wipe away all the dross, the over-prescriptive material, the extra burdens on would-be developers and on local authorities that some of the clauses would provide. I hope that the Bill will be focused on its central issue, and that the Government will accept it. There is a great deal of cross-party support for the Bill's central notion, and I wish it well.

11.58 am

Helen Jones (Warrington, North): I welcome some of the remarks made by the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell), although it is a little intimidating to follow both him and my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr. Stinchcombe) who have such knowledge of planning law. I speak not as a planning expert, but as someone who represents an area that knows all too well the difficulties of balancing the need for housing with the need to preserve our environment.

I am from Warrington, which is a growing town, as it has been for many years since the area was designated for new town development. The borough consists of the old central areas of Warrington and large areas of new town development. Sizeable parts of my constituency are built on former greenfield sites. As the area has developed, we have become ever more conscious of the need to protect the green belt around it and open spaces within it.

We have experienced considerable transport problems as the area has grown, and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough said, the situation was not helped by the previous Government's policy of allowing much out-of-town retail development. We are currently fighting to preserve Peel hall, one of the last open spaces in north Warrington, from development.

Because of my background, I am well aware that the Bill seeks to tackle a serious problem. The organisation of future development must be addressed, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen) on his efforts to raise the issue. However, I have serious concerns about whether his Bill—he seemed almost to discuss a different one —will achieve its ends.

I wonder whether the Bill is necessary in the current climate. In large part, it seems to duplicate the guidance in PPG3, which local authorities are required to follow. The carefully constructed strategy laid out in PPG3 was subject to wide consultation and has the support of many local authorities, including mine. It requires authorities to produce housing capacity studies and to release land for housing sequentially, with brownfield sites taking precedence over greenfield sites. In doing so, authorities must have regard to the capacity studies.

The policy was carefully drawn up and has wide support. Because some of the Bill's requirements are so imprecise, it would confuse rather than aid the process.

Mr. Steen: I thank the hon. Lady for what she has said. As a Back-Bench Member, I received £200 towards the drafting of the Bill. It is not drafted marvellously. I was helped by the Council for the Protection of Rural England, which did a tremendous job, and the Clerk of the House and my research assistant, but the Bill is not perfect. I do not have at my disposal the battery of advisers and draftsmen available to the Minister, and I am perfectly prepared to make necessary amendments in Committee. With the Minister's help, I am sure that we can get the Bill right.

Helen Jones: I hope to touch on some points that concern me, but I fully accept the difficulty of drawing up a private Member's Bill without the necessary resources.

The national land use database supports the policy in PPG3 and is the most comprehensive audit of previously developed land and buildings ever undertaken. The Bill seems to duplicate it. Local authorities are required to recycle existing buildings as well as land—a major policy change that the Government supported by the hon. Gentleman never sought to make. Authorities are also required to review land already allocated for housing to ensure that it meets the new approach set out in PPG3.

In addition to duplicating much existing provision, the Bill has not benefited from extensive consultation with local authorities. I accept that the hon. Gentleman could not undertake such consultation himself, but the Bill is flawed. Clause 1 requires a study of the capacity of previously developed land. However, the Bill contains no assumption about housing density. That seems to set authorities an impossible task. They cannot decide capacity without taking a decision on density. The Bill could make matters worse than they would be under PPG3, which gives local authorities guidance on avoiding inefficient development and seeks more high-density housing.

Under the Bill as drafted, local authorities would make their own assumptions on housing density, so any capacity study that they produced would be much more likely to be challenged on appeal. That would result in more uncertainty and greater cost for everyone involved in the planning process, including council taxpayers.

The clause sets no time limit for the study. Nor does it require authorities to take account of future sources of previously developed land. The capacity study would have no guidance on building density and we do not know how far ahead the provisions would apply. That sets local authorities an impossible task.

There is no requirement that the study should relate to regional or strategic planning processes. That is an essential requirement for areas such as the north-west, where cities such as Liverpool or Manchester are losing population, while other areas, such as Warrington, are gaining it. Unless there is a strategic planning process to underpin those assumptions, we cannot do what I and many Members representing north-west constituencies believe to be essential: concentrate future building in those cities, while avoiding extra building on greenfield areas outside towns such as Warrington and the market towns of Cheshire, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) referred. We must do that if we are serious about using brownfield sites.

An authority-by-authority approach with no provision for regional strategic planning is likely to be seriously damaging to areas such as the one that I represent. Furthermore, it will not address the problem of the decline of the inner cities.

[Helen Jones]

The clause includes no provision for the required audit to relate to the national land use database. There is no definition of expressions such as "under-used" and "under-utilised". The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) spoke of the possibility that the provisions might apply to mansions in which one couple were rattling about. I know that that is not what the Bill intends, but that is what it could be taken to mean. We need to get those terms right, otherwise we shall impose on local authorities a duty that is impossible for them to fulfil. We would set up a system that would generate constant disagreement and possible legal challenges.

The requirement to publish details of the ownership of all land included in the audit is not sustainable. Other hon. Members have already referred to the possible costs involved. There would be a serious problem in tracing the ownership of some small parcels of land that are not registered. I am dealing with a problem in my constituency where there is a serious difficulty in finding out who owns a particular piece of land.

All local authorities encounter that problem from time to time. However, under the Bill, they would have to spend much time and money tracing ownership of what might be extremely small parcels of land. If they did not do so, they would be in breach of their statutory duty, because there is no concept of reasonableness—of a local authority making reasonable inquiries. If the Bill is to work, that must be included. The provision, as drafted, is not a sensible way to develop the planning process, nor would it be a sensible use of the time of local authorities.

Clause 7 requires that development applications that have

> a significant impact on the existing infrastructure shall be accompanied by an assessment of that impact.

That provision duplicates the guidance set out in PPG12; local authorities are required to take that matter into account both in preparing their development plan and when deciding on applications. However, the provision goes further. It requires that an authority shall approve an application only if

> it is satisfied that the existing infrastructure . . . will be able to meet the demands made upon it by the proposed development; or . . . is capable of being altered to meet those demands without detriment to the quality of life of existing residents or damage to the natural beauty and amenity of the area.

What does that mean?

The hon. Member for Totnes rightly said that, in some cases, development could improve the quality of life—for example, by bringing new pupils into village schools and new customers into village shops—but it is at least arguable that any increase in traffic is detrimental to people's quality of life, so without provision for public transport, no planning application for development could be granted because car use would automatically increase.

It is also arguable that the natural beauty and amenity of an area is damaged by any building. I originally come from Chester. I am sure that the Celtic inhabitants thought that the natural beauty of the place was seriously damaged when the Romans built a wall round it. I am sure that the mediaeval inhabitants thought that they would prefer to have a nice open space in the middle of Chester than to have a great cathedral plonked on it. I exaggerate, but in response to any application it could be argued that damage would be caused. We end up with a clause that means very little and would be unenforceable. I fear that local authorities would become embroiled in endless appeals and endless litigation.

In short, the Bill, as drafted, is well intentioned but does not give us a sensible planning policy. It will add nothing to the Government's policy of encouraging development on brownfield sites, and would lead to confusion where there should be clarity. As a result, it might actually damage our prospects of preserving green spaces. It imposes duties on local authorities that are so ill-defined that they cannot be fulfilled, and could lead to further appeals and a substantial amount of litigation. It may, of course, enrich lawyers. As an ex-lawyer, I have nothing against enriching lawyers, but I cannot see that the Bill will help to preserve our environment, and it will need substantial amendment if it is to be effective. In the absence of such amendment, I cannot urge my colleagues to support it.

12.12 pm

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): As an acknowledged non-expert, I am glad to follow the hon. Member for Warrington, North (Helen Jones) rather than my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell) or the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr. Stinchcombe), both of whom obviously have great expertise in this subject area.

However, I am delighted to be named as a sponsor of the Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen). I share his antipathy to legislation and regulation, and I agreed entirely when he said that it would be infinitely better if we spent our Fridays repealing, rather than introducing, legislation. However, when it comes to pressure on the environment, I am guilty of standing on my head and abandoning my instincts, because I want the Bill to become law largely in the form in which my hon. Friend has proposed it to the House.

On one point in his opening remarks, I did disagree with my hon. Friend—when he seemed to take as a given the necessity to build 3.8 million houses by 2016. He then examined the theology of Kingsway, which had produced that information, and drew attention to the fact that the 3.8 million figure had been arrived at by a miraculous decrease from 4.4 million.

It seems to me that, ultimately, those figures are the product of sticking a wet finger in the air, and they are inevitably estimates—estimates about people's behaviour, trends that can change, and factors that can be influenced. This is where I have the most profound difficulty with the current approach to planning. The hon. Member for Warrington, North spoke about a strategic plan for her area—the north-west—and about the need to regenerate Liverpool so that the factors that are producing the rush from Liverpool to Warrington may be affected; yet ultimately, all our planning is decided by the one overwhelming decision that there will be 3.8 million new houses by 2016. Everything cascades from that.

Where I quibble with my hon. Friend is on the first principle. We should attack the factors that create the need for new houses. Why do we need 3.8 million more houses? Is it because our population is growing? No, it is not. We need many more houses because people separate and do not stay together for as long as they did. The House can take measures, through the tax and benefits

system, to support marriage and to encourage people to stay together. We can deal with the factors that lead to the demand for more homes.

We can address the issue of people leaving home earlier and setting up homes on their own. We can put in place incentives through the tax and benefits system to encourage people to stay at home longer before they set up home away from their parents. We can examine the factors that mean that old people live on their own for longer without support from their children. We can start to get to work on the factors that drive the demand for so many houses. If we can do that, the problem that we all face will not be so dramatic as the challenge that we face now, particularly in the south-east and the south-west.

Mr. Gray: One way that we could achieve those useful social aims would be by restricting the availability of housing. If a house is not available in a local area, the children will not wish to leave home when they are 18. They will be forced to stay at home even if they do not want to. That might even help to keep families together.

Mr. Blunt: There is something in what my hon. Friend says. For example, in Italy, young men traditionally stay at home with mamma for much longer than young men do in the United Kingdom. One of the reasons for that are the planning regulations. In many parts of Italy, there are beautiful landscapes for which there are very restrictive planning regulations. In a sense, such regulations mean that people are encouraged to stay at home. If extra housing is not readily available, that factor falls out the equation.

Dr. Whitehead: I have listened carefully to the hon. Gentleman's remarks. Does he accept the concept of affordable housing? If houses are not available at prices that people can afford, that does not necessarily mean that people will stay at home with mother or father—they may not find a roof over their heads at all.

Mr. Blunt: We have to examine the position. The population of the United Kingdom is 59.2 million. Will the population be 68 million by the time that we have built all the extra houses? No, it will not, so do we have a homelessness problem in the sense that the hon. Gentleman suggests? We do not; we have a problem with where people live and the style of life that they choose to lead. We should address those factors, because they underlie the problems that we have debated today and on many previous occasions and that the Bill will help to address.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes. The difference between predict and provide, and plan, monitor and manage is, in the end, almost meaningless. The whole policy is dictated by the numbers of extra houses set by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. Those houses will be built, because the housing inspectors who sit in judgment on planning appeals will have at the back of their minds—whatever PPG3 says—the fact that the Government have said that they should be built and have provided the overall numbers.

That has happened in the south-east, where figures for extra houses have been provided. The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) drew attention to the fact that we have not had such a debate about the south-west, because we have not got the numbers for the south-west yet. The south-east is the first part of the country for which figures have been provided. If we consider the patterns of migration from the south-east to the south-west, I agree that the south-west faces the problem on exactly the same scale as the south-east.

People in the south-east feel so strongly because the numbers for extra houses in the south-east have been made known. Serplan recommended that there should be 668,500 extra houses and that figure was based on an accommodation with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. Serplan did not want 668,500 houses to be built, but all the local authorities involved were trying to find a way to buy off central Government, who were trying to impose a number on them, and find a figure that would be acceptable for the whole of the south-east.

Professor Crow had a different mindset and said that the priority must be economic growth. He advocated a "let it rip" approach to housebuilding in the south-east to support unimpeded economic growth, so we ended up with the idea of 1.1 million new houses. The Deputy Prime Minister split the difference, and we now have a target of 860,000 houses to be built by 2016. That drives what will happen thereafter because I understand that on Monday—the Minister will correct me if I am wrong—we will be told the allocation per county. The counties will then have to make allocations for the planning authorities, which will have to make the best of a bad job.

In the end, although PPG3 and other guidance will set a sequential test and so on, it will not make a significant difference because it will not change the fact that those houses will be imposed on local people, whether or not they want them. Their representatives, in trying to raise people's quality of life, will not be in a position to make a proper judgment in the interests of all residents.

The hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr. Whitehead) mentioned affordable housing, and of course that is an important issue for local representatives, but they cannot afford to ignore the need to provide housing for people who have traditionally lived in that area and are priced out of the market. They will need to find houses for nurses and others working in public services, who are not as well rewarded as others. Those public services are essential, and if an area has only houses that cost a minimum of £500,000, nobody will be left to provide those vital services.

Those issues can be better decided by local people and their representatives, who are accountable to their electorate, than by central Government producing a number that cascades down through the system.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: Will the hon. Gentleman acknowledge that there is a particularly serious lack of affordable housing in London, where the average house costs £159,000 and first-time buyers have to pay an average of £120,000? On public services, will he acknowledge that London has the severest problems caused by the cost of housing and the need for more units of affordable housing?

Mr. Blunt: I agree with the hon. Gentleman, but the situation in London is patchy because some areas have enormous economic pressure and others are subject to

[Mr. Blunt]

serious economic and environmental challenge. That is a complicated picture, but my hon. Friend's Bill will help us to understand that by providing transparency.

Labour Members have criticised the approach taken by the Conservative Government in the 1980s, not least under the stewardship of the late Lord Ridley. To a degree, looking at the picture now, one has to agree that perhaps things went wrong. However, one of the joys of the Conservative party is that it contains two trends—it has a liberal wing and a Tory wing—and is able to respond to the changes required in the environment.

In the 1980s, people rightly aspired to the freedom of choice provided by out-of-town shopping centres, and that is what consumers were demanding. The sort of houses that were being built were what people wanted. At that stage, the debate about the environment was not as intense as it is now. That intensity is due to the fact that, as the environment has changed, people have begun to say, "Enough! There are enough out-of-town shopping centres and greenfield developments." That is why policy changed, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) said, in 1992. That is why the trend of policy now is a continuation of what happened under the stewardship of my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer).

The Bill comes at a time when the pressure for development in the south-east and the south-west is becoming intolerable. That is why the issue is at the front of our minds, and why the Bill deserves consideration.

The Government have failed to address the factors that drive the housing projections, and they have yet to get to grips with urban regeneration. There is a sort of schizophrenia in the Government, which one sees sometimes in the personality of Ministers. The instinct of the Minister for Housing and Planning, I believe, is to develop; he has a liberal approach to these matters. He believes that the south-east must be the economic motor of the UK, and that is why the numbers have been pushed up as far as they have been by the Deputy Prime Minister. I deplore that, but other Ministers see things differently.

The Government are trying to grope towards a solution. I do not doubt their good intentions, which are shown in PPG3 and the evidence given to the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs. However, they have, so far, failed to deliver the instruments that will enable change to take place. That is what the Bill does.

The hon. Member for Wellingborough quite properly criticised the Budget as a missed opportunity in terms of VAT, stamp duty on brownfield sites and a special development tax on greenfield sites. These instruments were available, but the opportunity was lost.

The people of the south-east are crying out for restraint in development, yet they will be told to get on with building more new homes which they know they cannot cope with. The context in which the House considers the Bill is so important. When central Government instruct one region to meet its share of the national housing projections, the message is simple—in the end, it will have to build those houses, pay the environmental price and suffer a reduction in the quality of life.

If the Government continue to pursue that policy, the House will owe it to future generations to do everything that we possibly can to alleviate the worst effects of the overall policy that is driven by the housing projections. The Bill could play a key role in that, and ought to command support from both sides of the House. The criticisms so far have been about the detail, and I hope sincerely that hon. Members will support the Bill, so that those criticisms can be debated properly in Committee. There seems to be agreement on the overall objective.

The Bill could put power in the hands of people in the form of information. That information could then condition the attitudes of their local representatives. We need transparency.

Ministers have been stubborn in their insistence that 60 per cent. of all new building should be on brownfield sites. I commend them for that; it is not enough, but at least they have upped the target and said that they intend to stick to it. However, that target does not change the reality on the ground. Local authorities, particularly in the south-east and the south-west, will struggle immensely to meet that target with the development required of them by Ministers.

The urban capacity studies that the Bill would require local authorities to undertake would inform the debate. If Ministers are to ensure that even the 60 per cent. target is met, it is essential to ensure that each and every brownfield site is meticulously considered and no area left undisturbed before the all-too-easy option of greenfield development is allowed.

We have a duty to protect our green fields from development. However, all too often, our planning controls are insufficient to cope with the ever-increasing strains on the infrastructure, and the threats to our green fields and the environment.

I raised with the Minister the issue of telecommunications masts; one example where the planning process permits the environmentally friendly option—that of base stations being forced to go on existing structures and buildings—to be too readily overlooked. The powers in that respect have not been explored adequately, with the result that there has been an explosion in the number of masts. I am sure that we have all received complaints from constituents about the associated health risks and the impact on their visual enjoyment of the environment. The Bill would ensure that all environmentally friendly options to preserve our environment are explored and every effort is made to spare greenfield sites before construction commences.

I conclude with an example drawn from the area on the boundary between my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth). The previous household projection numbers cascaded down through the county and on to the borough of Reigate and Banstead. That borough, already the most congested and developed part of Surrey, had a higher housing target imposed on it than any other borough in Surrey. Regrettably, there was a Liberal-Labour coalition running the borough council at the time. The borough now had to find room for those houses. The Horley masterplan was produced, whereby half of the houses were to be built on the boundary of Horley on farm land and green fields partly owned by the county council.

Local people took up the issue. Douglas Simpson of the Meath Green Protection Society carried out his own brownfield audit of Horley as it stands. Through imaginative schemes, including building on existing car parks and moving the car parking spaces to areas above

the railway, Mr. Simpson found in Horley—a small town—room for 2,000 houses on previously developed land. It is wrong that such a study of brownfield sites in Horley had to be undertaken by a member of the public. With that exercise, Mr. Simpson has triggered an interesting debate about the Horley masterplan and the alternatives to building 2,600 houses on greenfield land extending right to the boundary of the green belt on the A23 corridor—the narrowest part of the green belt around London. It should not have taken a member of the public to initiate that debate.

The information that Douglas Simpson had to find should have been available when the development plan was drawn up. The Bill would make such information available to all members of the public. It would enable the debate that every community must have to be properly informed and the planning process to be transparent. The Bill would provide the necessary statutory power to make the commitment to maximise the reuse of previously developed land and empty properties work locally. The Bill is proactive, although my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes might not like that description, given his attitude to regulation. It will make information available.

The hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) described development as a jigsaw, and the Government face the challenge of putting together a huge number of pieces of policy. The Bill addresses only one piece of the jigsaw: the provision of information—knowing what is there so that we can make use of it. We cannot simply rely on PPG3 and good intentions. We must put information into public domain through statute.

The Bill changes "should"—a word that appears repeatedly in PPG3—into "will". It is in the interests of future generations, who will inherit the environment that we create, that we place on local authorities a duty to provide information to their constituents. I am delighted to support the Bill and I hope that it reaches Committee.

12.33 pm

Mr. Colin Pickthall (West Lancashire): It is interesting to follow the hon. Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) as the third non-expert in a row. That is all to the good and what Parliament is all about—the more non-experts, the better. I have a great deal of sympathy with his opening remarks about his suspicions about the global housing figure. My gut instinct tells me that it is far too large; it does not accord with common sense, population growth, population mobility, or changes in family composition.

I cannot say that I go along with the hon. Gentleman in his touching faith in keeping marriages together through tax incentives. Most marriages that I have witnessed breaking up would not be kept together with manacles, never mind tax incentives.

I am also not convinced by the hon. Gentleman's generalisation—I hope that I quote him correctly—that people in the south-east are crying out for restraint in housebuilding. That is only partly true. It would apply only to those who were content with their current housing. Part of the problem in the south-east and elsewhere—I shall speak mainly about elsewhere—is precisely the number of people who, for one reason or another, are not content with their present housing, whether they have a house or not, and want to move out into the sort of areas that the hon. Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen) seeks to protect.

I enjoyed the speech of the hon. Member for Totnes and agreed with much of it. I noted his statement that he wished he were in the Chamber on Fridays repealing legislation, which was echoed by the hon. Member for Reigate. If they proposed the repeal of section 28, they would receive a great deal of support from Government Members.

Although I enjoyed the speech of the hon. Member for Totnes and support many of his aims, I cannot support the Bill, for the reasons already stated by my hon. Friends. It would duplicate much of what the Government are doing through PPG3 and the national land use database. It would overlay and confuse the work already being done by many local authorities—not all, no doubt, but many.

Some clauses would be unworkable, and most of the Bill is otiose. There is little in it that has not been addressed elsewhere. I shall not go through the Bill in enormous detail, except to say that the Government are already committed to doing much of what is set out in clause 1.

The hon. Member for Totnes was rightly worried about the dense and meaningless wording of many of the documents to which he referred. I share those concerns, but paragraph 22 of PPG3, which states that

> The Government is committed to maximising the re-use of previously-developed land and empty properties and the conversion of non-residential buildings for housing, in order both to promote regeneration and minimise the amount of greenfield land being taken for development

could not be clearer as a central commitment by the Government.

Clause 2 is already under way. Clause 3 goes without saying. Without it, clauses 1 and 2 would be pointless. That applies also to subsection (2) of clause 3. Clause 4 is already being done.

Clause 5 is already being done, but I shall comment on the wording

> public bodies shall seek to maximise the use of previously developed land,

which also appears in clause 3(2). Why does the clause not simply state "shall maximise"? The words "seek to" significantly weaken it. I advise the hon. Gentleman to reconsider that, if the Bill goes any further. I can hear the voice of my local senior planning officer saying, "Well, Col, we sought to maximise it. Unfortunately, we couldn't quite do it, but we assure you we tried."

I apologise to the hon. Gentleman for the fact that I was out of the Chamber when he dealt with clause 6, which would require a local planning authority to go through the hoops

> for five or more dwellings.

The hon. Gentleman is right. Like many hon. Members representing rural areas, I have bitter memories of the old days when an agricultural worker's dwelling got planning permission in the green belt, and one suddenly found that it had 12 bedrooms, two stables, garage room for six cars and so on. Five dwellings with gardens of an acre apiece and 10 bedrooms are different from five sheltered accommodation bungalows or a row of five terraced houses, which are built to fulfil specific needs. Clause 6 is therefore nonsense.

I am also worried about clause 7. The hon. Gentleman made it clear that the existing infrastructure would have to be adequate for any development of greenfield sites.

[Mr. Colin Pickthall]

That would preclude any deal between a local authority and a developer to introduce a development that had its own infrastructure. That happens all the time. I appreciate that schools present difficulties, but developers almost always provide physical infrastructure such as sewers and roads. If such a development were necessary in a small part of the green belt, the Bill would prevent it.

The provisions of clause 8 are already under way, especially through the scrutiny of local authority development plans. However, I support clause 9, which covers interpretation. If the hon. Member for Totnes removed the other clauses and left clause 9, I would support the Bill.

I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the opportunity to discuss one of the crucial problems of the new century. It has given rise to a briefing from the Country Landowners Association, with which—probably for the first time—I mostly agree. However, the CLA makes one statement, which, if not silly, is mistaken. It states:

> The Government's stated aim of "urban renaissance" is laudable. This should not be at the expense of the needs of rural areas.

The Government have to base their policy on the simple and obvious truth that the needs of rural areas depend on urban renaissance. The Deputy Prime Minister recognised that years ago; the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) has talked about it for years; and the hon. Member for Totnes also acknowledges that.

Unless the population of the United Kingdom—the majority of whom live in urban areas—are content with the quality of life in those areas, people will strive to move out. That is human nature. Most of them will want to move not to isolated rural areas—they will not move to the middle of the Pennines or central Wales—but to the green areas that surround major conurbations. They often want to do that to retain their jobs and the richness of leisure services that exists in cities. We all want it both ways.

That trend vastly increases commuter transport. That other major problem is intimately related to the subject of our discussion, as my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) made clear. Unless we can encourage urban renaissance in all our cities and urban areas—not only London or Manchester, wonderful though the metro is—the pressures for emigration to rural areas will become irresistible. Perhaps they already are.

I appreciate that I am stating the obvious. However, it bears endless repetition. The problem will not be tackled by those who have already moved to a rural area trying to pull up the drawbridge behind them to prevent others from getting in. It will not be solved by the persistent efforts to create division between rural and urban communities. That can do nothing but damage to our overall social infrastructure. We live in a small country, not Canada. Its rural and urban communities intermesh in many different ways.

A simple thesis underlies the Bill of the hon. Member for Totnes. He wants to prevent more people from moving to the countryside. He realises that, to do that, he must prevent the building of the homes that are necessary to house them there. He knows that more homes are needed. His proposed solution is to compel local authorities and developers to use brownfield sites in urban areas. The Bill specifies "previously developed urban land".

The CLA briefing points out that there are many previously developed sites in rural areas. That is true of my constituency. The Bill does not include them.

Mr. Steen: An amendment in Committee would solve that problem.

Mr. Pickthall: If the Bill gets that far and if such an amendment can be drafted, simply removing the word "urban" would solve the problem. There is much previously developed land in rural areas such as Ministry of Defence sites, old Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions sites, old countryside works of all kinds and old railway works, to which the hon. Gentleman referred. Houses have been built inside a former quarry in my constituency. Although that sounds terrible, the development is very attractive.

I do not know the hon. Gentleman's constituency, but I presume that his local council would not be greatly burdened by the responsibilities that the Bill would entail. However, his former constituency in Liverpool would be mightily burdened and those responsibilities, which most authorities already undertake in one way or another, would be enormous for a city the size of Manchester. Having said all that, his basic thesis is not far wrong, with the exception of the word "urban". However, the Government are seeking to achieve what the Bill describes. Why do we need to duplicate that?

In essence, the Bill says that urban local authorities will have to undertake huge extra activities at substantial expense to themselves to protect the countryside. The towns and cities would pay, through work and expenditure, for the benefit of the countryside, although I am not saying that that is entirely wrong as a philosophy.

Mr. Blunt: Is not the hon. Gentleman trying to have the argument both ways? First he says that those studies and everything else are happening anyway under the Government's proposals, then he says that the Bill would impose a huge extra expense by forcing urban authorities to go through that process. Surely we all agree that the process should take place. He says that it will happen under Government policy, but the Bill would make it happen. It will happen anyway. He cannot run both arguments.

Mr. Pickthall: I always try to have it both ways—do not we all?—but the Bill would involve local authorities in work of some kind. I shall not quarrel with anyone about the amount of work, but they would already have been instructed by PPG3 and by other Government planning guidelines to do precisely such work or work that would cover those examples.

I want to say a word about previously developed land. An element of the problem of locating sites for new homes concerns the comparative reluctance of developers to use existing brownfield sites. I sympathise with remarks made from both sides of the House about the need to adjust the tax regime to help with that, but the nation's stock of brownfield land, if I may put it that way, happens to be primarily in regions and sub-regions that are by no means overheated and in which fewer houses are required overall.

I would like Government thinking to encompass two types of brownfield site. The first is damaged land. In my part of the world, such land would have had a mill on it

and could be remediated—that word is used in the Government documents, although I do not know where it comes from—inside usual planning applications and development gain. The second is seriously contaminated and deeply difficult land such as the chemical dump that destroyed an entire village in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Halton (Mr. Twigg). The sites of old tanneries that deposited poisons on land for decades are another example. An MOD site in my constituency is radioactive because large amounts of luminous paint were used there during and after the war and other sites have clearly been badly contaminated by the work of industries associated with the nuclear industry.

It is clearly beyond the means of a local authority and a developer to clean up such sites. That is a task for the Government at national and regional level and I hope that they will establish a fund to be used by the regional development agencies—and eventually, I hope, by regional government—to tackle those monstrosities directly on environmental and development grounds. That should be—perhaps my hon. Friend the Minister will tell me that it really is—part of the RDAs' strategic land development role.

Mr. Loughton: Given his comments about badly contaminated land, would the hon. Gentleman take issue with a recent press report that the Government are considering making the present owners liable for cleaning such land up, whether or not they originally contaminated it many years earlier? Does that not provide a disincentive for owners to clear up, or indeed to take on contaminated land in the first place?

Mr. Pickthall: That is a good question. It depends very much on the circumstances in which the contaminated land was acquired. Anyone who buys land that is substantially contaminated is potty unless he or she has a plan, and the money, to deal with it.

Such sites are sometimes owned by local government. It costs hundreds of thousands of pounds, sometimes millions, to clean them; if they are not cleaned, they eventually become a danger to those living nearby. I agree with the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) that the Government have a responsibility to ensure that the sites are cleaned, and to put aside resources for the purpose.

The Bill seeks to put a sticking plaster over the problem, but does not and cannot tackle the root causes, although the hon. Member for Totnes did so in his speech. The central difficulty is the vast amount of economic development in the south-east—the "golden triangle". Other regions are much less pressured; some are even still mildly depressed. There is still room for development in the north-west, south Yorkshire, the west midlands and the north-east, and, owing to the industrial histories of those areas, they contain a substantial amount of previously developed land.

However, people who want to move out of London, in particular, want to move to the greener parts of the home counties where they can expend their energies demanding better transport systems to take them into and out of central London. The Prime Minister is right to say that the economic and social divide is within the regions themselves. As my hon. Friend the Minister knows as well as anyone, it would be hard to find a sharper contrast than that between Moss Side in Manchester and Alderley Edge in Cheshire, only a few miles away. In my constituency, extremely deprived and problematic estates in Skelmersdale are within half a mile of extremely well-to-do villages such as Bickerstaffe and Newburgh. Nevertheless, there is still a huge divide in the country. To describe it as the north-south divide is too simple; for this purpose, the "north" must include the midlands, and possibly Bristol, Southampton and Plymouth as well.

Planning for new homes takes place over a substantial period, especially when it involves the construction of new towns. From the north-west, where we have at least two uncompleted new towns in central Lancashire and Skelmersdale, we view proposals for new towns in the south-east with some amazement. The disparity is, of course, to do with jobs: where there are new jobs, investment and new enterprises, the demands for housing and infrastructure will follow.

Governments have tried for decades to lure businesses into the regions, sometimes with success and always at great cost to the taxpayer. Smaller-scale operations by local authorities such as mine have been quietly successful in many areas, but they have not produced vast new development. The geographically bottom-heavy economy of this country is difficult to deal with, precisely because of the pull of the "golden triangle"; but one part of the whole puzzle is entirely within the control of Government—and that is, in fact, Government.

I would like Government to consider, over the same span of time as their housing plans, the removal of Ministries from London to the regions. I saw a very good "Yes, Minister" sketch on that subject some years ago, which might have put the Government off contemplating the idea, but it is not particularly problematic to locate a Ministry in each of the English regions in an age of electronic communication. Ministers and their teams could probably all be housed in one of the existing buildings, such as the Treasury, and could be in constant aural and visual contact with civil servants in, say, Liverpool just as easily as if they were on another floor in the same building.

Many huge buildings in Westminster would consequently be available for other purposes. Some of them are only fit to be museums, but others could be adapted as homes, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr. Stinchcombe) suggested. I would quite like a flat in Richmond house: it would be a good idea.

Many civil servants would object to such a move, but there would be certain blandishments. They would be able to buy a four-bedroomed house with a quarter of an acre of land in Lancashire for less than the price of a one-bedroomed flat in central London. They would be almost guaranteed a good school in whichever direction they looked. House prices in London would fall to some extent, and would rise in the regions. The country would become more balanced in respect of that vital motor of the economy.

Young people who are attracted into the golden triangle to work in the civil service would find opportunities closer to home. The substantial brownfield resource in the north of England would be mopped up, and commerce would be attracted north, south-west and east. Interest rates would no longer be bullied by the south-east housing market.

[Mr. Pickthall]

I realise that that is grossly over-simplified, but it is within the Government's control over a decade—and we are talking about building millions of houses in a decade. It would enable us to argue that the country no longer needs kellies—we had them as children, I do not know what they are called now—which are bottom heavy and all the weight is in one place: in this case, in London and the south-east.

I referred to the unhealthy and artificial campaign to make urban and rural areas opposed and antagonistic polarities. That campaign is based on an untruth. A large proportion of our population live in suburbs—even very small towns have suburbs—that benefit from the virtues and are subject to the problems of both urban and rural areas. Many people live in the country and work in urban centres, so have a stake in both.

West Lancashire is typical of many other constituencies. It is a large horticultural and agricultural area with a small market town in the middle, a new town in one corner, a dozen villages, and 20 or so hamlets sandwiched between Merseyside, Greater Manchester and Preston. All the transport links are between the major towns, and pass through West Lancashire, serving the rural areas. Because they go from Preston to Liverpool and from Wigan to Southport, my area has a rail service, but it does not generate enough activity for its own rail service. Many residents in my area use Manchester and Liverpool for work, but more so for cultural and sporting activities. There is massive pressure for development in the green belt, because the bulk of the constituency is green belt.

We face particular problems to which the hon. Member for Totnes alluded. A deal was suddenly on the cards for Newburgh, which is a village of about 1,000 people. A developer wanted to provide a bypass for the village, which is badly hit by heavy traffic, in return for permission to build 380 houses. I wanted the bypass, but I and the people of the village strongly opposed it on the simple ground that it would entirely change the nature of the village. There was no problem with the school or transportation: it was the fact that it would no longer be a village. Such planning problems are not easily spelt out in the Bill.

The large MOD site in my constituency is up for sale and about to be developed. It is in a large village—a small town of about 6,000. The site is on the edge of the village, sandwiched between the countryside and the canal. Again, the proposition is attractive because it is a brownfield site and building those houses would relieve pressure on the district council to build on green belt elsewhere, but it would change the nature of the village. We must examine carefully the infrastructure that is required and what will happen to the quality of life there.

I will not labour the point that was made by my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough, but there is vast scope for new homes in cities, if people want to live there. There is vast scope above shops and offices. I walk to work every day in this place along Rochester row; I have done so for some years. It is a fascinating street. It has empty, semi-derelict buildings. They are vast; there is an old police station there, too. We could probably house 200 or 300 people in there if there were the incentive to do so through taxation and planning policy.

We all have a stake in the quality of the countryside, no matter where we live. That means that we all have a stake in towns and cities, no matter where we live. The presumption behind the Bill is that we should squeeze expansion of households into urban areas. That would be to ignore the needs of some rural settlements—to do him justice, the hon. Member for Totnes recognised the point—to expand at the margins to maintain the mix of population and the micro-economy. It may be less damaging to develop in the countryside in that way than to allow a steady expansion of urban centres, which the green belt was set up to stop.

The level at which those complex and interacting consequences are best tackled is the regional level. It is not too fanciful to claim that the best argument for regional government is that for a regional strategy for land use. The Government cannot and should not instruct people where to live. To the millions whose idea of a decent life is living in a bustling urban environment, we owe the urban renaissance that Lord Rogers has outlined and that the Government are pledged to. To the fewer millions, whose idea of the good life is quiet, clean air, good schools and the small, tightly knit communities of rural areas, we must say that it is important to preserve that quality of life as best we can, but all our citizens are entitled to aspire to it and to have an equal chance of achieving it. The Bill would not help them.

1.2 pm

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): I listened with interest to the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Mr. Pickthall), whose speech caused me some concern. He spoke for just under half an hour. When a Labour Member does that on a private Member's Bill day, one knows that the Whips' fingerprints are on it. Indeed, I see one of them ensuring that other Members on the Government Benches talk the Bill out, although I am not sure whether they want to talk out this Bill or the one immediately afterwards, as they may by now have learned that attacks on the countryside and field sports do not work well for the Government.

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): Does my hon. Friend agree that, if the second is the tactic, it will be welcomed?

Mr. Baldry: Indeed, but, sadly, I suspect that the Whips' tactic is for Government Members to talk out this Bill, which would merit getting into Committee.

The hon. Member for West Lancashire talked about moving Government Departments to the regions. He represents a north-west constituency. He would do well to cajole the Government, whom he supports, supposedly, not to move those Departments to the regions, but—as is happening with the synchrotron project—to stop moving projects to the south-east. The Government are reinforcing the bottom-heavy aspects that he alluded to. There is concern among those of us who represent constituencies in the south-east about the inexorable pressure for housing in the region.

I commend the Bill. I am sorry only that my speech today will not attract as much attention, either locally or nationally, as my comments to the House yesterday, but the Bill is excellent.

Only this month, the overwhelming majority of residents in a village just outside Banbury called Bodicote voiced their concerns in a petition that I presented to

the House. It is a typical example of the pressures in the south-east. Bodicote has existed since the Domesday book; it has taken from then until now to reach 850 homes. Within two years, it is planned to build a further 1,100 homes in that village. That is simply unsustainable. Indeed, if I could afford it, I would love to send every Labour Member a copy of George Orwell's book "Coming up for Air" for them to reread. It is an illustration of how much of the home counties was built over during the 1930s and 1940s. Unless we take steps to mitigate those pressures, much of what is left of rural England will disappear under the same pressures.

Another problem is that much of the language is almost incomprehensible to the average elector and others. Mention is made of PPGs, regional planning guidance, structure plans and local plans. How on earth do we expect constituents to understand code terms such as PPG3? It is the only way that we can talk in this respect, however. In any event, there is much that I welcome in the new PPG3. It puts an end to predict-and-provide planning and replaces it with a more monitor-and-manage approach. That can only be good news. It introduces a sequential approach that places a presumption on using urban sites before rural ones, and requires urban capacity studies to be undertaken by local authorities. It improves quality and reduces land take, and favours urban extensions to new settlements. That provides a solid base for regional planning guidance. However, PPG3 has left unfinished business, which is important to good planning and which regional planning guidance should include.

I do not intend to talk in detail about the exact number of houses that the Government plan to impose on the south-east. They have settled on an unsatisfactory, split-the-difference compromise between Serplan and Crow. It will mean too much housing for a region that has already grown dramatically. Housing provision in my constituency has risen by 70 per cent. since the early 1970s. Between 1981 and 1996—a comparatively short period—the district of Cherwell grew by nearly 30 per cent. When in the history of our country has one seen that level of growth?

A recent cartoon, I think in *The Daily Telegraph*, showed a family opening a box of the board game, Monopoly. It was the south-east edition, and the family were buried under the miniature houses. That cartoon got it right. The Government have resolved on more house-building in the south-east than the region can sensibly bear. I do not think that they have listened to the legitimate concerns that have been voiced. More needs to be done to alter the approach that we take.

In a statement to the House earlier this month, the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions said:

> I am putting in place policies that will radically alter the way in which we build new homes in this country. I want an end to the wasteful, badly located and poorly designed house building that has gone on for the past 20 years.—[*Official Report*, 7 March 2000; Vol. 345, c. 863.]

To that end, apparently, the new PPG3 has been produced. Although I welcome elements of it, it does not radically alter the way in which we approach housing.

There is much in my hon. Friend's Bill to be commended. It is no more than plain and simple logic to require an assessment of local infrastructure. With regard to the effect of the PPG on Oxfordshire, for example, the road network in rural north Oxfordshire is already under considerable pressure and suffers from a lack of maintenance. The capacity of the three junctions on the M40 in my constituency already poses serious problems much of the time. Yet the plans for the south-east and for north Oxfordshire do not seem to take account of this plain and simple logic.

Had these measures been in place in addition to PPG3, an assessment would have shown that north Oxfordshire cannot cope with the increased demands on its roads, water, sewerage, waste, health and educational facilities. It would have shown that such house building cannot be sanctioned within the existing facilities without detriment to the quality of life of local communities.

The Bill would empower the bodies that are best placed to make such assessments—the local planning authorities. It would require any application to a local planning authority that is likely to have a significant impact on the existing infrastructure to be accompanied by an assessment of that impact. That seems a very sensible measure.

Sir Crispin Tickell has said that development should meet the needs of present generations without compromising the needs of future generations. Sustainable development obviously needs sustainable infrastructure. The Bill would ensure that planning permission would be granted only if necessary additional infrastructure could be provided without burdening the public purse. Part of north Oxfordshire's problem is that improvements in infrastructure have, inevitably, lagged behind where public funding has been required. For example, the Government's settlement to the county council results increasingly in failing roads all over our rural network.

A debate last year in the other place on the south-east regional planning committee—Serplan—showed where the Government are going wrong. Lord Whitty, Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, said:

> We are both concerned to see sustainable development at the centre of any plans for economic growth.

However, the Government blatantly ignore the genuine concerns of those who rely on the economic prosperity of the south-east. PPG3 brushes aside the congestion and pressures on services and infrastructure that the south-east is already experiencing. Instead, the Government pursue a policy intended to promote economic growth at the expense of quality of life. PPG3 will have the ultimate effect of choking off economic growth and preventing the south-east from realising its full economic potential.

The Bill would go a modest distance towards helping to avoid that. It would focus developers' attention on towns and cities in which infrastructure already exists and where tens of thousands of acres of land are not fully utilised. It would not choke areas, but would reduce the pressure for greenfield development in the countryside. PPG3 may aim to do that, but it misses the target in the south-east.

In the debate in the other place, the Under-Secretary said:

> There is general agreement that we cannot go on building in the laissez-faire pattern which has occurred in recent years, above all in the south-east.

We would all agree with that, but not allowing those who represent the south-east to have a say in what is imposed locally is much worse than laissez faire. That does not

[Mr. Baldry]

provide better resourcing for regional planning bodies that are running on a shoestring. It does not allow for better collection and monitoring of assessed projects. Nor does it increase resources given to forward planning and monitoring in local authorities. It makes no commitment to a new concordat with local planning authorities that would combine hand-holding and help during preparation of development plans with formal comment or objections where the guidance had not been followed.

As the Council for the Protection of Rural England points out, we cannot let a draft development plan proceed in 12 months' time without an urban capacity study. The Government have consistently been told that that will happen, but it will not if the Bill is enacted. In its 17th report, the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs said that it did not believe that regional bodies would have sufficient resources. The Government responded with woolly words, but did nothing.

In the other place, the Under-Secretary said:

> We may have to concentrate on more limited areas and a more structured approach.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 15 December 1999; Vol. 1798, c. 251.]

Surely a structured approach would require some timetable for planning in the south-east and a published action plan for implementation of PPG3.

No official summary has been offered of the significant shifts in policy, and no attention has been drawn to the changes required. Nor is there any intention to publish best practice guidance on key aspects or, as the CPRE notes, on urban capacity studies and existing land allocations. The Government have been told time and again that those things are needed. It is clear that the planning system will be unable to cope within the time scale envisaged in PPG3 and that it will struggle to produce structure plans and local plans to deliver proposed growth against inevitable public concern and opposition.

PPG3 has trumpeted the sequential approach, but what will be the major gain if it continues to put tremendous pressure on the green belt? My constituency has only 24 hectares of brownfield capacity. One does not have to be a planning expert to realise how little brownfield land is available in north Oxfordshire. Without Bills such as this one, PPG3 contains little that would ease the pressure on greenfield sites, on the green belt and on remaining green areas in countries such as Oxfordshire.

Many of the Bill's proposals would put responsibility into the hands of local authorities. I welcome that move, although it is disappointing that such ideas have not already fulfilled their potential. Two years ago, the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions told the House:

> Decentralisation is an essential aim of the Government.—[*Official Report*, 23 February 1998; Vol. 307, c. 22.]

However, that has not happened in planning. Local authorities are not being given the chance to make more local decisions.

The nub of my speech is that, on the one hand, we have a Government and a planning process using language such as PPG3, structure plans, county plans and local plans, while on the other hand, housing numbers are increasingly imposed on local communities from above. Local communities—local councils and villages—say, "Surely, we should be able to decide how fast and to what extent our towns and villages grow."

Communities in areas such as north Oxfordshire see more and more fields disappear—inexorably and irrevocably—under concrete, while, a few miles up the road in the west midlands, they see acres of empty, derelict brownfield sites that are not being developed. If we allow that process to continue as we move through the century, more and more of England will disappear under concrete. George Orwell's book "Coming up for Air" will apply not just to parts of the home counties, but to the whole of England.

The Government have not applied the imagination or vision needed to tackle the problem. It is most important that we adopt a policy in which local people decide on the extent to which their communities grow and on the amount of housing that is imposed on them.

1.17 pm

Dr. Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test): I congratulate the hon. Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen) on introducing this subject in a private Member's Bill. Many of us know of his sincerity and of his deep thought about the matter; he has demonstrated that today. Indeed, over many years, he has shown almost stakhanovite devotion to the issue—even during the period when his Government were producing opposite policies on cities, urban development and the planning process. If we were to base our decisions on the Bill on the person who is promoting it and on the sincerity and thinking that had gone into it and then apply those principles to all legislation, the statute book would look different. None the less, we are dealing with a Bill and that is what we must address.

It is no accident that the title of the Bill conflates the aims of urban regeneration and countryside protection. They represent the centre of the debate on land use; in urban regeneration, we bring about the protection of the countryside through the repopulation of the city. By building houses and amenities in urban areas, we roll back the trend for development in areas outside the urban zone. That is the context in which the great greenfield-brownfield debate has sprung up. If we can develop mostly on brownfield, previously used land, greenfield land can be saved from the development and the countryside will be safe.

There are two versions of that straightforward argument: one is simple, the other is complex. Both make similar claims on the surface; they agree on some headline actions, but their eventual aims are different. The simple version is as follows. Put everything on brownfield sites in cities—indeed, require development to take place only on brownfield sites except in exceptional circumstances. Then little development will take place outside cities and those who live in the country can continue to live their present pleasant lives, untroubled by further development or problems on their doorstep.

The complex version holds that the debate is actually about sustainability—the extent to which the ecosystem can continue to carry, provide a good standard of living for, and house in reasonable conditions, the population of the country as a whole, without in the process destroying or compromising the environment or the climate, bringing about irreversible and detrimental changes.

Those two versions look a bit like each other, but one is a general principle—what would a sustainable planning system that accommodated all of us look like?—and the other is a particular principle: how can the particular living conditions of some people be protected at the expense of others? My suggestion is that the Bill fits the latter description. That was not fully reflected by the way in which the hon. Member for Totnes presented it. The Bill provides particular solutions and is not capable of universalisation.

I shall argue that, ironically, such an approach is ultimately unsustainable, and the horrors from which it seeks to protect its particular constituency will, if its advice is followed, be visited upon that constituency, in the end, to a greater degree than if it had originally pursued a less particularistic strategy.

Some Labour Members have argued—I suspect that others will as well—that the Bill should not proceed, simply because it is unnecessary, as most of the things that it suggests should be done are already in train. That is a seductive argument, but not a sufficient argument in its own right. One might ask—indeed, it has been asked frequently in the debate—"If that were so, what is the harm in proceeding with the Bill? It would simply stand alongside, and possibly reinforce, what is there already." That is not a good reason for legislating, and it is, or would be, a waste of a valuable opportunity to place some good legislation on the statute book, but it is an arguable point.

I shall argue that there is a greater problem with this proposed legislation than the fact that it duplicates existing arrangements. When its promoter defends what is proposed, it should be incumbent on him to explain why he wants to place on the statute book something that has already been done. He claims that particular elements—we have heard this morning about one particular element—would be additional, but we need more explanation than that.

We have heard this morning some analysis, especially from my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr. Stinchcombe), of the duplication in the Bill. It is indeed striking. I shall not list every element of the Bill that duplicates existing planning policy guidance, but I shall point out that planning policy guidance requires local authorities and planning authorities to do things. Planning policy guidance documents are not simply good advice that may or may not be looked at. In every clause, there is a striking parallel with either PPG3 or, in some instances, PPG12.

The national land use database was mentioned. The criticisms levelled against that database, which is still at an early stage of its development, are not justified. The first Government statistical service information bulletin to be issued on the subject says that this is the first attempt to create such a database. Information has been produced, quite remarkably and co-operatively, by the vast majority of local planning authorities, but further information will be sought, developed and published on the database. It is estimated that the database has already received information about almost 16,000 hectares of previously developed land in England now lying vacant, and also—this is germane to arguments that hon. Members have made about remediation—about more than 17,000 hectares of derelict land that require some form of remediation.

Therefore the exercise has been a success, and the information is there. An important point that has emerged from the debate is that development of that national land use database, possibly to make it available at filling stations for 25p, would be a valuable way of ensuring that the information that is being collected is available at a local level so that decisions may be taken, but it would not require new primary legislation to allow that to happen. I hope that this debate will send the message that making such information available is possible and that it is a desirable way forward.

One of the most depressing factors in my dealings on the issue is that—despite the fact that all the material is there in planning policy guidance, the national land use database and changes in legislation—the concerns of people in the south-east about the direction and extent of housebuilding in that part of the world have been used by the Conservative party and other interests as a blunt instrument with which to bash the Government. To do that, those wielding the instrument have been forced to omit from their account most of the measures that have been taken or are being taken so that they can maintain the claim that a mad Government are hellbent on concreting over the whole of the south of England. Frankly, only if one completely ignores the existence of PPG3, the sequential test, the brownfield register, the targets for the use of previously built land, the capacity studies, the infrastructure tests and so on, can one really maintain that attack.

On the basis of my analysis, one can come to one of two conclusions about the Bill. The first is that its promoter did not know that such measures had been taken. We have heard an interesting explanation that the Government spotted the Bill and quickly put PPG3 into place. That is a conceivable, if not likely, explanation. The alternative conclusion is that the people who suggested the Bill to the promoter knew that such action had been taken, but wished to make out that the Bill is the only bulwark against a beastly Government who are determined to do terrible things to southern England. As has been made clear in the debate, that is not true.

However, can we leave it at that? Can we simply say that the Bill duplicates what the Government have already done? I do not think that we can, because the Bill's main fault lies in the mechanisms that it leaves out, and we have heard mention of them. To summarise, the Bill's approach to how we do things nationally might be described as the view from South Hams. It requires action from local planning authorities, and only local planning authorities. It lives in a world where all that is required is that a brownfield register is set up in each area, and only in each area. When a planning application comes in, the register is compared to the application rather like a swatch of curtain material against a paint sample and—hey presto—the greenfield site is saved. Reality does not work like that and if it did, the consequences would, as I have suggested, eventually be the opposite of what the Bill's promoter affects to intend.

A simple initial point is that the supply of brownfield land is by no means equal in all points of the country. Regrettably, it is by no means equal to the pressure for housing in those parts of the country where such pressure exists. It is instructive to learn from the national land use database that, although nearly 48 per cent. of all previously developed vacant and derelict land was in the north-west, north-east and Yorkshire and the Humber,

[Dr. Alan Whitehead]

only 22 per cent. was in the west midlands and the east midlands. In the remaining regions, only 7 per cent. was in the east of England, 10 per cent. in the south-west, 10 per cent. in the south-east and in London, only 4 per cent. There is an enormous disparity between where the brownfield land is situated and where the pressure for housing exists.

Urban areas are not coterminous with local authority boundaries. If one is serious about planning housing so that it is mainly developed in urban areas, one has to start from a proper understanding of what an urban area is. We can say what is urban when it comes to the inner areas of large conurbations, such as London, Manchester or Birmingham, but I am not sure that we can say the same about smaller free-standing cities such as Southampton, Plymouth, Leicester, Nottingham. In those and many other areas, the real urban zone—the organic city—extends beyond the boundaries of the city council.

Southampton, the city that I represent, has a dense urban core, and the real city has perhaps twice the population and several times the area of that core. The suburbs, which are associated with the city and dependent on it for jobs, entertainment, shopping and other activities, are under the jurisdiction of another local authority. The Bill does not take that into account.

Each local authority, such as Southampton, Eastleigh and the New Forest in my part of the world, will conduct the study and look up the site register. What will happen then? Will it reject a proposal because there is no site? Will it go ahead with it when it might be better to take into account land in the city zone as a whole? That is why we need an element of regional and structural planning, which is apparently missing from this mechanism. A major fault of the Bill is that it uses the word "urban" without defining it or what role urban zones are to play, and says that all housing can, in some general undefined way, be built in those zones.

Furthermore, the Bill seems to envisage each local authority wrestling with these problems in isolation from all the others. That echoes what seems increasingly to be the Conservative line that every local authority decides on development in splendid isolation and seeks to send it elsewhere, regardless of the consequences.

I am reminded of an epiphany that occurred at a meeting that I spoke at in Southwater near Horsham. Various campaigning groups had banded together and proudly announced at the end of the evening that they would stop all development. The chairman was substantially on their side, but had to remind them that, logically, they could not all win. That is the central flaw in the Bill.

The urban regeneration to which the Bill's title refers requires much more care in its progress than is entailed by simple urban cramming. That may look good to rural or semi-rural dwellers for a while but, if the city is crammed and there are no amenities, no sites for jobs, no open space and no reasons to stay, eventually it will surely spill over into its rural surroundings, to the detriment of all. We need sustainable urban regeneration, which requires much more care than is apparent from the mechanisms in the Bill. The report by Lord Rogers's task force, many of whose recommendations have already found their way into planning policy guidance, admirably underlines that fact.

In locating new developments in free-standing cities, we should try as far as possible to develop land that has already been used, but what will happen? Some previously used land is in the middle of nowhere. Do we use that land? We have already had a debate today about whether brownfield means urban sites. The hon. Member for Totnes said that a simple amendment to the Bill could include brownfield sites in non-urban areas. However, that would cause a separate problem.

If the eternal sequential tests suggested by the Bill are applied to local authorities in rural areas, we may well develop brownfield sites that are unsustainable. A number of former airfields, mental hospitals and Ministry of Defence sites are in the middle of nowhere, have no links with any urban zone and are not urban extensions. If we put housing on those sites, they would simply become dormitories with long transport extensions that people would use to drive into the city in an unsustainable way. The Bill appears to suggest that in some circumstances we might do worse than we would if we tried to develop in urban zones under existing provisions.

Serious, sustainable urban planning should consist of planned urban extensions, close to existing amenities and with short, sustainable transport patterns. However, those may occupy greenfield sites, while the unsustainable communities in the middle of nowhere would occupy brownfield sites, and the Bill logically suggests that we choose the latter.

Is building of any sort in rural areas to be stopped because the place is not urban and there are no greenfield sites? Of course we should seek to develop within the footprint of existing built communities, but that is not what the Bill says. If we simply shut up shop, particularly for affordable housing in rural communities, the social effects will be catastrophic. Only the very rich will be able to afford to live in those green havens. I imagine that they will want their houses and cars repaired, their drains cleared, their ride-on mowers serviced and their golf courses maintained. However, no one earning the kind of income available from those jobs will be able to live near enough to do them. Maybe the villagers will club together to bus people in from the nearest city once a month. I hope that I never see that scenario.

The Bill is not just a duplication of what is already there. It goes beyond that, by replacing a well-worked-out national, regional and local partnership in planning with what turns out to be a simplistic and ultimately self-defeating mechanism that might well play well in South Hams, but would be a disastrous wrong turn for our nation were it to be implemented across the country. I urge the House not to give the Bill a Second Reading.

1.35 pm

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): It is always a daunting experience to follow the learned doctor, the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr. Whitehead), as I have done so often in Select Committees. He used terms like "stakhanovite"to describe the tendencies of previous speakers. I am sure that he knows what a stakhanovite tendency is, but I certainly do not. Most of the rest of his

speech was extraordinarily learned and reasonably well argued, if a little beyond the immediate ken of some of my constituents.

Dr. Whitehead: The word "stakhanovite" comes from the Soviet coal miner Stakhanov, who hewed more coal in one day than any other Soviet miner in history and, as a result, was given the Order of Lenin.

Mr. Gray: I am grateful to the learned hon. Gentleman for putting me right on that subject. My contribution will be less elevated and perhaps less elegant than his.

I wish to speak on behalf of my constituents and others across England who are concerned about this issue—people such as those in Broxtowe in Nottinghamshire, who showed their concern last night by throwing out the Labour-controlled council and replacing it with a Conservative council on a 13 per cent. swing, which, if replicated in a general election, would return the constituency to Conservative control.

I broadly accept and welcome the principles of PPG3, which follows the principles laid down by my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer), who put in place the original PPG3 and changed Conservative policy on planning. We who first put the principles in place are preserving the countryside. I am pleased that the Government have followed those principles.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen) for choosing this subject for his Bill. It is good that he opened up the debate, and I hope that the Government will listen carefully today and then, I hope, in Committee.

What we do in the next 20 years in terms of building in England will be with us for 1,000 years. Truly, this is a millennium issue. Archaeologists and town planners will look back 1,000 years from now and will talk about what we are doing in terms of planning today, in the same way that we very often talk critically about our predecessors in the 19th century and earlier.

Mr. Tom King: People talk as though this is the final plan, but this is the plan until 2011 or 2016. The indication is that the plan thereafter is to do it all again. When one reflects on that, one realises how critical this issue is. My hon. Friend was a little dismissive of PPG3, which failed to mention more about affordable housing and infrastructure provision—two key elements that must be taken into account in any further planning and development.

Mr. Gray: My right hon. Friend makes some powerful points. We are discussing not simply a process that will stop in 2011, but what will happen thereafter. Unless we get the principles right now and lay down the way in which we want to live on this small island of ours, future generations will not thank us.

It is worth reflecting on some of the correct principles that the Bill attempts to address. First, it is right that there should be equality of economic prosperity across the United Kingdom—it is not right that there should be economic prosperity here in the south-east, in my own area towards the south-west and in other parts of England, while we remain perfectly content to allow less prosperity, or greater poverty, in the north of England and in Scotland and Wales. Our planning policies must lay down ways to establish equality of opportunity across the country. I am sure that many hon. Members on both sides would agree.

Secondly, we must find ways to revive our inner cities. The Bill goes some way toward achieving that. In Paris, the inner city is elegant, well-built and prosperous, whereas the outer city is less prosperous. We have generally done it the other way around and allowed our inner cities to decline. That must be reversed. I suspect that there is agreement on that principle as well.

Thirdly, we must preserve the nature of our small market towns. I am concerned that towns in Wiltshire such as Chippenham, Malmesbury, Wootton Bassett and Corsham may be engulfed by new housing—often homes in the "executive style", which is an expression I dislike intensely—almost all occupied by commuters into Swindon, Bath and Bristol. We must find ways to preserve the character and nature of market towns while accommodating economic prosperity.

Fourthly, we must save the countryside, both as the primary area of food production and for its amenity value. Just about everyone would agree with those four principles of development. However, my fifth principle of planning policy is more controversial—deliberately so. The presumption is made that it is the nation's duty to provide the quality and the type of housing that people want, in the place that they want it and at a price that they can afford to pay for it. The first part of that statement is fair enough, but I question whether the rest is a reasonable aim of planning policy.

Should we provide the desired quantity and type of housing that people want where they want it and at the price they can afford? We do not do so at present—one only has to look at Mayfair. We think it perfectly acceptable that the smallest property—a bedsit—in Mayfair costs £1 million; no one says that we should change planning policy to ensure that housing is available in Mayfair for all who want it. However, when we discuss the rest of the south-east of England, we appear to accept the necessity of providing the type and quality of housing that people want, where they want it and at the price they can afford. That presumption is exactly what leads to the trickle-down effect currently seen in planning: we state how many houses we need and where we need them.

Dr. Whitehead: The difference between Mayfair and south-east England is that one can still afford to live relatively close to Mayfair, whereas commuting distances in south-east England, were the entire region to become unaffordable, would mean that no one was able to get where they needed to go, whether to work or for some other reason.

Mr. Gray: The hon. Gentleman is correct. I was using Mayfair as an extreme example of a general principle, which is that, if we accept that it is right to provide affordable housing, we create a self-fulfilling prophecy. We in the south-east are prosperous, so we build more factories; we find that we have not enough houses for the people who work in those factories, so we build more houses. Then, we have lots of people, but some of those factories disappear, so more businesses have to be brought in to employ the people. In the meantime, huge factories lie empty in other parts of England, such as the north-east and north-west, poverty increases in such areas and they have a housing surplus.

[Mr. Gray]

We must ask ourselves whether it is right to provide the number of houses people want at a price that they can afford to pay. Perhaps it is not right. Perhaps we should engage to a greater extent in social engineering—an unpleasant expression, but apt—in an effort to spread prosperity throughout the nation and to reduce congestion in the south-east.

Mr. Letwin: My hon. Friend has identified the kernel of the issue, but does he agree that the problem is even more severe than he describes because, as prosperity grows, there could be an almost limitless demand for second homes? On the thesis that he correctly exposes as that which underlies the Government's present policies, we could presumably build 20 million second homes all over the countryside.

Mr. Gray: The problem that my hon. Friend describes is particularly potent in his area, Dorset, and mine—

Mr. Tom King: And in Somerset.

Mr. Gray: And, as my right hon. Friend reminds me, in Somerset, where there are large numbers of second homes. In-comers seeking second homes, particularly in the west of England, create huge pressure. That problem must be addressed.

On the question whether we must give people the sort of homes that they need in the place that they need them, and the suggestion that that may not be a moral obligation, I would make an exception in the case of the sons and daughters of local people who wish to continue to live in the same area. That is perfectly reasonable. There should be affordable lower-cost housing, for which the exceptions policy in PPG3 allows, so that local people can live in those areas. That does not mean executive-style homes for commuters to move into.

Mr. Letwin: Does my hon. Friend agree that there is a problem with such affordable housing? We do not live in a totalitarian state, thank goodness, and once houses are built, it is not easy to ensure that they are always occupied by the people for whom they were designed.

Mr. Gray: It is by no means easy to ensure that that is the case, but if that were a principle underlying the planning system, there would at least be a presumption that local authorities might find a way of doing it.

To some extent, when the Conservatives were in government we put that idea in place by ensuring that the right to buy would not apply to housing associations in settlements of less than a certain size, to make sure that we maintained affordable rented housing in some of our smaller villages. That is a worthwhile principle, although my hon. Friend is right.

In Malmesbury, a highly desirable Cotswold stone town in my constituency, for example, there are so many outsiders coming in that the smallest house costs a fortune, so local people must move a long way away. We must get away from that phenomenon, and one way of doing so would be by writing a principle relating to affordable housing into the planning policy, although I accept my hon. Friend's point that it may be difficult to work out how to do that.

That brings me to a more general point. Under our present planning system, some faceless bureaucrats somewhere come up with the number of houses that we will need. My hon. Friend the Member for Totnes questioned the basis for those projections and he is right to do so. Nevertheless, the figure produced by the faceless bureaucrats is divided, broadly speaking, by the number of counties in England. Each county is told that it must take X number of houses, the county then divides them up among the district councils, and it ends up with North Wiltshire district council being told that it must take 12,000 houses.

That takes no account whatever of the need in North Wiltshire, the economic prosperity in North Wiltshire, or the land available in North Wiltshire. It takes no account of anything at all, apart from some central stakhanovite civil servant who says that, by a process of arithmetic that is always too complicated for him to understand, North Wiltshire will take 12,000 houses. The fact that those houses might be needed more elsewhere is ignored.

That brings me baek to the economic equality argument. Here, I risk trespassing on a number of very worthwhile businesses, which want to develop in areas such as mine, where there is already low unemployment. I would argue that that is not necessarily helpful. We do not necessarily need the Showell industrial park just south of Chippenham, because Chippenham has almost zero unemployment.

By building a huge new business park, we invite lots of new entrepreneurial businesses, which is great economically, and bring in lots more people. Meanwhile, in the north of England and elsewhere, large areas of factory space and housing are empty and there is general economic decline. Only by being more controlling through the planning system can we encourage businesses to go to areas that need the business more. That brings me back to the Bill.

The planning system is centrally controlled. The Government run it, and decisions trickle down to the people who have to live with the consequences. We should reverse the process and tell local people that their representatives—district, county and parish councillors—will determine their economic necessities; that they will decide what land they have available; and that they will know the sort of people who look for housing and will therefore know the sort of housing that is needed in the area. If the result of that democratic process is fewer houses in, for example, North Wiltshire, than the faceless bureaucrats in Whitehall tell us that we need, so be it. We can force business and housing into the areas that have the requisite capacity only by such means.

I fear that I have one or two minor worries about the Bill. I have warned my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes about that. It is a good Bill, because it focuses attention on crucial matters. However, I am worried about the production of the register of vacant land. It is important to know the location of vacant land, but I am concerned that it would be easy to believe that a list and a map of vacant land would solve the problem. The problem could be solved by other means, which I shall describe, but the mere production of a register would not resolve it. Indeed, it might make matters worse, because many civil servants might tell themselves that producing the register, keeping it up to date and making it available to the public would somehow make life better. That is not necessarily the case.

We do not need to make registers—that is the old Stalinist, centralised way. We must give people incentives to build on vacant land and provide disincentives for not building on it. Other suggestions occur. We have discussed the differential in VAT between new build and refurbishment. We must correct that; I believe that it should be zero, the figure that Lord Rogers proposed. Otherwise we are considering a tax on housing, which I could not contemplate supporting. We must find a way of equalising the VAT.

A vacant land tax is worth considering. If someone chooses to keep land vacant for no particular reason, perhaps he should be taxed on it. We could consider a council tax on empty homes. It is possibly right to pay a little extra on a house that is kept empty for lengthy periods for no particular reason. In that context, I agree with the comments of the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath), who talked about flats above shops and the Empty Homes Agency. Both were initiatives of the previous Conservative Government.

I do not support a greenfield tax, but we could possibly consider a tax on building on greenfield sites. However, my inclination is that that is not the best policy because it would give the builders an incentive to build larger and more expensive homes to eat up the tax that was charged on them.

Compulsory purchase orders on brownfield sites in inner-city areas were mentioned. We must find ways to improve the CPO system so that developers can lay their hands on large parcels of land owned by a variety of owners, many of whom will have disappeared.

We should restrict greenfield development. If we do that, we are not following the slightly bureaucratic route that my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes proposes in the Bill, but harnessing the natural instincts and strengths of the private sector. We should tell developers that we have proposals that will help them to make a profit by making use of vacant land. We should encourage businesses to go to areas where they are needed, not to areas such as mine where they are not needed as much. We should harness the energies of the private sector, encourage development where it ought to happen in our great nation and discourage it where it should not, namely on greenfield sites.

I welcome the broad thrust and principles of the Bill. It is a fine measure. I hope that the Government will give good time for its consideration in Committee and that they do not try to talk it out today. We shall note carefully the amount of time that the Minister takes to reply. We hope that she sits down at twenty-nine and a half minutes past two o'clock. We look forward to that. The Government must not talk out such a valuable Bill.

Some serious work needs to be done to improve the aspects that I have described. By and large, the principles behind the Bill are sound. The Conservative party has always subscribed to them. I am sure that an incoming Conservative Government—the result in Broxtowe last night encouraged me to believe that that may be around the corner—will give effect to those principles.

1.55 pm

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas (Harrow, West): I welcome the opportunity to follow the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray). I share his views on the need for equality of economic opportunity around the regions, although I suspect that our opinions on the helpful impact of regional development agencies, which are beginning to be part of the solution to the problem of the delivery of that equality of opportunity, are slightly different.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen). I have had warm feelings towards him this week because as part of my research for Monday's debate on access to the countryside and the right to roam I read his contribution to the debate on the Dartmoor Commons Act 1985, which he piloted through the House. He stood out against the pressure applied by the Country Landowners Association against opening up access and delivered an effective right to roam across Dartmoor. I relish the opportunity to support the Bill's aspirations, which he described so well in his opening remarks.

Who could not want to protect greenfield sites from development if brownfield sites exist? Who could not want to champion the regeneration of urban areas? It seems entirely sensible to focus developers' minds on derelict, vacant, under-used and under-utilised buildings and to recognise that infrastructure such as access to general practitioners' surgeries, schools and so on is needed to support housing developments.

My constituency is an example of suburban splendour at its finest and the countryside creeps in at the top end, in Pinner Green and Hatch End. There is a strong community and village feel to parts of my area and green open space is cherished as much in my constituency as it clearly is in that of the hon. Gentleman. A powerful example of that point is the campaign to prevent field and recreation ground being developed under Hillingdon council's proposal to stick some 100 houses on open land cherished by people in Roxbourne, Rayners Lane and South Harrow in my constituency. That successful campaign used an argument similar to the point made about infrastructure in clause 7.

As well as cherishing the open space in my constituency, people in Harrow recognise the great pressure of housing need to find sites for new housing in the area. The hon. Gentleman and others talked about the 3.8 million new homes and where to put them and we could usefully have explored the type of stock that we need. Should it be executive, affordable or social housing? I contend that affordable and social housing must be the priority. Although I recognise that there is a balance to be struck, discussion of how to deliver affordable and social housing stock has been absent from the debate.

To show the seriousness of that omission, 1,251 households in my borough had been accepted as homeless by the end of December 1999, 126 were in bed and breakfast accommodation and our total housing need is for 2,268 households. That graphically illustrates the housing pressures in my borough. The problem is reflected throughout London as 184,000 households are on waiting lists, 6,500 people are in bed and breakfast accommodation and the use of temporary accommodation has risen by 30 per cent. across the city.

On 1 March in Westminster Hall, my hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton (Mr. Love) made the telling point that the average price for a London house is now some £159,000. On average, first-time buyers have to pay £120,000. That clearly has an impact on public sector professionals, as is evidenced by the skills shortage in London. My right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn

[Mr. Gareth R. Thomas]

and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson), the Labour candidate in the London mayoral election, has rightly identified it as a key problem.

The issue of housing density is missing from the Bill. We should consider that, and also the need to refurbish and redevelop the housing stock that is available. In my constituency, the Rayners Lane estate is in particular need of refurbishment.

The Bill's aspirations are laudable, but, as others have pointed out, the new PPG3 and the new national land use database have already achieved its key aims. As for infrastructure, we already have PPG12, which recognises its crucial importance. I think that we would be better to stick to PPG3 and the land use database than to introduce a Bill which I think will only cause problems and confusion for local authorities. I welcome what the hon. Member for Totnes seeks to achieve, but I think that it is already being achieved by existing Government policy.

2.2 pm

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): As I recently detained the House through the night at the Dispatch Box, it is perhaps appropriate for me to speak for only two minutes today. I want to make two points, each of which will occupy one of those minutes.

My first point was alluded to by my right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King). The Bill must be seen in the context of not just the current plans, but the fact that they are to continue. In my area in Dorset, which is not untypical of the south-west, the provision of housing is increasing by about 64 per cent. in the period 1981 to 2021. That rate of increase would give us 700,000 new houses—1 million in Dorset as a whole—by the 22nd century. If any hon. Member is under the misapprehension that that is socially or environmentally tolerable, he or she should think again about what it would mean. In fact, it would mean adding approximately seventyfold to Dorchester, the main town in my constituency.

Anyone who knows a rural area will realise that we face not merely a problem, but the onset of an environmental catastrophe, and in that context I welcome the Bill. However—this constitutes no criticism of my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen)—I regard it as a small, timorous step on an extremely long journey involving major and radical measures, some of which have been mentioned by my hon. Friends.

In particular—this is my second, and very brief, point—I think that we will have to reverse the burden of proof. We shall need to create a symmetrical planning system, in which it is no longer the case that only the developer can appeal—and usually, if he is rich enough, prevail—against the local authority. We need a system in which local residents too can appeal, and sometimes prevail, against the developer. Until we achieve that symmetry, I do not believe that we shall be able to feel that the planning system is fair to our environment or to local people, or have a means of checking the helter-skelter development to which I have referred.

2.4 pm

Mr. Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham): We have had a first-class debate. I have learned a lot, and I think that others have as well. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen), not least on his prescience in coming up with the Bill well ahead of the publication of PPG3 by the Deputy Prime Minister.

My hon. Friend is something of an expert on the subject, and has been for many years. Mention was made earlier of his booklet, entitled "Plums" and first published in 1988 by the Conservative Political Centre. It is a masterpiece; I believe that copies can still be obtained from the Conservative Policy Forum, as it now is.

We believe that the Bill contains much of merit, and we greatly hope that it will go into Committee. There has been an impressive array of knowledgable speakers in the debate. Great talent, gravitas, bottom and depth has been shown by the many contributions. The hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) rightly drew attention to the problems of nationwide integration and the pressure on developers to make adequate provision for transport. She also said that it was short-sighted of the Government to site synchrotron in the south rather than in the northern part of England.

The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) made an interesting contribution, with his reference to the Vincent van Gogh impressionism of the promoter of the Bill and his interesting talk about the Maoist red guard. He rightly and appositely said that children should be able to live in the communities in which they were born and brought up. That is certainly a problem in many rural areas, particularly in his constituency, as I know.

The hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr. Stinchcombe) made a knowledgeable and thoughtful contribution, and has obviously had many years of experience in planning law. He said that he had warm feelings toward the Bill, although at times they seemed to become rather arctic. He had some interesting views on the better use of land, and alluded to the report by Lord Rogers, although it should be pointed out that the Government have taken up only one of the proposals in the urban renaissance report.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell), with his customary skill and expertise on this subject, said that what the Government need, despite PPG3, is a statutory prod in this direction. That is exactly what the Bill attempts to provide. I was also interested in the comments of the hon. Member for Warrington, North (Helen Jones), who referred to resentment in the middle ages about Chester cathedral being plonked in the middle of her home town. Mediaeval town planners have much to commend them to Ministers today. The principle of walk to worship in the middle ages by siting houses around the church or cathedral as the centre of the community has lessons for today's transport systems.

My hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) rightly said that the problem with the whole housing issue is that, as it is put to us at the moment, everything cascades down from the demand for 3.8 million houses that we are told that we need, and that will be to the detriment of the south-east of England.

The hon. Member for West Lancashire (Mr. Pickthall) made some interesting comments about contamination. I believe that not enough is being done about that. My hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry) rightly said that we need a policy whereby local people can decide how their communities grow. He knows much about that subject. It is absolutely right to empower local communities, and that view was echoed by my hon.

Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray), who is also an expert from his time as an adviser in the Department of the Environment and as a member of the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs.

Attracting houses and businesses to the south-east corner of the country has a magnet effect. It brings more people to the area, which creates further skill shortages and a shortage of housing space, thus driving up house prices. It is a catch-22 situation.

If the Government are true to their word—especially if the Deputy Prime Minister is true to some of his more articulate words when he presented PPG3 and the response to the Crow report earlier this month—they should support the Bill and work constructively with my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes to bring about many of the improvements that he wants.

In his statement to the House on 7 March, the Deputy Prime Minister spoke about giving preference to recycling previously developed sites. He said that housing must be more affordable, and that we must promote mixed use developments. That is exactly what the Bill aims to do. Above all, my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes recognises that maximising better use of derelict land primarily in urban areas brings mutual benefits to both town and country. It is not a one-way street.

The first two clauses deal with local authority urban capacity studies, which will be revised from time to time, and the audit of derelict, vacant and under-used land. They extend the work of the NLUD—the national land use database—which was first published last year. It revealed that brownfield sites identified so far could accommodate more than 325,000 new dwellings at current density levels. There is doubt, however, about what constitutes brownfield land. We need to define usable brownfield land. The Government have some work to do there. The Bill would help.

Recently, the leader of Bromsgrove council pointed out that identified brownfield sites included a disused railway station in the green belt and a smouldering landfill tip—hardly sites that will be used for building houses. Where brownfield site studies identify railway car parks as potential housebuilding land, again, that surely will interfere with the programme of nodeing transport links and encouraging an integrated transport policy, about which we hear so much.

Clause 3 is about local authorities having regard to urban capacity. There is merit in the clause. It will allow better scrutiny of applications involving planning gain. Too often, local authorities pocket a cheque from developers who want to build unsuitable executive homes, or a do-it-yourself retail centre, for example, in return for funding a new leisure centre, despite the fact that the area is crying out for affordable starter homes and is already prone to rush-hour congestion.

I cut to clause 7, which is particularly interesting and important. It deals with infrastructure, an especially moot point in the south-east of England, where my constituency is located, and in West Sussex, which is to have about 60,000 new houses, which is why the county council took the Deputy Prime Minister to the High Court: that is simply not sustainable. It is a question not of plonking 60,000 concrete boxes on the countryside, but of overcrowded schools, the longest waiting times for diminishing hospitals, a lack of roads and east-west access across the counties of Sussex and, in particular, a lack of water supply, due to the downs in the two Sussex counties. Too much building has involved sprawling estates with no sense of community or community heart, lacking new schools, community centres, mixed shopping and mixed occupancy.

When I asked the Deputy Prime Minister for details of what account had been taken of the requirements of schools and hospitals in my county, he was found lacking. It seems odd that we can predict all the new houses that will be required, but that no work has been done about the infrastructure requirements and planning that will be needed to go with them.

Government inaction and, in particular, the Deputy Prime Minister's inability to back up his hot air about putting the environment at the heart of Government by securing real financial commitments from his colleagues, particularly the Chancellor, make the Bill even more necessary. On 21 February, we were told:

> the deputy prime minister met the chancellor yesterday to urge him to introduce value added tax on new housing to encourage developers to modernise old buildings rather than build new ones.
>
> Mr. Prescott wants next month's Budget to impose a tax on the construction of new homes on greenfield sites. The move would be accompanied by a cut in VAT on refurbishment.

What did we get in the Budget?—a big fat zero. We still have 17.5 per cent. VAT on brownfield refurbishment. We are promised at best a study into preferential stamp duty for brownfield development. Stamp duty at 1 per cent. on properties of less than £250,000 is no substitute for 17.5 per cent. VAT. The figures do not add up. In the Budget, precious little money for transport has been hypothecated from the rise in road fuel duties.

Yet again, the Deputy Prime Minister has failed to make his mark on a Budget. Perhaps he should have sussed by now the tactics of No. 10 Downing street in sending him abroad at a sensitive time around the Budget: last year, it was the Maldives and India; this year, a rather strange trip to Rio.

In conclusion, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes on the immense amount of work that he has done, not just in the past few weeks and months, but over many years in his two decades in the House. The Bill makes a good contribution to what everyone agrees is a very important debate. It has been made all the more necessary by the increasing failure of the Deputy Prime Minister to have any influence on the Chancellor on the need to take the environment more seriously. I urge the Minister to have the courage of her convictions and to let the Bill undergo the closer scrutiny of a Standing Committee.

2.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Beverley Hughes): I agree with the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) that this has been an interesting and informative debate. I thank the hon. Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen) for presenting his Bill, and I thank my hon. Friends, and Opposition Members, for their contributions. The hon. Member for Totnes said that this was the first time that he had presented a private Member's Bill. It is a particular pity, therefore, that on this occasion the Government cannot support it. I shall clarify why that is so.

[Ms Beverley Hughes]

Some of the reasons for our response became apparent in the debate. I fully accept the hon. Gentleman's expertise and long-term interest in the subject. Indeed, it has been referred to as his hobby-horse. However, some of the speeches by Conservative Members showed that this was not so much a hobby horse for them as a Trojan horse—something through which to bring in their own, not very well hidden, agenda of clothing in statute the "not in my backyard" mentality that some of them support. They are using the Bill not as a way of dealing seriously with the complex and multi-faceted issues that are inherent in the question of how to provide housing for our people in the future, but as a mechanism to prevent any further building of homes in their own areas, irrespective of the needs of local people.

Conservative Members also showed a failure to comprehend the difference between plan, monitor and manage and predict and provide. That is a crucial issue, because they fail to take into account the real world in which people's behaviour over time does not necessarily conform to the science of prediction—which, as many hon. Members have said, is in any case an inexact science. The plan, monitor and manage process is designed to take the real world, changing circumstances and changing behaviour, into account.

We also saw the failure of Conservative Members to understand planning law and the role of planning guidance, which was so ably explained to them by my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr. Stinchcombe).

Mr. Letwin: Does the Minister think that there are, from a national rather than a NIMBY point of view, limits on the amount of house building in the countryside? If so, what are they?

Ms Hughes: The limits are constraints imposed by physical structure and by all the issues that hon. Members have mentioned, including infrastructure. The planning process has to take those constraints into account. That is the purpose of the plan-led approach to housing development that the previous Government failed to develop when they had the opportunity, but that this Government are serious about strengthening. It is the only way to have a consistent, relevant and coherent approach to the many difficult and complex issues that are inherent in the question of how to provide housing for our people in the future.

On a superficial reading, the Bill might seem reasonable. Indeed, I accept that many of its underlying objectives are reasonable. They are consistent with Government policy, which already covers many of the objectives that the Bill sets out.

I am not unsympathetic to the Bill's objectives, but some of our objections to it have been outlined ably by my hon. Friends the Members for Warrington, North (Helen Jones) and for West Lancashire (Mr. Pickthall). First, the Bill duplicates the policy that the Government are implementing through PPG3. Secondly, it would confuse local authorities because it is imprecise and some of its requirements are too general. Thirdly, that imprecision results in proposals that would be impossible to put into operation.

The fourth objection is the most important. As the hon. Member for Totnes has said, other issues could be dealt with by redrafting, but we object to the Bill in principle. My hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Test (Dr. Whitehead) identified a fundamental disagreement about the need for legislation on those matters. It is ironic that Opposition Members contorted their principled opposition to legislation in general to argue that statute is necessary in this case. We feel that legislation is not necessary and that it would not be the most efficient and effective way to achieve objectives that we share with the hon. Member for Totnes.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: Does the Minister agree that one of the Bill's central objectives, detailed in clause 2, is that each local planning authority should

prepare and publish an audit of derelict, vacant, under-used and under-utilised buildings and land in their area?

Can she assure us that PPG3 will achieve that?

Ms Hughes: I shall come to clause 2 in a moment. I shall not have time to deal with every clause, but shall discuss the major clauses addressed by hon. Members.

Clause 1 relates to urban housing capacity studies. The Government are in favour of such studies by local planning authorities. PPG3, which is already in force, requires authorities to undertake urban housing capacity studies as part of their development plan reviews. Some authorities have already undertaken studies. I agree that authorities need to be proactive if they are fully to implement the policy framework of PPG3.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr. Stinchcombe) made clear, local planning authorities already have general powers under the Town and Country Planning Acts to undertake surveys for development plans. No further enabling power is needed. The difference between Government policy and the Bill is that the hon. Member for Totnes wants such studies to be a statutory requirement. The Local Government Association and the Planning Officers Society have demonstrated to our satisfaction that that is not necessary, not because we can trust them, but because planning law does not require it. The guidance in PPG3 is sufficient because it requires planning authorities to produce urban housing capacity studies and to release sites for housing sequentially. We do not support the use of statute when we can achieve our objectives through partnerships between local regional planning bodies and central Government.

Clause 2 proposes audits of

derelict, vacant, under-used and under-utilised buildings and land.

That has already happened. English local planning authorities have already made returns for the national land use database, which gathers information annually. The database is the most comprehensive audit of previously used land and buildings ever undertaken in England. Conservative Members make protestations and express concern but now, when we came into power, it was an enormous shock to find that the previous Government, who had stressed their concern, in theory, for greenbelt land—although they did not deliver it in practice—had no way of knowing about the potential for building on brownfield, previously used land. They kept no record of that information, either nationally or locally.

Although NLUD is compiled on a voluntary basis, the response rate and co-operation of local authorities has been remarkable—more than 95 per cent. That impressive

record shows the commitment of local planning authorities to making progress on identifying the potential for using brownfield land.

Mr. Steen: I am extremely sorry that the Minister will not support the Bill. That is a terrible mistake; it makes me very upset. We have put much work into the Bill; it is the right way to proceed. As the years go by, we shall see whether she is right.

The important point was made by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell): will local authorities publish the records that they produce for NLUD?

Mr. Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West): The Domesday book.

Mr. Steen: Indeed. Will that information about derelict, vacant, dormant land be available locally—in service stations or libraries? That is the important issue.

Ms Hughes: I shall answer the hon. Gentleman's question in a moment. I do not agree that that is the important issue. What is important is that we have a national picture, which is as complete and as accurate as possible, of the location of previously used buildings and land that can be built on. If local authorities want to publish such information locally, they can do so, but the true imperative is that the national picture is as complete as possible.

The hon. Gentleman said that he wants every local authority to feel responsible for identifying and releasing such land. We agree. However, the mechanism that he wants to introduce—making it a requirement for individual local authorities to do so—would have several disadvantages.

It would not produce the quality of information that we receive from the national register; nor would it produce information with the consistency that we can ask for through the register. The quality of information acquired simply through the summation of those local publications would be fundamentally different from that in a nationally co-ordinated register.

In response to some of the questions from Opposition Members, let me say that the national register will indeed produce details of ownership. That will not constrain publication. The information will be available on a website; each site will include an address, land-use decisions—including outstanding permissions, the area and size of the land and details of whether the ownership is private or public. The website will not name the owner, but it will designate the ownership.

The right hon. and learned Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell) said that we needed a nice, straightforward register—that is what we shall have. This is the first year in which we have used the process; it is still developing. We shall extend our requirements for information so that we create a complete and effective national database.

That is the way forward. We neither want nor need piecemeal information that local authorities produce for themselves. We want a comprehensive national picture of the potential for building on brownfield land. That is what NLUD does. Every local authority has participated, exhibiting an unprecedented degree of co-operation. That is a good example of local authorities and Government working together. To get local authorities on side is the only way to produce an effective database.

Several Members referred to infrastructure. Opposition Members will not find infrastructure in PPG3, because it is in PPG12, issued in December 1999. PPG12 explicitly recognises that the provision of infrastructure is very important in development, especially major new developments, and explicitly says that by "infrastructure" we do mean all those issues that the hon. Member for Totnes raised—education, health, community facilities—

It being after half-past Two o'clock, the debate stood adjourned.

Debate to be resumed on Friday 19 May.

Remaining Private Members' Bills

HARE COURSING BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

To be read a Second time on Friday 7 April.

RECYCLED CONTENT OF NEWSPRINT BILL

Read a Second time, and committed to a Standing Committee, pursuant to Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of Bills).

ROAD TRAFFIC BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

To be read a Second time on Friday 7 April.

Iraq

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

2.31 pm

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): From Reuters, Vatican City, 21 March 2000:

> Pope John Paul yesterday blasted UN sanctions on Iraq during a Holy Year ceremony attended by its Christian patriarch, Raphael Bidawid.
>
> "The sons and daughters of the Church in Iraq, and all the Iraqi people who are being so severely tried by the continuing international embargo, never cease to be present in my thoughts," the pontiff said.
>
> "I assure all those who are suffering, especially the women, children and elderly, of my prayerful support."
>
> The Pope has often criticised the use of sanctions and said many Iraqis have died because of the lack of medicines.
>
> Bidawid, patriarch of the Chaldean Catholic Church, was to conduct a service in his church's eastern rite later yesterday.
>
> The Pope had wanted to visit the Old Testament city of Ur, birthplace of the patriarch Abraham, in Iraq in February but was not allowed by the Baghdad government.
>
> It said the visit was not possible because of UN sanctions and the no-fly zone over the country.

That view is shared by Denis Halliday, by Hans von Sponeck and by Jutta Burghadt—the senior, experienced international officials of the United Nations on the spot. It is the view shared by Save the Children, for whom Andrea Ledward gave an excellent briefing to a number of honourable colleagues in the House of Commons on 29 February 2000, a copy of which is with the Foreign Office.

It is a view shared by the United Nations Children's Fund, outlined in its document—also in the possession of the Foreign Office—"Child and Maternal Mortality Survey". It is a view that is encapsulated in "The Water Tragedy", published by the United Nations. Its cover says:

> The sophisticated water installations of Iraq, wholly dependent on spare parts from outside the country, have been laid waste by the years of neglect since the Gulf war. The result has been a catastrophic decline in public health. Christine Aziz, Evaristo Oliveira and Jost Widmer look at the lingering consequences of the war for Iraq and the hopes raised by the UN's "oil-for-food" resolution.

That document, too, is in the possession of the Foreign Office.

On 20 March 2000, at column 422W, my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr. Cohen)—I am glad to see him here—asked about the cost of Operation Desert Fox and subsequent operations in Iraq, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence mentioned figures of £35 million. The full reply is in the *Official Report*. I am deeply concerned at the technical report from Mark Hillier from London. He says that

> experts have said that the oil-for-food programme had "failed to establish and support a sustainable oil production system in the north" . . . The experts warn that, without telemetry, operational communications and adequate water-treatment spares, "the possibility of irreversible damage to the reservoir of this super-giant field is now imminent".

The super-giant field in question is the great oilfield at Kirkuk.

Mark Hillier reports that the experts

suggest that about $100 million per year might need to be spent on horizontal drilling projects that, along with 3D seismic acquisition and reservoir simulation, might help to boost ultimate field recoverability to between 35 per cent. and 50 per cent. from the 15-to-20 per cent. range that now looks likely.

The squandering of valuable, finite resources is absolutely unimaginable.

The report adds:

The Iraqi Drilling Company lacks bentonite so it is impossible to make a heavy drilling mud and kill the well to conserve the reservoir, the experts said.

I wish to concentrate on the visit that George Joffé and I made to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence. I set down our proposals in a letter to my right hon. Friend and I have given a copy to the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Mr. Hain), who will reply to the debate. George Joffé was the deputy director of Chatham house and that fact is evidence of the seriousness of the critics. I wrote that we felt that

there are two areas in which adjustment to present policy should be made, in order to mitigate the effects of the current sanctions regime, without calling into question the policy agreed by the Security Council. The purpose of both sets of proposals is also to try to counter the very adverse physical and intellectual consequences of the sanctions regime amongst the Iraqi population without providing encouragement to the regime itself. You will recall that the underlying thrust of our comments was that current policy, quite apart from discrediting the sanctions regime and its major Western supporters in Arab eyes generally—whatever their governments may claim—is also stimulating extremely hostile attitudes within Iraq and outside the actual structure of the regime itself. This, we feel, augurs ill for future relationships between Iraq, its neighbouring states and the wider world, once the current regime disappears.

(1) The first batch of measures we would like to propose deal with issues of public health. I realise that this is a contentious area, where there is disagreement between governments in the Security Council and United Nations over the actual situation.

(a) I do not, however, think that there is much doubt about the fact that the public health situation is very poor. The major cause of this is the dilapidated state of the water supply and sewage systems. These systems require infrastructure repair and equipment replacement, as well as basic inputs for treatment purposes.

(b) The second component of such an approach would be to improve access to immunisation and vaccination facilities, as well as permitting greater access to anaesthetics and general drugs. I am aware that official sources claim that considerable supplies are held in Iraq, but I also know that other sources dispute this.

In principle, the sanctions regime permits this, since both reflect "humanitarian purposes". In reality, there are often massive delays in authorisation through the Sanctions Committee because of "dual use" considerations, leading, on occasion, to rejections of the requests. This is surely an area in which a change of approach is essential and would not outrage the principles of the sanctions regime, since it only requires a change in emphasis. Could the British government not use its good offices to soften the rigour frequently expressed in Washington, on the basis that this would be an appropriate investment in the future without allowing the regime to renew its biological or chemical weapons programmes?

(2) The second area in which I would like to suggest a modification of policy is in that of human and intellectual contact. Even though intellectual material is not expressly excluded by the sanctions regime, in reality, Iraq has been out of intellectual contact with the wider world for almost a decade. The postal services with Iraq are erratic and discriminatory—materials sent are often returned for no discernible reason—and the Sanctions Committee in New York is, to say the least, extremely conservative in its willingness to allow such material through.

Mr. Harry Cohen (Leyton and Wanstead): Does my hon. Friend agree that there is a lack of transparency and accountability concerning the decisions of the sanctions committee and what this country's representatives are doing on that committee? Is it not a scandal, for example, that money from the oil for food programme can be handed out to the oil companies, but is held up for projects that would help children in Iraq?

Mr. Dalyell: I have listened carefully to my hon. Friend, and I agree with everything that he says. It is precisely those considerations that lead to the greatest resentment against Britain and the United States not only in Iraq but in the streets of most of the Arab world.

I undertook to give five minutes to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn), who has been so active in this cause.

2.41 pm

Mr. Tony Benn (Chesterfield): I rise briefly to support the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) because he has been a persistent and principled critic of this policy. I rise only because I have heard the Foreign Office reply many times and, if the Minister is to deliver the same answer, I must tell in him advance that it is wholly incredible and untrue.

We are told, for example, that the policy is necessary because one country has invaded another and has weapons of mass destruction. Israel has weapons of mass destruction and has occupied the southern Lebanon. Indonesia has weapons of mass destruction, which we supplied, and killed 200,000 people in East Timor. Turkey has weapons of mass destruction and occupies northern Cyprus, and the Government's policy is that Turkey should be admitted to the European Union. There is no credibility whatever in that argument.

The second argument, which I know that we shall hear because the Minister and the Prime Minister have given it before, is that the entire responsibility for the terrible health crisis and the tragedy in Iraq lies with Saddam Hussein. As my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow said, that is not the view of senior United Nations officials who have no connection with Saddam Hussein but who were in Iraq to do a job that they were denied the opportunity to do because they knew that the policy was wrong.

I hope that the Minister understands that the charge against the British and American Governments is that they are applying sanctions that amount to genocide. I use that word advisedly and with great gravity and regret. I repeat: the policy of the British and American Governments amounts to genocide. It is no good talking about the international community because it shares the view that my hon. Friend has put forward with such strength.

Whatever reply the Minister gives, if it is line with what he said before, it is not true and it is not believed anywhere other than in Washington, which dictates the policy that this Government follow. The time has come to take a little more notice of people of the quality of John Pilger, Felicity Arbuthnot and my hon. Friends the Members for Linlithgow, for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr. Cohen) and for Glasgow, Kelvin (Mr. Galloway), who have made it their business to draw to the attention of the British people the truth of the tragedy and the reason why it has occurred.

This is a short debate and my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow properly put forward his argument, but it will not end with another ministerial reply drafted in the

[Mr. Tony Benn]

Foreign Office but written in Washington because it is really a big, long-term debate about Britain's relations with the middle east and the world and the prospects of the United Nations surviving this century, when it has increasingly been sidelined and dominated by one super-power.

2.44 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Peter Hain): After the recent media debate on Iraq and sanctions, I am pleased to have the opportunity to respond to my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell), whom I congratulate on securing this debate.

I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend's long, genuine concern about the suffering of the Iraqi people. Unlike some critics of the United Nations sanctions, he has consistently argued with sincerity, as has my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn), and has avoided the petty, personalising attacks of the kind that we have seen recently. I do not question their motives, and I know that they do not question mine. I want to see the long, bitter suffering of the Iraqi people end as soon as my colleagues do, even if we differ about how to achieve that.

I reassure my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield that this speech was not written in Washington; it was written on my computer, although drafted by officials.

My hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow has proposed change in two specific areas—public health and contact between Iraq and the British people. I welcome these ideas, which are entirely consistent with our thinking, and with UN Security Council resolution 1284. We can make progress, as my hon. Friend suggests.

Last year, Britain put a great deal of effort into piloting the resolution through the Security Council. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield speaks of the international community. The entire international community has backed that resolution. It is the official policy of the international community and of the UN, and it reflects Britain's long-standing and deep-seated commitment to the disarmament of Iraq and the well-being of the Iraqi people.

Kofi Annan, the UN Secretary-General, in his recent report to the Security Council, was hopeful that effective implementation of the resolution's humanitarian provisions would further enhance the impact of the oil-for-food programme on the humanitarian situation. With the oil price high, and Iraq's output steady—at around 2 million barrels a day—potentially $12 billion could be available this year for that humanitarian programme. That is big money. Critics of sanctions seem wilfully to ignore the real culprit in the denial of humanitarian relief, which is readily available under the UN's programme.

Talking of critics, can I put on record the facts—as opposed to the myths—about the recent humanitarian flight to Baghdad planned by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Kelvin (Mr. Galloway)? I wanted the flight to go ahead. It could have done so. Contrary to the rather bizarre accusations that I have seen, I did not block this flight to deliver more medicines to Iraq. The UK Government did not prevent the flight, nor did the US Government. Nor did the UN—in fact, it gave its specific approval on 8 March through the Sanctions Committee.

Preparations were proceeding smoothly until about a week before the flight was due to go, when my officials learned that the intention was to take 207 people, including many journalists and others who could not possibly have been assisting a mercy mission. The organisers were informed that the UN Sanctions Committee would not have agreed to the flight because the number of passengers called into question the humanitarian nature of the flight. We suggested that the number be brought down to under 30, and the organisers agreed to this. We did not specify who those people should be, but did seek further details, as required by New York.

I specifically promised to secure the agreement of the Sanctions Committee, and, indeed, this was secured. To my astonishment, the flight was suddenly cancelled. Only the organisers know why; perhaps the propaganda value of a late cancellation, mischievously ascribed to me, was more advantageous.

Resolution 1284 gives the UN a new platform for its dealings with Iraq. Three months on, there has been welcome progress on implementation. Hans Blix has taken up his post as executive chairman of the new arms body, UNMOVIC. Yuli Vorontsov has been appointed as the high-level co-ordinator for Kuwaiti issues. We hope that he will be able to bring his massive experience to bear on the intransigents in Iraq who are preventing progress on efforts to determine the fate of more than 600 prisoners of war still missing since the Gulf war.

Rightly, the immediate focus of resolution 1284 has been on its humanitarian provisions. I should remind the House that these are unconditional. There is no longer any limit on the volume of oil that Iraq can sell to fund the humanitarian programme. The UN's procedures have been simplified and speeded up.

Let me also set the record straight on our handling of contracts in the Sanctions Committee in New York. That Committee exists to ensure that the resolutions are fully complied with. It is therefore obliged to do all that it can to prevent the supply to Iraq of any goods prohibited under the resolutions. It also makes many of the decisions on contracts under the humanitarian programme, and therefore has to meet the humanitarian imperative too. That is not an easy balancing act, and we think that we get it about right.

We are not prepared to abandon the scrutiny of contracts, although virtually all the other Committee members do, for whatever reason. However, nor do we wish to hold up or block the delivery of vital supplies, whether that means medicines or parts for Iraq's oil industries—including the spares to which my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow referred.

We put on hold only 1 per cent. of all contracts. There is no way that such a tiny proportion can be responsible for the undoubted suffering in Iraq. Critics should also acknowledge the problem of dual-use goods: for example, chlorine has a bona fide use in water treatment projects, but is also a constituent of mustard gas, which was used in the attack on Halabja, so it is absolutely right that we should know when and how it is going to be used in Iraq. We are pressing for improved United Nations monitoring of dual-use goods inside Iraq, which would reduce that

percentage still further. We will continue to urge all those on the committee—I mean all—to take a similarly balanced approach.

Security Council resolution 1284 provides for the suspension of sanctions if Iraq co-operates. That that new opportunity is enshrined in a British-drafted Security Council resolution is a further example of our willingness to think imaginatively about the challenge posed by Iraq. Suspension is available, if Iraq wants it, and the Iraqi Government know that we are serious in our commitment to suspension. We hope that they will adopt a more co-operative approach than they have done thus far. I urge all those with good contacts or friends in the Iraqi regime to give Baghdad the same message—that it should allow the full implementation of resolution 1284.

Mr. Tony Benn: Is it not a fact that the inspectors were identifying targets that we could later bomb? From an Iraqi point of view, inspection is simply an intelligence operation to enable the Americans to target sites, as and when they decide to resume bombing. That is the problem with the reintroduction of inspectors.

Mr. Hain: The resolution provides for a new inspection regime. The new arrangements are designed specifically to determine whether the Iraqis are developing weapons of mass destruction—as we know they are doing. Throughout his political life, my right hon. Friend has consistently opposed the production of such weapons, which include biological, chemical and nuclear weapons. The Iraqis should have nothing to fear from a fresh arms inspection system. Their criticisms of the old system, to which my right hon. Friend refers, do not apply to the new one.

The recent documentary produced by John Pilger tried to show that sanctions are responsible for the suffering of the Iraqi people. That argument has been repeated in the debate. It is a lie propagated by Saddam Hussein and his apologists. Of course the Iraqi people are suffering; that is one of the reasons why the Government invested such energy in a new Security Council resolution. It is a scandal that doctors cannot get the drugs they need to end harrowing pictures from cancer wards. However, the fault lies with the Iraqi Government for failing to order the required medicines and failing to distribute those that they do order.

The latest report by the Secretary-General notes that one quarter of all medical goods delivered to Iraq since the humanitarian programme started have not been distributed: they sit in Government-controlled warehouses. There is a similar story in respect of food. In 1998, the Secretary-General recommended a daily food ration of 2,463 kilocalories, but the Iraqi Government sets its average at just 1,993 kilocalories—less than is provided for—and the latest report notes that Iraq is not ordering enough pulses or dairy products to make up the ration, and that it is not including protein.

The conclusion that we have to reach is that Saddam Hussein is yet again playing politics with suffering. He believes that television pictures of malnourished Iraqi children serve his interests, so he makes sure that there are malnourished children in their thousands to film. Why did John Pilger not film in northern Iraq, where the situation is far better? No one starves and health indicators have actually been improving, yet exactly the same sanctions regime applies there. The difference is that Saddam's writ does not run there. Why do sanctions critics prefer to ignore that inconvenient but crucial fact?

Critics of sanctions are blind to who is to blame. They ignore Saddam Hussein's past record of wars against his neighbours and brutality towards his own people, especially the Kurds and the Shia. Their alternative strategy does not inspire confidence: we are to abandon sanctions and hope for the best; we are to trust Saddam to improve the condition of his people; we are to cross our fingers as he smuggles what he needs to replenish his stock of chemical and biological weapons under cover of normal trade; we are to close our eyes as he redevelops his nuclear capability; and we are to wish his neighbours and the Iraqi people—especially the Kurds and the Shia—the best of luck. That might be a policy that some are prepared to advocate, but it is not one that the Government are prepared to adopt.

Mr. Cohen: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way on that point. John Pilger argued in his report that after the first Gulf war, the Kurds and the Shia rose up to take power away from Saddam Hussein and to protect their own interests. They were abandoned by the United States and Britain and were slaughtered en masse. How are we protecting the Kurds and the Shia, given that historical example?

Mr. Hain: I was not a Minister in the then Government and I do not defend what happened. Those people were, indeed, abandoned. That was a big fault line in the policy of that Government. We are a different Government. We support the Kurds. If the protection provided to the Kurds and the Shia under the current policy, as strengthened by the new Security Council resolution, were suddenly withdrawn, as many critics of sanctions seem to suggest, they would again be vulnerable to the same kind of devastating attacks that Saddam Hussein visited upon them in the past.

Mr. Benn: Turkey invaded northern Iraq in pursuit of the Kurds. There is no support in the British Government for the Kurds in their case against Turkey. The argument is simply not credible. I know that the Minister has to finish his speech, but I must tell him that it is not a credible argument.

Mr. Hain: My right hon. Friend has not answered my point. If we abandoned sanctions, as he suggests, what would happen to the Kurds? The same as happened to them last time, under the mustard gas that Saddam Hussein directed at them, and under the other attacks on them. I know that my right hon. Friend, who has been a fervent warrior for human rights throughout his political career and internationally, would not defend Saddam Hussein's consistent behaviour against the Kurds. We want to ensure that they, and the Shia, are protected.

To return to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow, there is plenty of money available for the drugs that Iraq needs, if only the Iraqi Government would order what is required and deliver it to those in need. That is not an invention by the British Government.

Mr. Dalyell: On delivery, will my hon. Friend get his office to give him the letter of 9 March from Riad El-Taher of Friendship Across Frontiers, which goes into detail on the matter of distribution? Finally, may I ask my hon. Friend at least to reflect on the dangers to the great Kirkuk oilfield?

Mr. Hain: I shall certainly have another look at that, as my hon. Friend suggests. However, there should be a

[Mr. Hain]

proper recognition of the fact that humanitarian relief in all the forms available is being blocked by the Iraqi regime. I hear no such acknowledgement in the argument during this debate or from critics of sanctions generally.

In his report, Kofi Annan called on the Iraqi Government to ensure adequate funding to cover recurrent costs and provide the framework for the restoration of the public health care system. He called on Baghdad to improve the delivery and administration of drugs for chronic illnesses, and he asked the Iraqi Government to ensure that sufficient quantities of anti-infectious and anti-tuberculosis drugs were ordered and distributed. Why do we not all join in that call?

The new resolution—1284—also encourages member states and international organisations to provide

published material of an educational character

to Iraq. That addresses another of the points raised.

I wish that the Government in Iraq wanted their people to have free and unrestricted contact with the outside world. That is clearly not the case, but the British Government have no wish to stop the people of this country and of Iraq maintaining the friendships built up when our countries enjoyed better relations.

Many Iraqis still visit Britain. We look forward to the time when those ties can flourish again. Meanwhile, I would encourage those who wish to develop links with their Iraqi counterparts, for example in the fields of education and medicine, to do so.

I return to the central case that I put most strongly to my right hon. and hon. Friends. I should like to hear a credible alternative advanced by the critics of sanctions, short of simply withdrawing, lifting the sanctions, the proposed arms inspection arrangements and the military activity that backs them up when necessary, and letting Saddam Hussein get on with the old policy that he pursued through the 1980s—yes, I acknowledge that that was with western support—disgracefully, when he attacked Iran and was subsequently allowed to attack Kuwait. The west, including Britain and the United States, has a lot for which to apologise. It allowed the Iraqi regime under Saddam Hussein to reach its current strength. The Tory Government armed him, directly and indirectly.

We have an entirely new policy, which we have driven through. We have helped to get it through the Security Council of the United Nations. The critics of sanctions suggest no coherent alternatives. They would leave Saddam Hussein free to oppress his people, especially the Kurds and the Shia, and to attack neighbours, as he has done in the past.

One of the arguments that the critics of sanctions have to face is that although sanctions have had many consequences, one of them has been the containment of Saddam Hussein's war machine. He has not invaded anyone during the time—

The motion having been made after half-past Two o'clock, and the debate having continued for half an hour, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *adjourned the House without Question put, pursuant to the Standing Order.*

Adjourned at one minute past Three o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 14 March 2000

[MR. MICHAEL LORD *in the Chair*]

Textile Industry

Motion made and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mr. Dowd.*]

10 am

Judy Mallaber (Amber Valley): I welcome this opportunity to debate a national strategy for the United Kingdom textile and clothing industry, and I thank Madam Speaker for recognising its importance by allowing us to discuss this. I know that we were in competition with some of my colleagues from the east midlands, who sought an Adjournment debate on the economy of that region. Given that textiles and clothing are the region's second largest manufacturing industry, today's debate will go some way towards meeting their request.

I was privileged to succeed by hon. Friend the Member for Oldham, East and Saddleworth (Mr. Woolas) as chair of the all-party parliamentary clothing, textile, footwear and carpet group. In November 1998, he initiated a debate on the industry, and there have been several since then, including a memorable one in which we paraded in hats of the finest quality, which were made in Luton. That was most enjoyable, and generated considerable publicity for the industry. Such publicity is one of the aims of today's debate.

Those all-party group members who tabled an early-day motion last week and sought today's debate did so because the industry has reached a watershed—it is make or break time. As I speak, 200 more workers in my constituency are being made redundant in a Courtaulds factory that is closing down. The industry and its employees are experiencing difficult times. Marks and Spencer, of which we will no doubt hear more in this debate, has even killed off St. Michael.

On a more positive note, an industry report produced over the past year now offers a strategic way forward by providing the opportunity to retain a strong, though changing, clothing and textile industry. Department of Trade and Industry Ministers gave a lead by encouraging industry partners to produce that report, and I applaud them and the DTI staff who helped to produce it. Once consultation on the report is complete, all parts of the industry must work together and act urgently on its recommendations. We cannot afford to let those recommendations rest. The Government must provide support so that the industry can move forward, and I hope that today's debate will help that process. We must grasp the future now, or accept continuing decline in the industry as inevitable and unstoppable.

The report's executive summary says that:

> the industry is currently facing the biggest challenge in its history. Low labour-cost suppliers are securing an increasingly large share of world markets, state aids are distorting competition and sourcing patterns on the UK High Street are changing. The industry must respond quickly to the changing circumstances. If it does so, it will slow the pace and scale of its contraction and increase the chances of maintaining critical mass.

The consequences of failing to respond quickly are obvious: continuing job losses, continuing decline and no future for an industry that, in my view, ought to have one.

I shall return to the document's details in due course, but the main message of today's debate is that the textiles industry is important to the UK economy and can remain important, even though it may change. The industry itself, its commentators and all levels of Government must stop writing off the industry. They must accept and believe that it is not just a sunset industry and that action can be taken. This morning, I took part in a programme on Radio Derby. It tried to concentrate on doom and gloom, but fortunately some of the other people taking part, who were involved in preparing the report, are looking for a way forward although they face job losses in their own companies and unions. We should not talk down the industry, but accept that while it has problems, it also has a future. That has implications not only for the industry, but for government at all levels.

I should like to make a few comments about the importance of the textile and clothing industry and the problems that it faces. I shall then say more about the strategy document and highlight a few of its recommendations, including the action and support that are being requested from Government and public agencies. I can only touch on the issues involved, which are highly complex and cover a wide range of areas. No doubt others will want to discuss some of those issues in more detail. Several other hon. Members would have liked to have been here today, but unfortunately had other commitments. I am sure that they will take part in the continuing debate in the months ahead.

My main point concerns the importance of the industry. It is still the eighth largest manufacturing industry in the United Kingdom, and we should not just ignore it on the assumption that it is going down the Swanee. It has a future. The entire sector of clothing, textiles and footwear has sales of more than £17 billion and employs about 306,000 people. It employs more people than agriculture, motor vehicle manufacture and the chemical industry, and is bigger than the coke and nuclear fuel sector and the rubber and plastics sector. Although people in the industry do not necessarily begrudge the help that is given to farmers and aerospace, they point out that they need help as well. Generally—although not always—they are hoping not just for a handout, but for assistance, on the basis that other industries with fewer employees are receiving it. The document's recommendations are a starting point in enabling that to happen.

Of the 306,000 employees in the industry, 160,000 work in the textiles sector and 119,000 in the clothing sector. The industry is of particular significance in certain regions. A quarter of its jobs are in the east midlands, and it is vital to the local economies of towns and cities such as Leicester, Mansfield, Sutton-in-Ashfield and those in the Amber Valley area. It accounts for a quarter of all manufacturing jobs in Nottinghamshire and Leicester. I am sure that other hon. Members will refer to sectors of the industry that have a proud history in their regions.

[Judy Mallaber]

Nobody can have failed to hear the screams of anguish in recent months and years as jobs continue to disappear. Import penetration is high. Although many imports come from countries with very low labour costs, many come from those with high investment. When the mayor of my local council—who was himself recently made redundant from Stevenson's dyeing works—visited China to look at the textiles industry, he was amazed by the level of investment and the capital equipment, which is often way ahead of ours. However, one of the Japanese companies that he visited was considering moving to Indonesia, where it would benefit from high capital investment and low labour costs. Both are significant.

Pressure also comes from high street retailers. By seeking ever lower prices, they encourage bigger manufacturers into cheap offshore supply strategies, while smaller companies are left to flounder. Courtaulds, which has just closed its factory in my area, mainly supplies Marks and Spencer, and said that the problem is caused by overseas competition—although some of that arises from its own overseas production. It is a complex matter.

Between September 1998 and September 1999, more than 36,000 textiles and clothing workers lost their jobs—more than 690 workers for every week of the year. Other hon. Members will, rightly, want to discuss in this debate the strong pound, international trade, tariff barriers, and what should be done in the various trade talks that are to take place. While those are important elements of the problem, it is of longer standing than that. Since 1994, more than 1,300 clothing companies and 468 textiles companies have ceased to exist, and the problem predates that by a long way.

Facing up to the challenge of cheap imports and a shrinking market has not been easy. Under-investment in technology, innovation and training has made closure the only feasible outcome for several companies, including some of those that I mentioned. This is a traditional sector, but it has to adapt to today's knowledge-led economy. That is possible; the opportunities exist. We can have a clothing and textiles industry in the future. It may be different, but the industry can adapt. However, many of the companies are small and medium-sized enterprises, and they need help to develop and access the resources that exist.

The textile and clothing strategy group is a mixture of the British Apparel and Textile Confederation, industrialists, retailers, academics and union representatives; that is a broad range. Its report is now being consulted on, and I understand that the group has received a number of suggestions for fleshing out its recommendations. The report makes 51 recommendations and aims to find a way forward. The prime aim is substantially to improve the industry's ability to compete successfully in the global marketplace, and the report puts great emphasis on the need for the industry to adapt. Innovation, diversification, training, marketing, exporting and networking are all cruical to competitiveness.

The report says that it does not

> seek to protect the domestic industry from the winds of change.

It recognises that there are some aspects of textile and clothing manufacturing in which the UK will never be competitive, but it also recognises that the industry has tremendous strengths and that there are great opportunities in areas such as technical textiles, designer wear, dyeing and finishing, branded clothing, capital intensive manufacturing and high-value niche markets. The trick is to try to find the sectors in which we can compete and to build on them. Forward-looking companies have been able to do that. One of the companies in my constituency, Guilford Europe, realised some years ago that it would not be able to compete in high production, high turnover, very low-cost manufacturing of clothes, so it decided to diversify. It studied the market, changed its production line and moved to producing fabric for cars. It is now doing well; it is a successful company. It is possible to achieve that, although other companies will not find it so easy. We have to consider how we can assist them.

The report contains recommendations aimed at manufacturers, training providers, support agencies, employers' federations and others, including the Department of Trade and Industry. The main focus is on what the industry should do, but it also needs strong leadership and support from all levels of government. Most companies operating in the sector are small and medium-sized enterprises. Many simply do not have the personnel and resources to implement such changes on their own, and several of the employers' federations are in a similar position. The report contains a range of recommendations but puts a fairly heavy onus on the federations and other parts of the industry. That needs to be combined with Government support.

I will give an example. One recommendation is that the British Clothing Industry Association and other trade associations should introduce proposals to strengthen their marketing skills. The sector needs to work collectively, but many small and medium-sized enterprises do not know where to start, as they are not used to working collaboratively. We are always told that one advantage of the Italian industry—one European industry that seems to have flourished—is that its members are more prepared to work collaboratively. That may or may not be true, but we should investigate it and learn from it. To be effective, companies will need marketing help from public agencies, as well as the trade organisations. An individual company cannot necessarily employ its own marketing manager; it will need assistance to be able to do that.

Again, there are positive examples. My hon. Friend the Member for Wyre Forest (Mr. Lock) is sorry that he cannot be here today. As he represents Kidderminister, he is the carpets Member, and we have added carpets to the name of our group, I need to mention the carpet industry. He wanted to celebrate the success of some of his local companies, such as Tompkinsons, Brintons and Victoria. The companies that have invested in new plant and considered niche marketing have been successful. Unusually for the industry, they have collaborated on a marketing strategy, bringing in marketing advice. They have been able to do that themselves and have even won marketing awards for their work. Other companies are likely to need more help. Once the recommendations have been fleshed out and the report is final, everyone in the industry must pay attention to the detail.

Assistance will be needed to implement some of the recommendations. The Department of Trade and Industry has a role to play in the transfer of technology. Too many companies can fall by the wayside because they do not know how to diversify or how to begin to find the expertise. I do not know enough about how DTI industry funding works to know what assistance can be given, but I know that it will be given only if it raises the industry's standing. It is no good a company coming along and saying, "Gives us a handout—but we won't work with anybody else."

The report highlights the fact that in 1998 403 United Kingdom firms received small firms merit awards for research and technology—SMART awards—and only 12 were in the textile and clothing industry. We must discover whether that was because they did not apply, whether, as some companies say, the barriers are too fierce or whether there is a prejudice against the textile industry because it is considered to be an industry of the past. Because of the industry's regional nature a number of the recommendations will need local implementation. Government must play a part in ensuring that Departments, officials in regional government offices and regional development agencies get the message that we believe that the industry has a future, albeit a changing one.

There are too many stories of companies not necessarily getting the help to which they are entitled. I have only just heard from business link about one such company in my constituency, so I have not yet been able to investigate the report fully. It is D&E Textiles, a computer-aided cutting company—at the cutting edge, one might say—which is seeking to expand. It is an area that is entitled to receive regional selective assistance. Business link was giving the firm assistance to do that, but it was turned down. The company wants to expand, but it was told that this was not viable. It is viable. The firm is seeking to expand and it needs more equipment. It is now trying to get another type of grant and has been told that, because it was turned down the first time, it is clearly not eligible the second time. There may be reasons for that and I intend to investigate, but there are too many tales of insufficient enthusiasm for taking up the industry's needs, and that message must be taken down the line.

We know from companies that have taken steps themselves how the report's recommendations can be implemented. I have mentioned some. There was also an example in the constituency of the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning). At the Knowledge 2000 conference a couple of weeks ago, addressed by the Prime Minister, delegates heard at first hand of a success story from Eric Newton of Heathcoats at Tiverton. He said that, by implementing the points in the report, he has maintained employment levels, trebled output and added value to his product.

The recommendations cover a range of areas, including capital investment, training and skills—the Department for Education and Employment may need to consider that. E-commerce and supply chain issues are also increasingly important, and not simply in relation to shopping on the internet. I understand that 80 per cent. of transactions would be business to business. Present mechanisms in the industry that bring suppliers and retailers together do so face to face. E-commerce should be able to speed up that process and make the supply chains work better, as has happened in, for instance, the automobile industry. There is a role not only for the industry but for Government agencies to help in the development.

There is a great deal of work to do. The industry needs a major culture change. The report clearly says:

> The textile and clothing industry recognises that ultimately its destiny is in its own hands.

Nevertheless, other organisations have an important role to play, including Government organisations, both nationally and regionally, academic organisations, trade associations, unions and others. The industry will call for additional financial assistance in some of those areas and, at the very least, we must ensure that sufficient information and assistance is available to enable companies to access any funds to which they are entitled.

Other recommendations in the report include the setting up of a fund specifically to assist innovation within the industry. As the SMART programme does not seem to have been very effective, perhaps the Department of Trade and Industry will consider imaginatively whether a special programme for the industry could be tied in with its innovation fund to assist with technological innovations.

One recommendation in the report that should be considered very seriously and carefully is the proposal that the Government should make funds available on a sectoral basis. People in the industry get upset when they see other industries apparently receiving funds that they cannot access. It is not clear to me that they receive those funds on any different basis but, at the very least, the matter should be examined. We hear many stories of how the industry in other European countries is able to access different taxation regimes and different methods of applying the rules. I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Minister will say that it is difficult to make funds available on a sectoral basis outside the areas covered by current programmes, and I know that there are problems, but there must be methods by which we could be more innovative in ensuring that funds are available to help the industry to operate better and to move forward.

If all the recommendations are to be implemented, a culture change is necessary in the industry, with a partnership between all sectors. The industry has not always been good at that and we should examine the record of other countries that seem to have had more success to see how they have achieved it.

The textile and clothing industry can have an important future. There would be more of a public outcry if any other industry as large and as important to the economy as the textile industry were losing so many jobs and so quickly. The report lists many things that can be done and its production is greatly to the credit of the industry and the Government. It will encourage the industry to look forward to a period of social partnership in which those recommendations can be implemented. That will be painful for some companies that are unable to compete. They will suffer continuing job losses, which will be horrible for some of our constituents, many of whom have been made redundant from one firm after another and have had to trail around different companies. However, the future can be positive. We must acknowledge past job losses and do what we can to stem them, but we must also be positive and talk up the industry.

[Judy Mallaber]

UNESCO has agreed that the area on the border of my constituency and that of the hon. Member for West Derbyshire (Mr. McLoughlin) should be a tentative site for world heritage status and that is likely to be confirmed within the next few years. It is based on the Derwent valley and the pioneer development of the textile factory system through harnessing water power from the River Derwent. The area was the cradle of the industrial revolution. Our tourism industry is now based as much on our industrial heritage and the magnificent mills built by the Arkwrights and the Strutts as on our beautiful countryside. It is wonderful to celebrate the innovation and brillance of those pioneers who started the textile industry.

However, that should be seen as not only our industrial heritage but an example of how progress can be made and how the textile and clothing industry can flourish into the future. It will not remain the same and there will be much pain along the way—indeed, that is happening now—but we must do what we can to ensure that the industry has a future and is not written off as a sunset industry. We should act on the report's recommendations and work together at all levels to enable the industry to have a future.

10.25 am

Mr. David Tredinnick (Bosworth): I congratulate the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Judy Mallaber) on securing this important debate. Many hon. Members wish to contribute, so I shall not detain the Chamber long.

In the previous Parliament, I spent the best part of a year in this Room—which was then the Grand Committee Room—as I was a member of the Committee that sat for three days a week discussing the Channel Tunnel Rail Link Bill. In mapping the route through Kent, we examined the fate of endangered species. We considered whether deer could jump railway lines and whether mice could get beneath them. At the risk of being accused of flippancy, I suggest that the textile, hosiery and knitwear industry may be another endangered species. May I remind the Chamber that since the Government came to power, 25 per cent. of the industry has disappeared? That is a ghastly position. Last year, on behalf of workers in my constituency, I presented Parliament with a petition, which the Government did not even acknowledge. I raised the petition again at Question Time, when a Minister apologised for the Government's failure to give a response and promised to examine the matter, but nothing has happened, so my confidence in the Government's ability to solve or reduce the problem is not great.

That is one of the fundamental problems with the Government: they put too much emphasis on presentation and spin and not enough on substance. I spoke to the hon. Lady earlier and she suggested that I might be sceptical about the report. Indeed, I am. One Minister described it as a task force. A task force went to the Falklands, but I do not think that many ships will be sunk on the industry's behalf. Rover at Longbridge gets all the perks. I do not begrudge it that, as many workers in my constituency are employed by the motor industry. However, the Government seem to have forgotten the hosiery and knitwear industry which, unlike Rover, does not get tax breaks or rate reductions, as I discovered from personal research.

The Government must show that they take the matter seriously in their repsonse to the report. We do not want words and spin or a Mandelson version of the matter: we want the Government to take action and tackle specific areas.

I shall not summarise the report, as I wish to give other hon. Members an opportunity to contribute. Indeed, I know how frustrating it is to attend these short debates and not be called to speak. In 1987, I made my maiden speech on the problems created by the importation of cheap Chinese underwear. That was not an easy speech to make, but it attracted the atttention of "Yesterday in Parliament": indeed, that thought crossed my mind before I made the speech.

A key issue in the report is the importation of cheap foreign clothing. The Government are not enforcing the law, but they should, as many such products are coming in illegally. I agree with Paul Gates of the National Union of Knitwear, Footwear and Apparel Trades—KFAT—who told me that it was essential to clamp down on illlegal imports. Many companies in my constituency that have gone to the wall as a result of cheap imports would not have done so if we had taken a more robust attitude. We should not ignore obvious solutions in our search for new strategic solutions.

The report does not cover dye works in great detail and does not examine the problems that they have had to put up with as a result of new environmental standards. Several dye works in my constituency have gone to the wall as a result of new regulations imposed by the National Rivers Authority. At least two of them have gone to the wall because Severn Trent Water would not invest in new equipment to get phosphorescent and other complex modern dyes out of the water. The Government should examine the water companies' treatment of such companies.

The hon. Lady referred to the importance of niche markets. Bodycotes is a wonderful company in my constituency making high-quality underwear. "More underwear," hon. Members may say. I am not obsessed with underwear, but we make a lot of it in Hinckley—that is a fact.

One of the first things that I did when I was selected as a candidate in 1986 was to go to Hinckley Makes It. It was amazing to see the factory girls modelling all the underwear made in my constituency. It was a great credit to them that they were prepared to go on the stage at the Concordia theatre once a year to show the town what was made there. It was a great show, which I commend to my colleagues.

Charlotte Atkins (Staffordshire, Moorlands): Perhaps the hon. Gentleman is offering a few tips to Marks and Spencer, which might become more profitable if it followed the example of the company that he has mentioned.

Mr. Tredinnick: I thank the hon. Lady for her support. The Marks and Spencer black hand has cast its shadow across my constituency too.

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): I am concerned that the complaints made to Marks and

Spencer at its annual general meeting came from a lady of about my age. I must say that, despite the fact that I purchase underwear from Marks and Spencer, it may not be a selling feature for women of my age to model underwear for that shop.

Mr. Tredinnick: My hon. Friend is ever charming. However, we had better not get into an old-fashioned sexist style of debate, because with new Labour in the room that may not be appropriate, and I do not want to be drawn into speaking for too long.

Marks and Spencer is a major problem. Another problem that we have had in my constituency is that an Italian managing director stripped out and moved an old-established company, Pex, to Romania. I had to support the workers at a sit-in at the plant—[HON. MEMBERS: "Oh."] Yes, that gives me some old Labour credentials, although I am a Tory. I do not want anyone to mistake my political allegiances, and especially not the Minister. I went down to the picket line because there was a lot of yarn in the factory. The Pex workers knew it was there, and they were owed some money. All credit to them that they held out against the bogus managing director, and protested against what he had done to their company. They got some recompense, and jolly good luck to them.

The Chancellor should help the industry; there should be support for high-tech machinery investment. Rate relief is also important, but there is much that companies can do for themselves. They say that God helps those who help themselves, and I sincerely believe that. Companies have much to learn from modern technology. Computer-aided design is coming down in cost and increasing in capability all the time. Companies must keep their eye on that. We now have e-commerce and the new development of selling on the internet, to which the hon. Lady alluded in her speech. I have said to many companies in my constituency, "For goodness sake, think about selling direct. You can get a website up and running for £500." That area is developing at such a pace—one's friends and one's children's friends are spending a lot of time on the internet—and it is a great way of adding to market sales without a lot of extra cost.

This is an important debate, and I welcome it. I hope that the Government will take some action. The great danger is that they will merely put a spin on the matter.

10.33 am

Mr. Kelvin Hopkins (Luton, North): I have relatively little claim to speak on behalf of the clothing and textiles industry, because in my constituency it is not large. None the less, during my first year in the House a small hat-making company closed there. It was not a traditional hatting company, but one that had invested in modern machinery; a high-tech hat producer. However, it still closed. That was a harbinger of harder times, because other companies in the textile and clothing industry in Luton have closed since then, although none of them was in my constituency.

Textiles are an example of a problem in manufacturing in general. I refer to manufacturing in general because I am a member of the all-party manufacturing group and want to promote the interests of manufacturing to ensure that Britain retains a substantial manufacturing sector. I do not have time to go into the arguments now, but manufacturing is vital to our future.

The problems in our manufacturing industries stem essentially from overseas competition. We have a substantial trade deficit in manufactured goods. In 1999, we had a £6 billion trade deficit in manufactured goods with the European Union alone, a substantial component of which was in textiles. The United Kingdom textiles and clothing industry is a special case even within the manufacturing trade deficit. Between 1990 and 1998, the growth rate of all United Kingdom industries was smaller than the overall economic growth rate, but at least industry in general grew by 1.9 per cent. However, the textile industry reduced by 2.5 per cent. each year during that period. Indeed, in 1998, textile output fell by 7.6 per cent., which contrasts with an increase of 2.3 per cent. in 1994. Those years are significant and are reflected in the trade statistics. There has been a massive deterioration in the trade balance in textiles and clothing.

I shall consider specifically the textile industry because it probably provides the best example of the two groups in Government statistics. Between 1994 and 1998, the total trade deficit in textiles increased by a staggering 35 per cent.; it increased by 53 per cent. with the EU alone, and by 25 per cent. with the rest of the world. Those statistics are very significant and show the effects of dramatic changes in the exchange rate.

Sterling appreciated by 27 per cent. relative to the deutschmark between 1995 and 1998. There was a 33 per cent. appreciation in the euro-ecu-sterling exchange rate between 1995 and this January. Textile and clothing manufacturers have to face such extremely difficult competition. Interestingly, the pound appreciated by only 4 per cent. against the dollar and by 17 per cent. against the yen in that period, and Japan has had its problems. It is significant that the trade balance has deteriorated more in relation to the EU than with the rest of the world. That is directly related to the differences in exchange rates. The exchange rate with Europe has deteriorated significantly more than that with the rest of the world.

Exports are constantly emphasised in the trade debate. Of course, exports are important. There was a surprising 2.8 per cent. increase in textile exports between 1995 and 1998. However, imports are the problem; they increased by 22 per cent. during those three years. Imports are seriously damaging domestic markets. The problem is one of price competition and exchange rates. The Government must address the exchange rate problem for the sake of the textile and clothing industries as much as for the rest of manufacturing. Indeed, the statistics show that those industries are much more sensitive to price competition than other areas of manufacturing.

We have a so-called strong pound. I do not like the term "strong"; I think that "inappropriately over-valued" is more appropriate. The pound has not changed very much compared to the dollar, but there is an incredibly shrinking euro, and the evidence hits us between the eyes. I am not a great enthusiast of the euro project, but I was astonished at the depreciation in the euro after its foundation. There will be a serious exchange rate problem for the foreseeable future, and the Government must address it.

As I have said, we had a £6 billion trade deficit with the EU last year, but a few years ago we were in balance. That must be a result of exchange rates. Following the

[Mr. Kelvin Hopkins]

exit from the exchange rate mechanism, we witnessed a substantial fall in our exchange rate relative to that of the euro zone, and a dramatic improvement in trade and manufacturing. I return to the fact that even textile production expanded in 1993–94, although it later fell catastrophically.

Will the Minister ask his colleagues, including his right hon. Friend the Chancellor, to examine the exchange rate problem? It is serious, and cannot be solved without addressing the macroeconomic difficulties facing the industry. This is a fine report on national strategy, but it does not draw sufficient attention to the exchange rate problem or to the macroeconomic problem. I hope that the Government will look at those matters in the near future.

10.40 am

Mr. Phil Woolas (Oldham, East and Saddleworth): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Judy Mallaber) on securing this debate. I also congratulate the authors of the report. This strategy document on the United Kingdom textile and clothing industry is a consultation document, and I am sure that the contents of this debate will be fed into that consultation.

I congratulate the authors on producing an example of social partnership working at its best. It involves employers from across the sector, as well as the trade unions. We should thank the three trade unions involved for their positive and progressive input into this debate. The secretariat of the report is the Department of Trade and Industry. We should not be too critical of the DTI, but recognise its important leadership role. However—[*Laughter.*] I shall come to the howevers in a moment. I have a few brief points to make.

Many myths surround the industry, and my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley highlighted a few of them. However, she was wrong in one crucial historical respect. The cradle of the industrial revolution was not Derbyshire but Oldham, where the textile industry was very important. That industry has declined over not only the past three years but the past 100 years, with the shift to overseas production.

One of the myths being perpetuated is that overseas competitors have the advantage over us only because of unit labour costs. That is not so. There is a disparity in labour costs across the world, but some of the highest investment value, the best technology and the best matching of design with knowledge of markets and production techniques comes from what we patronisingly call the third world. In fact, there is a shift of production from India to Mauritius, just as there is from the United Kingdom to Morocco. This is a global industry, and if we base our strategy on the belief that our only disadvantage is labour cost, we cannot succeed. We cannot dismiss labour costs as an issue, but nobody should base a strategy on that alone. Thankfully, this document does not do so, and marks a turning point in that respect.

The second problem in the industry, which relates to the supply chain, is outlined on pages 20 to 22 of the report. The supply chain in this country is upside down. Our manufacturers do not have customer knowledge, market research skills or the ability to match design and customer demand. That knowledge lies in the retail sector, and the retailers wield the big stick in the United Kingdom. I refer especially to Marks and Spencer. There is no doubt that the UK industry requires Marks and Spencer to succeed, because 16 per cent. of the retail industry goes through it.

M&S has traditionally been criticised for reducing its UK supplies, although it should get some credit, because no one has focused on British Home Stores and other companies that use nothing like the same amount from UK sources. Nevertheless, M&S carries the most clout and it does not and has not worked in partnership with manufacturing suppliers. It has used its market position to dominate them, so at the stroke of a buyer's pen or a telephone call to Morocco, it can move production, and hundreds of UK workers lose their jobs.

Mr. Ted Rowlands (Merthyr Tydfil and Rymney): I underline the strength and power of my hon. Friend's case by saying that, in my constituency, three factories are closing as a result of such decisions.

Mr. Woolas: That is a sadly familiar story and I look to my right hon. Friend the Minister to respond to it. There is a section in the document on M&S.

My hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley mentioned the lack of take-up of regional selective assistance. The document states that there has been a lack of take-up of RSA by textile and clothing companies and that there is anecdotal evidence that some officials administering RSA are not convinced of the merit of supporting investments in the sector. That is within my right hon. Friend's power to change.

On public procurement, the document recommends a partnership, and we should consider it. We do not need unfair competition; what is needed is a partnership of suppliers and purchasers to take advantage of UK products and our excellent skills in a sector in which we are world leaders.

10.46 am

Charlotte Atkins (Staffordshire, Moorlands): I, too, welcome the national strategy for the United Kingdom textile and clothing industry. The consultation document has much to offer the industry. Most importantly, it recognises that the industry holds its destiny in its own hands. Although trade associations, unions, universities, colleges and the Government have vital roles to play, the industry realises that to survive it must make itself globally competitive.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Judy Mallaber) said, the textile and clothing industry is still a significant employer. However, the industry is clearly approaching a watershed and there is a danger that further contraction will lead to the loss of a critical mass. The industry must and will take initiatives to put it on a more competitive footing, but that must be underpinned by more Government support if the industry is to survive this critical period of adjustment.

My constituency is typical of many textile industry areas. Most of its textile and clothing firms are suffering badly from the strength of the pound, although none

would blame the pound for all their ills. For example, Leek Dyeing and Finishing, which has been operating successfully for 16 years, last week announced that it is going into receivership. The combination of having to move premises, the lost orders resulting from a flood, and the strength of the pound make its products uncompetitive compared with imports from the far east. That was enough to push it under. However, it had invested in good equipment and premises, so with luck the business will be sold as a going concern, with the loss of only a few jobs.

Those firms that are busy have played to their strengths. Marling of Leek, with nearly 200 employees, is the biggest supplier of webbing in Europe. It makes safety harnesses, straps to secure lorry loads, climbing equipment and so on. It sells its webbing products at half the price that they could command a year and a half ago. At the same time, the price of yarn has risen. It is being stung at both ends. The firm has protected itself by becoming part of a bigger group, through which it markets its products. The company also recognises the value of investing in its work force. Under the Japanese-style Kaizen system, employees are rewarded for their ideas. If their innovations are introduced into the production system, the employee reaps some of the benefits. Thus, staff are empowered to involve themselves in the productivity and long-term viability of the company.

Selectus in Biddulph employs 230 people. It used to control the Velcro brand name in the UK, but now merely manufactures Velcro under contract from the company. Instead, Selectus is concentrating on its traditional ribbons business. Traditional outlets for its products have declined, so it has to find new outlets and ways of adding value to its output. As a Marks and Spencer accredited company, it still supplies stores, but instead of clothing, it is focusing on good design for packaging. As the far east catches up on design and quality, Selectus sees its future in developing new products and keeping ahead of the game through constant innovation and attention to the demands of the market and its customers. Like other companies, it has been hit by the strength of the pound. However, it protects its production volume by trading in foreign currencies. That may hit short-term profitability, but surviving this transitional period will protect its markets.

What does the experience of such local companies tell us about the future of the textile industry? In most areas of the textile industry, constant investment is required to remain internationally competitive. Such investment not only allows manufacturers to produce goods at lower unit costs but enables them to innovate through the development of new products and new processing techniques, so it is vital that the industry is fully aware of the funding streams to support innovation. The Department of Trade and Industry has an important role in ensuring that the industry is properly informed.

The UK textiles and clothing industry needs strong and relevant skills to compete successfully. However, there is a widely held perception that the industry is in decline—that it is low-tech, and does not offer good career prospects or good pay. If companies are to be successful, they must recognise training as an investment, rather than a cost. My local further education college in Leek is demonstrating the way forward. It has developed a high-tech textile design centre offering training, design packages, and technology to improve cutting techniques and overall efficiency and effectiveness. As many FE colleges are suffering the effects of long-term underfunding, financial backing is necessary to ensure the viability of such centres. If textile companies are to attract the bright recruits that are needed to develop the industry, there is no alternative to projecting a new image of the industry within schools and colleges. That must be backed by the relevant local skills councils and by regional development agencies.

There is a small window of opportunity to empower and invest in the industry. The industry has a bright future, but only if we face the challenges ahead and create the necessary partnerships to succeed. The creation of a national strategy for the UK textile and clothing industry is an excellent start.

10.53 am

Mr. Terry Rooney (Bradford, North): It is a pleasure to speak again in an Adjournment debate on the textile industry. It is the sixth such debate since I have been a Member of Parliament, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Judy Mallaber) on securing it.

I was amused by the comments of the hon. Member for Bosworth (Mr. Tredinnick), who referred to tax relief, rate relief, financial assistance and support, sit-ins and picket lines. If we had heard that during the first 10 years that he was in Parliament, the industry might be more grateful.

As I come from Bradford, I am steeped in the textile industry. I must have lanolin in my skin. My family has given 90-odd years' service to the textile industry and, sadly, suffered 25 redundancies. My family's history is the history of the textile industry. There have been some famous names in Bradford, but some of them have gone. Dawson, Pringle, Hields, Parkland, Listers, Woolcombers, Salts and Illingworth Morris were giants of the textile industry, but they are no longer, for reasons that are many and varied.

The textile industry is worth £27 billion, but 40,000 jobs have been lost in the past 12 months. That sounds bad, and it is, but in the 1981 recession 50,000 textile jobs were lost in West Yorkshire alone. That recession ripped the heart out of the industry, which reeled for a long time. Over the decades, the industry had many knockbacks and troughs but, unfortunately, very few peaks. Governments have had a role in all that. If at certain times in the past three or four decades the textile industry had been given any support at all, it would not be in the mess that it is in now.

A great deal has been said about support overseas. It is true that the money that is still being poured into the textile industry in Germany, Belgium and Italy has a direct impact on what is happening in this country. In Germany and Belgium, money is funnelled in through regional and state governments. Perhaps there is a lesson for us there. If we had elected regional assemblies, we might be able to indulge in the same practice. In Italy, support has gone primarily to the industry's design and marketing side, which is a major weakness of the British industry. It can make superb products but its design and marketing have never been what they should be.

[Mr. Terry Rooney]

The textile industry is not looking for handouts. It wants fairness, not favours; but, in fairness to it, the Government delivered body blows to it in the 1990s. Being a low-paid industry, it has always mirrored closely the assisted area status map and the objective 2 map. In the mid-1990s, large areas of the industry were removed from the objective 2 map. In 1993, assisted area status was removed from Bradford and given to Hastings, a decision that only compounded the felony. The industry does not want the Government to tie one hand behind its back. However, by way of a tribute to my right hon. Friend the Minister, I must say that Bradford is delighted to be on the assisted areas map once again. It will put that to good use.

In addition to losing assisted area status and being removed from the objective 2 map, there was the fiasco of the sell-out by the previous Government on the multi-fibre agreement. That was another body blow to the wool industry in particular. The right hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine), who concluded the Uruguay round of the general agreement on tariffs and trade in 1994, famously sold out the textile industry to obtain a deal on agriculture by signing an agreement that meant that British textile exports to the United States started with a 37 per cent. tariff, which decreased by 1 per cent. each year for 10 years. So when it is next reviewed in 2004, there will still be a 27 per cent. tariff—and these are supposed to be two free-trade nations. It is a joke.

The industry is wondering what to do next. Only this week the Government announced that they would give BAe £500 million. Previously they gave money to Jaguar, Rover and Ford. What the textile industry wants first and foremost is political support from around the world. Secondly, it wants support for its design and marketing sector. Thirdly, it needs support for trade fairs and other operations abroad. The industry needs to get its own act together. Last November, I visited the trade high commission in New York. I was told that last year its trade office received only 192 inquiries from the United Kingdom about access to the biggest market in the world. I find that frightening.

Regional development agencies have a role. An economic package is being put together in Yorkshire to identify deficiencies in the industry and help to reverse them. Much is said about the training requirements of the work force, but the greatest training requirement in the textile industry is, frankly, for management, in order to provide more foresight into where markets are and how to deliver them.

10.59 am

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East): In the north-west, 60,000 jobs are still dependent on the textile industry. I come from Bolton, which is synonymous with textiles, as both Crompton and Arkwright lived, worked and invented in the town. There are now three textile industries in the north-west. Everybody knows about the traditional cotton industry and there is also the clothing sector, on which 500 companies in the Greater Manchester area alone are dependent. There is also a growing third sector, called the technical textiles sector, about which I want to be upbeat.

The European market for technical textiles is around 21 per cent. of the entire textile market and it is growing at 5 per cent. per annum. That is true all over the world. The technical textile sector needs investment, and I plead with the Minister to support it. Traditional industrial textiles represent 43 per cent. of the sector; transportation, including automotive uses, 23 per cent.; civil engineering textiles, 10 per cent.; medical textiles, 10 per cent,; and protective clothing, 2 per cent.

The north-west is probably the UK centre of the industry. The aerospace industry is concentrated in the north-west. It uses many lightweight materials, including carbon, aramid and glass-fibre reinforced composites, which are all structured using textiles produced in the north-west. Some of our oldest companies—such as Andrews Textile Industries of Bury, which started out making laundry blankets in the previous century—are now some of the world leaders in the sector. That company now makes filtration fabrics, also a growing market. Medical textiles are also important. Smith and Nephew, Johnson and Johnson, Setons and Vernon Carus are all leading health care companies, relying more and more on the development of technical textiles in the medical context.

It may surprise right hon. and hon. Members to know that the modern motor car contains 20 per cent. by weight of textiles. It is a growing feature of the automotive industry, important for lightness, fuel consumption and so forth. That all shows how many leading players there are in this growing sector in the north-west.

I also wish to be upbeat about the clothing manufacturing sector. Indeed, the largest and most modern knitting facility in the UK is in Bolton, my home town. It is called Swordward and it manufactures football strip, using the most modern technology anywhere in the world. It satisfies a performance and fashion-conscious market that changes not only between seasons but, as shown by top clubs such as Manchester United, mid-season.

In Yorkshire, the woollen industry has got its act together and started a centre of excellence based in Huddersfield. I am pleased to announce this morning that the cotton industry in the north-west has also got its act together and on 1 March this year, at Bolton institute in my constituency, a centre of excellence was created by Professor Dick Horrocks, dean of technology. It involves many companies and organisations throughout the north-west. It has a business plan and needs more than £141,000 to see it through the first two years of the pilot project. So far it has raised £71,000. I look at the Minister and ask for help with the pilot project. It hopes to keep going beyond the initial two-year pilot stage. It will provide a great impetus to developing the north-west textile industry. My congratulations go to the Bolton institute, to Professor Dick Horrocks and to all the people, including the unions, who played a role in establishing that centre of excellence.

I would have liked to have said much more, but I know that time is short.

11.4 am

Mr. Michael Moore (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale): We have had an important and timely debate this morning. Some hon. Members have tried to

catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and some have succeeded and kept their comments brief, which shows how important our debate is and how many different interests there are around the country. I congratulate the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Judy Mallaber) on securing the debate. I pay tribute to her work as chair of the all-party parliamentary clothing and textiles group. I should also like to highlight the importance of the document that we are discussing this morning.

Textiles are very important in the area that I represent, but the sector has been badly bruised over the past couple of years. Thousands of jobs have been lost at household names like Pringle, Laidlaw and Fairgrieve and at many other smaller operators. My constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood) contain three of the five travel-to-work areas in the Scottish borders. They feature in the top 10 travel-to-work areas in the UK in terms of dependency on the textile industry. We therefore keep a careful eye on the sector.

Few industries know the blast of global competition quite like textiles, whether it is importing yarn, competing with imported goods or exporting the finished goods around the world. As the hon. Member for Amber Valley pointed out, the report recognises that ultimately the industry's destiny lies in its own hands and the authors do

> not seek to protect the domestic industry from the winds of change.

Those comments would find an echo in the Scottish borders. Changing ownership is one aspect of the current world situation that causes a great deal of concern.

My hon. Friend the Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire recently visited Hong Kong where he met the Fang brothers, who have just taken over Pringle, one of the most significant employers in Hawick and the Scottish borders. That is a substantial change of ownership from the previous ownership under Dawson international. The announcement has generated a great deal of optimism, but until we know the final details, there is still uncertainty. I hope that the Government will make it their job to monitor how ownership of the whole sector is changing in a fast-paced world.

I should like to focus briefly on the cashmere industry, which is particularly significant to the area I represent, to the Scottish economy and, indeed, to the UK economy as a whole. A constant theme throughout this morning's debate has been the success of the textiles industry, and I wish to echo that. Cashmere is a good example: it is a huge export earner and one of the high value niche products highlighted by the report. A year ago the cashmere sector was in the middle of the so-called banana war, with thousands of jobs at risk from the unilateral action of the United States Government on tariffs. We got through that. There were difficult times but most businesses have recovered.

One key recommendation in the report that will be welcomed throughout the area is the need for a level playing field. Manufacturers in my part of the world desire that above all else. I draw specific attention to the recommendation that

> priorities for trade liberalisation should be prepared by the leading trade associations. . . . Effective mechanisms should be established for ensuring an ongoing dialogue between trade officials and industry representatives to agree how these priorities should be pursued.

There is a great deal of anxiety in the cashmere sector about the multi-fibre arrangement. Local cashmere producers believed that cashmere products would see the end of quotas only at the final stage of the multi-fibre arrangement in January 2005. They have become extremely alarmed about the possibility that quotas might end as soon as 1 January 2002. With businesses planning investment and product development over a long period, that shortened time scale would be extremely damaging for the sector. Mr. George Peden, the chairman of the Scottish Cashmere Association, has been in correspondence with the Department and was told on 22 February that there can be

> no cast iron guarantee on the final exclusion of cashmere from the stage three re-integration list.

In other words, cashmere could be back in full competition as soon as 2002.

Could the Minister confirm that that is the case or perhaps give us a basis for optimism? The letter acknowledged that the Department would fight a hard case to ensure that the United Kingdom strongly opposes any proposal that category 5—cashmere jerseys—should be one of the categories that are reintegrated. What steps are the Commission and the DTI taking to ensure that reintegration, and therefore the lifting of quota limits, does not take place until 2005?

The most important thing that the Government can bring to the debate is a level playing field, not least with a prospect of an end to quotas at some point. We must be confident that the policing of the World Trade Organisation rules will be rigorous. As has already been said, we must remember that China has not always been the best at sticking to existing rules.

Uncertainty is a killer for business. Cashmere survived the massive blight of the banana war. It cannot afford the uncertainty created by the prospect of the early lifting of quotas. I hope that the Minister will not only pay tribute to the sector and recognise its strengths, but take steps to remove that uncertainty.

11.10 am

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): I congratulate the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Judy Mallaber) on securing this debate. Just over a year ago, on 27 January 1999, I introduced a one-and-a-half-hour Adjournment debate on the textile industry on the Floor of the House. Many of the concerns that hon. Members expressed then have been exacerbated by the number of factory closures in the UK textile industry and by the trend to move offshore, which continues apace. We are all worried about that.

It is interesting to note that not only retailers are now purchasing abroad; the manufacturers who supply those retailers, who are often in partnership with their key retailing customers, are relocating as part of a bilateral agreement between two sectors and two companies. That is worrying. It is not simply a matter of UK retailers shopping the world, as they are entitled to do; there seems to be a trend towards moving the manufacturing source in conjunction with the retailer. Marks and Spencer, which has been mentioned many times this morning, is a classic example of that.

In the debate on 27 January 1999, the then Minister, the hon. Member for Leeds, West (Mr. Battle), told me:

[Mrs. Angela Browning]

the bottom is not falling out of the industry. We are stabilising the industry.—[*Official Report*, 27 January 1999; Vol. 324, c. 277.]

Clearly that is not the case. The industry has not stabilised. We should welcome any advance information that the Minister can give us ahead of the Government's response to this important and timely document about the role that they can play in ensuring the industry's stability, a year on.

I want to draw hon. Members' attention to one or two issues raised in the document, which makes it clear that this is not a complacent industry. The industry is not sitting back at a time of crisis for many of those concerned, saying that somebody must do something. It is engaged—hence the document—with others in looking for solutions and does not look to others to solve the problems. The hon. Member for Amber Valley and others have flagged up areas such as innovation and marketing, in which the industry has recognised that it has a role to play. Perhaps the Minister will give us an idea of the Government's thinking on how they can contribute, particularly in relation to the World Trade Organisation talks.

One section of the document refers to exports going to markets outside the European Union. It says that such markets often face tariff barriers, but duties and other barriers remain high in many markets, including in the south American countries, which have been opened up, the Indian sub-continent and elsewhere in Asia. The World Trade Organisation must be involved in that. In the debate on the Floor of the House, the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry said that, despite the debacle in Seattle, the Government would be a key player in the EU to bring the talks back on course and make progress.

It was interesting to note that the industry wants the Government to help to initiate bilateral agreements. Some time ago, I suggested to the Minister—I cannot remember whether the suggestion took the form of a parliamentary question or a letter—that the Government could advance bilateral agreements not only in this but in other sectors. I received a rather negative response. He must realise that we cannot sit back and wait until the American elections have finished and World Trade Organisation talks are cranked up again; the Government must take the initiative. As the hon. Member for Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale (Mr. Moore) said, the problem with cashmere, which was debated in January of last year, was resolved through a Government initiative. Although cashmere is important, it is not unique in the textile industry, and others would like to see progress made through such Government input. I hope that the Minister can reassure us in that regard.

The report raises other issues that affect the Government, including regulation, which is dealt with in paragraph 9.4. All manufacturing sectors are subject to additional regulatory burdens. According to the British Chambers of Commerce, regulations cost business nearly £10 billion in just under three years and recurring costs amount to £2.4 billion a year. However, there are further costs that will affect this sector. I have received representations about one particular cost, which prompted me to debate the textile industry on the Floor of the House last year. John Heathcoat, a successful company in my constituency, is extremely concerned, as are others, about the proposed climate change tax to which it will be subject. There are other, smaller manufacturers in my constituency, but John Heathcoat is a global player.

Parliament has been lobbied many times in respect of that tax, and the Government have modified the Chancellor's original formula. However, it is clear that, having invested capital in more energy-efficient plant, the industry will not reap the benefit because the formula will impose additional costs through the tax. I flag up the matter because clothing manufacturers such as John Heathcoat, which incorporates a dyeing facility, use a lot of energy. Energy is a significant component of manufacturing costs. Responsible companies that have invested money in consuming energy in as lean and efficient a manner as possible deserve that the Government rethink the climate change tax, particularly now, when the industry is under great pressure.

The document refers to a disparity in how regulation is implemented in the UK and in other European Union countries. The Dutch have implemented their version of the tax in a flexible way, so that their core industries, which are high energy users, are not damaged. The Dutch are not unique. We all accept that the environment is an important component in considering costs and raising taxes. None the less, it is extraordinary to note that, having reached our Kyoto target many years ahead of the target date, the Government intend to place additional punitive burdens on industries. Those industries are seeking the Government's help and support, and many of them can demonstrate that they have met their environmental responsibilities.

The Minister should not be complacent about paragraph 9.4 of the document, which identifies the burden of regulatory costs, or about the fact that the UK implements them disproportionately. It refers to the impact assessment—which is usually carried out before the implementation of secondary legislation—in terms of the cost to business, and suggests that it has resulted in legislation being modified. Can the Minister say where the impact assessment has taken into account the cost to business and cite specific examples of how the sector has been assisted by that?

The contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (Mr. Tredinnick) was consistent with the representations that he has made on behalf of the industry throughout his parliamentary career. Having not been in the House when he made his maiden speech, I was somewhat surprised to discover that it was on the subject of Chinese underwear. No doubt that was an important threat to the UK market at the time.

I again congratulate the hon. Member for Amber Valley on securing the debate. All hon. Members have spoken with great knowledge and clarity.

11.21 am

The Minister of State for Trade (Mr. Richard Caborn): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Judy Mallaber) on giving us the opportunity to debate the industry again. We have had such debates on many occasions. I remind hon. Members that had it not been for a meeting in November 1998 between

representatives of the industry and the then Minister responsible, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, West (Mr. Battle), the debate would not be taking place against the background of the report.

Some of the comments of Conservative Members were a bit rich, given that during their 18 years in power they did nothing for the industry. In respect of the contribution of the hon. Member for Bosworth (Mr. Tredinnick), if there had been a strategy for wiring up the industry, e-commerce and other information technology equipment could easily have been used. As it is, it is probably one of the worst sectors in terms of the development of communications and information technology systems. He was right to say that e-commerce and business to business communication are vital. The industry will find progress difficult, because the foundation was not laid in the past, but we are determined to ensure that it takes place.

The underlying theme of the debate was that partnership and consensus are emerging against the background of the report, which is a well-informed piece of work. That is pleasing, and is a far cry from the days of adversarial industrial relations. The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) referred to paragraph 9.4 of the report. That paragraph also states:

> An example of good practice in this area was the introduction of the National Minimum Wage.

That is telling in respect of the progress that the industry has made in developing on a consensual basis. If a little consensus had emerged in previous years, when Governments of her party were in power, the industry's structural weaknesses could have been addressed more effectively.

I shall begin by clarifying the status of the document. It is currently being circulated in draft form as a consultation document. It contains the initial views of the textile and clothing strategy group, which has circulated it in order to seek the views of a wide range of interested parties who could be affected. So far, about 40 reponses have been received from individuals, companies, university representative bodies and other interested parties. I understand that the textile and clothing strategy group intends to revise and amend the report in the light of those comments, and will publish the final version later in the spring.

As the group is still at the consultation stage, it would not be wise for me to give a detailed response now, but I can give an assurance that Ministers from my Department will respond to the finalised recommendations. Indeed, we have kept in close contact with the group in the course of our work. As has been said, the DTI has been involved in the secretariat. All parties will welcome the professional job that it has done, for which I am grateful. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and my hon. Friends the Ministers for Small Business and E-Commerce and for Competitiveness have all attended meetings of the group. They will meet the group again to discuss the recommendations once they have been finalised. That shows how seriously the DTI ministerial team takes the report.

The textile and clothing stategy group comprises representatives of a cross-section of those who have leading roles in the textile and clothing industry. It represents a powerful parternship. Large and small manufacturers are represented on the group, as well as trade associations, universities, trade unions—whose positive role in relation to the report has been referred to today—retailers and DTI officials. The textile and clothing strategy group is an industry-led body; it is not a Government body, although DTI Ministers have actively encouraged the group's work and have provided it with a secretarial resource. I stress that the group is industry-led because, together with DTI colleagues, the industry must identify the issues that face it, and take the lead in addressing those issues. That does not mean that the Government do not have an important role to play.

To put the report aside for a moment, DTI Ministers have been impressed by the spirit of partnership displayed by the various participants—the industry, trade associations, retailers, unions and academics—in trying to resolve difficult problems. The report stated, as I have, that it would be premature to respond to individual recommendations, because they are currently only provisional, but I want to make some general observations against the background of the report.

I hope that industry will be receptive, and that bodies such as the regional development agencies, to which reference has been made, will be influenced. Those business-led boards, in English regions where the textile industry resides, have given serious consideration to that sector of the industry to ensure that it is part of the regional industrial strategy and wealth-creating base. Once the report is finalised between the various parties and the Government, hon. Members who have a vested interest should ensure that such concerns are factored into regional development agency strategies to maximum effect. Higher education, the development of regional selective assistance—in which RDAs have a major input—and the development of training and skills councils, for which RDAs have the major strategic responsibility, are relevant in that regard. Innovation is also relevant, and our policy on clusters of innovation will unfold during the next few weeks. The report can inform the debate on the development of economic strategies and wealth creation.

On cashmere and the multi-fibre agreement, we are in dialogue with the industry but a definitive position has not been reached. As the hon. Member for Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale (Mr. Moore) acknowledged, we are taking a robust approach. If there are interested parties in his constituency who want to raise the matter with my Department, we are more than happy to receive them. If he wants to contact me afterwards, I shall provide more detail.

In response to the comments made by the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton, the World Trade Organisation set up the multi-fibre agreement, which was signed under the previous Administration. Its implementation is being discussed with regard to cashmere. The Government will take a strong brief on the matter.

I also agree with hon. Members who raised the issue of Marks and Spencer. It is crucial that the atmosphere of partnership created by this document be taken on board. M & S could be said to have been arrogant with the supply chain, instead of working in partnership to

[Mr. Richard Caborn]

promote development in a wider context, which might have prevented some of the damage that has been done to the industry. That is the moral of the story and—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Frank Cook): Order. Time is up.

Bus Services (Vale of York)

11.30 am

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): I am delighted to have secured this debate.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Frank Cook): Order. Would hon. Members please leave the Chamber quietly? We have business to discuss.

Miss McIntosh: Thank you, Mr. Cook. As I was saying, I am delighted to have secured this debate on support for bus services in the Vale of York.

The Government paid lip service to improving public transport in their White Paper on the future of transport published about two years ago, entitled "A New Deal for Transport: Better for Everyone". On page 40, the section dealing with more and better buses states:

> Buses are already the workhorses of the public transport system and in many parts of the country they are the only form of public transport. Increasingly they will become the focus of an efficient transport system that gets people to where they want to be quickly and comfortably, without having to rely on cars. But people will not switch from the comfort of their cars to buses that are old, dirty, unreliable and slow. Too often, buses have been treated and seen as 'second class' transport. It doesn't have to be like this and is certainly not the case in many other European countries. As part of the New Deal for transport, we want better buses—clean, comfortable and convenient. Bus lanes and other priority measures will help to get buses running on time.

That was two years ago. One must contrast the lip service paid to the new deal for transport with what is happening on the ground in the Vale of York, where bus services are being reduced and, in some cases, withdrawn. I have corresponded with the Minister and his colleagues on these cases, and I hope that he will be able to respond in detail this morning.

The first case is the Haxby and Wigginton to York service. Routes 22 and 22A were withdrawn in spring 1999 and reinstated after constituents had expressed dismay and disappointment, and after I had expressed support for the services continuing. First York gave an assurance in February 1999 that, if the bus routes were changed again, a similar consultation exercise would take place. However, last summer, the bus routes were changed by First York without wide consultation. The services were withdrawn, having been reinstated.

There are now no direct services from Haxby and Wigginton to the hospital—which presents an acute problem for older people visiting relatives—or to the Theatre Royal or the station. That causes great inconvenience and, in some cases, distress to my constituents. First York made the point that journeys to the hospital and the theatre may be made via Fulford, which is an expanding community—as are Haxby and Wigginton. However, that service avoids the traffic problems and congestion on the Haxby road by bypassing it completely, which means that the journey time from Haxby is much greater, and in one case involves a change of buses. My constituents have expressed serious consternation about that.

I turn to the Linton-on-Ouse to York service. In January 2000, bus services from Linton to York were drastically reduced. The number of journeys to York was slashed from 13 a day to five, with only one bus running during the main part of the working day

between 7.30 am and 5.30 pm. Local residents are now even more dependent on access to a car to get into York from Linton. The cuts highlight the fact that the Government have failed to deliver on the pledge that they gave as recently as two years ago to improve public transport services in rural areas. Linton is especially important because it is a Royal Air Force base. One constituent wrote to me saying that he is about to serve a four-month term in Kuwait, leaving his wife without access to a car. Mothers with families and older people are having to turn more and more to cars or taxis instead of the bus services to which they, rightly, believe they are entitled.

First York made no excuses for the cuts and simply stated that the current service is uneconomical because there is not enough local demand. Thanks to North Yorkshire county council, one bus service was reinstated and departs from Linton-on-Ouse at 11.10.

In correspondence dated 28 February this year, the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the hon. Member for Streatham (Mr. Hill), admitted that

there is need for improvement in local bus services in many areas.

He went on to promise to introduce measures to secure greater stability in bus services, primarily through quality partnerships, and to ensure that local authorities had more influence over the provision of public transport. He also promised to provide powers to enable local authorities to introduce bus quality contracts to give greater control over delivery of local bus services. Will the Minister verify which, if any, of the initiatives promised me by the Under-Secretary have been implemented in north Yorkshire?

I turn to the park-and-ride scheme at Rawcliffe. Despite severe opposition from residents—I also opposed it—the scheme was moved from the excellent, practical site at Clifton Moor to a greenbelt location. The opposition arose because it is one of the few remaining greenbelt sites at Rawcliffe. I said at the time that congestion on the A19 would increase, and there are record tailbacks beyond the roundabout at the Rawcliffe interchange with the bypass to York. At busy times, it can take 40 minutes for constituents to cross the roundabout. I and many hon. Members would like more park-and-ride schemes and more parking facilities to enable people to use the buses, but they should not be put in silly places where they cause increased congestion.

I pay tribute to North Yorkshire county council's wide consultation on public transport services. It demonstrates that the key to successful delivery of service in a rural area is through consultation, particularly with the parish councils, to ensure that the right bus arrives in the right place at the right time. North Yorkshire county council has an excellent record on spending public money responsibly. It is currently spending £1.68 million each year on public transport. Some of that fund has been allocated to an additional service from Linton-on-Ouse to York. The Government offered £1.38 million to North Yorkshire county council in April 1998. However, the spending guidelines were withheld by the Department until June 1998, so the money could not be spent on sustained initiatives within the financial year and the grant was returned and re-allocated in 1999. One good reason for that was that it would have been impossible for North Yorkshire county council to have spent more than 50 per cent. on services, which would have required continued funding in the following year. There would have been no continuity of service and it would have been unfair to my constituents to introduce a new service one year and to discontinue it the following year when they may have come to depend on it. North Yorkshire county council spends a lot of time consulting with local bodies and, primarily parish councils, to ensure that such grants are used in the best way possible. As a result, services to Easingwold in my constituency and Stokesley in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition have been extended, while services for Thirsk railway station have been developed greatly and the Bedale to Northallerton route has been greatly improved.

As a result of that efficiency, the Government have allocated to North Yorkshire county council a further grant over three years of £4.14 million at the rate of £1.38 million a year. In the financial year 2000–01 a community transport scheme will be developed in the Wixley area of the Vale of York, which is most welcome.

Consultation does pay, but I draw the Minister's attention to the fact that the rural bus fund brings less to rural bus services than the amount that the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Reigons takes away from shire counties' transport budgets. I ask the Minister and the Government to extend the rural bus grant to community transport schemes, which would help the disabled, the elderly, volunteers and local residents, especially in rural areas. I urge the Minister to take this opportunity to encourage the provision of bus services in rural areas, particularly those from Vale of York to the urban parts of York, some of which fall within my constituency.

City of York council gave a disappointing response to the reduction of services from Haxby to Wigginton. No alterations have been made to the reduced service and there are no plans to use any part of the council's budget to reinstate the service. Minor alterations are being made to ensure that existing services are more efficient during peak traffic congestion. I wish to put on record my disappointment at City of York council's poor reaction to the reduced service.

Will the Minister consider investment in vehicles through the introduction of a bus grant? Rural bus usage is not yet high enough to encourage operators to invest in high quality vehicles. Services provided in rural urban areas contrast hugely and action is required to enable the quality of service in rural areas to keep pace with developments in urban areas. Will the Government see fit to make a bus grant available to bus operators who provide rural services? That would ensure that rural services kept pace with those expanding in urban areas.

I invite the Government to take other measures to improve bus services and to encourge greater use of buses by passengers—for example, by maintaining or perhaps increasing fuel duty rebate or by making community transport schemes eligible for such rebates. Rural bus grants could also be used to support existing services rather than just new schemes. It would be sensible to use the money to support existing services.

In conclusion, the Government are all promises and no delivery; all mouth and no action. Far from their improving public transport prior to the introduction of

[Miss McIntosh]

congestion and workplace charging, services in the Vale of York are being withdrawn, run down and reduced. If the Government are serious about delivering better bus services and a more integrated transport system, they must address the real problem of declining bus use. Through-ticketing and multi-journey tickets would help, as would greater integration with rail services or the prospect of a rural transport grant to integrate bus and rail services.

The Vale of York has a highly developed rail connection service—through Thirsk, to Northallerton and York, by the east-coast and cross-pennine routes. It would make great sense for passengers to interconnect between buses and railways. Denmark provides the model: with one ticket, people can travel for an hour on buses, or electric or ordinary trains. We should be working to achieve that in this country. Motorists face higher punitive fuel taxes and vehicle excise duty, but only a small part of such moneys is reinvested in the roads or public transport. I urge the Government to put more money raised in that way into public transport to encourage motorists to leave their cars at home and take the bus. Indeed, my proposal is just the ticket to get people to do that. I hope that the Under-Secretary will reassure my constituents that there will be a better bus service in the Vale of York in future.

11.45 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Chris Mullin): The hon. Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh) raised an important matter and made several sensible suggestions. However, she was rather cheeky: no one would guess from her speech that investment in rural bus services is at its highest level for many years. I shall do my best to address her points and shall say a word or two about the Government's overall policy.

We accept the importance of supporting public transport in rural areas. In the Budget of March 1998, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced an additional £50 million a year to increase accessibility and mobility in the countryside. England's share was £41.7 million, of which £32.5 million was allocated to local authorities to support new rural bus services—that is the rural bus subsidy grant to which the hon. Lady referred. The allocation was based on the size of the rural population and the number of people living in settlements with a population of 3,000 or lower.

Benefits of that new money are already becoming apparent. A careful study of the hon. Lady's speech would reveal that she referred to some of those benefits. In 1998–99, the first year of the scheme, 1,800 new or improved services were introduced nationally. The Government have recently announced that the rural bus subsidy grant will continue beyond 2000–01 for a further three years at its current level at least. As a result, a further £100 million will be available to improve rural bus services.

The grant is for local scheduled services. Funds have also been set aside for the rural bus challenge competition, aimed at encouraging innovative and cost-effective bus-related schemes that provide and promote new rural transport ideas. Following the 1999 Budget, the challenge total was increased to a minimum of £15 million for at least the next two competitions. In the first two years of the competition, 104 schemes totalling about £28 million have been supported: 46 received a total of £11.4 million in 1998, and 58 a total of £16.8 million in 1999.

The remaining £4.2 million of the £32.5 million funding was allocated to the rural transport partnership, whose overall objective is to reduce social exclusion through enhanced accessibility to jobs and services. The Countryside Agency is responsible for that grant.

The rural bus challenge and the rural transport partnership funds can be used flexibly—for example to improve bus and rail integration. However, they are not intended to support rural rail services, for which funding is available through the rail passenger partnership funds.

In 1998–99, North Yorkshire county council received a rural bus subsidy grant of £1.38 million, and will receive a similar amount for each of the two subsequent years of the funding scheme. As the hon. Lady said, in 1998–99, the council spent only £326,000 of its grant, less than 25 per cent. of the available funding and a shortfall that has been highlighted on previous occasions. As the hon. Lady said, there were mitigating circumstances, but many authorities—unlike North Yorkshire county council—managed to spend their full allocation. We recognised all along that it might not be possible for every authority to spend its full allocation in the first year because of the need to consult and to seek the necessary powers to make the grant payments. However, North Yorkshire's underspend was the largest of any authority. In the circumstances, it is a bit rich of the hon. Lady to complain about the lack of Government support for buses in her constituency. However, that was in the past; we are concerned about the future so I shall not dwell on the matter.

The key issue, as the hon. Lady rightly says, is improvement in local bus services in consultation with rural communities. In the current year, the grant allocation for North Yorkshire is again £1.38 million, and I am pleased that the county council has confirmed that it will spend the full allocation this time round. Among the services to benefit will be those in the hon. Lady's constituency between York and Easingwold and Easingwold and Thirsk. I am glad that the hon. Lady welcomed that, although she did so rather quietly.

North Yorkshire county council was also successful in the rural bus challenge awards. In 1999 it received £43,200 for the Wixley area community transport project in the hon. Lady's constituency. The scheme provides for a fully accessible vehicle for community groups in Wixley and adjacent villages. I hope that the county council will learn from the success of other councils elsewhere by introducing future innovative schemes for rural bus challenge funding. The county council has not been as successful as other authorities in securing funds under the challenge scheme, which rewards innovation in providing rural transport.

I spoke about the rural transport partnership funds, five of which have been established in North Yorkshire since the introduction of the scheme by the Countryside Agency in 1998: the Craven, Ryedale, Selby and Richmond partnerships and the Harrogate and

Hambleton partnerships. Nine awards have so far been made, and a total of £145,000 has been put into rural transport partnerships and rural transport development funds in the county. The hon. Lady will note that that is in addition to the £2.8 million allocated to date in rural bus subsidy grant and rural bus challenge schemes in North Yorkshire. I stress that it is new money that was not available under the previous Government, of whom the hon. Lady was a supporter.

It may be of interest to the hon. Lady and her constituents that North Yorkshire county council has launched a new telephone inquiry service that provides information on public transport journeys starting or finishing in the county.

Miss McIntosh: the Minister is replying to the part of my speech that related to the North Yorkshire county council services. I called the debate in order to ask about the reduction of services in the city of York, especially those from Haxby and Wigginton to York and from Linton-on-Ouse. I hope that the Minister will answer my questions.

Mr. Mullin: By coincidence, I was coming to that matter. I shall start with Linton-on-Ouse. The majority of bus services outside London—85 per cent.—are commercially provided by private operators, and decisions on the extent and frequency of those services are primarily a matter for the commercial judgment of bus operators. The Linton-on-Ouse to York service was a commercial service, which the operator decided to withdraw. As the hon. Lady said, North Yorkshire county council arranged for replacement, subsidised services and will no doubt keep the situation under review. My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the hon. Member for Streatham (Mr. Hill), wrote to the hon. Lady about the matter; his letter was slightly more upbeat than she suggested, as she quoted from it rather selectively.

The hon. Lady referred to Haxby and Wigginton on Second Reading of the Transport Bill last December. These services are provided commercially—that is, without local authority subsidy—by First York, a subsidiary of the First Group plc. Following a review last September, the company altered services to the hospital and railway station so that they run directly from Haxby village centre to York without deviation to the housing estate in the Wheatfield lane-Oaktree lane area that it served previously. I believe that the aim was to reduce journey times and encourage greater use of the service, in which respect, it has been successful. I understand that after discussions with residents, the company has again modified the route so that services come with a 300 m walking distance of the area. The local authority thinks that it would not be appropriate to subsidise a service to the area, given that there is a commercial service within reasonable walking distance.

Local authorities have a crucial role in delivering integrated local transport and in improving rural bus services. The Transport Bill now wending its way through the House will give local authorities, including North Yorkshire, the necessary tools to develop effective bus services. Among other things, the Bill introduces a national minimum standard for local authority concessionary fare schemes, guaranteeing all pensioners at least half fare on buses, or payment of not more than £5 a year for a pass—something that some of the hon. Lady's older constituents will welcome.

National targets have been agreed with the bus industry on reducing the age of the bus fleet and improving the reliability of services. We are also introducing new customer satisfaction surveys this year, and we shall publish the results. We have removed the previous Administration's freeze on the bus fuel duty rebate paid to bus operators. This rebate totals £100 million—more than it was two years ago—and it has helped the industry to keep fares down. Investment by the bus industry is £400 million a year, its highest for many years after some years of decline under the previous Administration.

We are committed to ensuring further improvements to bus services. The hon. Lady made some sensible suggestions. She also called for a bus grant. I am always a little nervous when Tory Members of Parliament start demanding more public spending because I know that their colleagues—and sometimes themselves—will jump up and down to talk about stealth taxes to raise the money. However, with that caveat in mind, I shall pass on the hon. Lady's suggestion. I have described our commitment to rural bus services, some of which have benefited the hon. Lady's constituency. We have a reasonably good story to tell, and I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving me a chance to tell it.

Dry Stone Walls

11.57 am

Helen Jackson (Sheffield, Hillsborough): This is the first time that I have had an Adjournment debate, and spoken in, the new Chamber at Westminster Hall. I am delighted to raise a subject dear to my heart. Thousands of people, including the Minister, share my love of the Pennine hills and other upland areas, where the landscape is traced with walls that climb up to the horizon, fringed with foxgloves in the spring and harebells in the summer.

The walls vary hugely. Some are white in limestone areas, others are grey gritstone in the southern Pennines and others are blue slate. Depending on which side the wind blows, lichen and mosses cover them. They were built with great skill many years ago, to mark a boundary, to clear stones from the fields, or to shelter new-born lambs and livestock and keep livestock safe and within a field's parameter. Some walls are very old—pre-Romano-British. As the Government acknowledge in their response to the report of the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and the Regions, there is little data on exactly how old and dilapidated they are, but they are important. They are home not only to lichen, mosses and wild flowers, but to insects and many species of birds. Wrens and little owls nest in them. The centres of dry stone walls are very warm, so they are also home to hibernating reptiles. The great crested newt likes to spend the winter there. They are intersected by many other important stone features: big stone posts at gateways, step stiles, squeeze stiles and sheep creeps—an expression I did not know until I started to research the subject. I can enlighten hon. Members later if they are interested.

For years, dry stone walls have been mapped. They are used on Ordnance Survey maps for guidance. They are an integral feature of the upland countryside, and are loved by local farmers as well as walkers, riders and the urban population of the north of England who, in the words of the song, may be wageslaves on Mondays, but are free men on Sundays. At present, dry stone walls have no statutory protection. They are disappearing and crumbling at an alarming rate.

The House has been concerned about hedgerows for many years. A private Member's Bill is proceeding, but we are waiting for firm proposals from the Government on how to respond. Of all traditional field boundaries, dry stone walls are especially vulnerable because they have a market value. There is a price on their heads, so to speak. The Countryside and Rights of Way Bill receives its Second Reading on Monday, but the Government have missed the opportunity to include a clause about field boundaries and possible protection for dry stone walls.

The Countryside Commission survey of May 1995 showed that 50 per cent. of the 112,000 km of dry stone walls in the country are derelict or not stock-proofed. South Yorkshire has the fifth highest density of dry stone walls in the country: only 5.4 per cent. of its walls are classed A or B which means sound; 54 per cent. are classed C, which means semi-derelict and in need of restoration; and 44 per cent. are so derelict that they consist only of remnants.

Dry stone walls crumble for many reasons, some of them perfectly natural. Rabbits burrow around and underneath them so that they collapse. They need constant repair. Road works often damage dry stone walls along the highways. They are often demolished to improve access for farmers to fields or even woodlands and forests. Bodies that should know better, such as the Forestry Commission and Severn Trent Water, have demolished walls to gain access to woodlands. Stones are also taken by members of the public, who go along in cars on Sundays and think that putting a few stones in the boot to improve their gardens and rockeries will not do much harm.

More worrying is the damage done when larger topping stones or copes are taken in a fairly systematic commercial way to garden centres, possibly all over the country, for their market value. Once a wall loses its heavy topping stone, deterioration is more rapid. They also crumble away, as farmers use other barriers such as electric fences or netting to keep livestock in. Most worryingly, in my area they are often simply sold—and that it why I have asked for this debate. One week a wall is there, the next week it has been taken away to be sold. The current cost of local stone is about £40 per tonne, and it is going up. That adds up to £6,200 for 100 m of stone wall. Hill farmers in my constituency have had a rough time over the BSE crisis and the general crisis in stock farming, and there is a huge temptation for them to sell off a wall to bridge a short-term crisis or financial problem.

Farmers are also put under pressure by planning rules which, in areas such as mine to the north of Sheffield, increasingly and rightly insist that any rebuilding ought to be done in local stone. The frequent transformation of farm buildings into residential accommodation puts up demand for local stone, which puts up the price—the vicious circle that puts pressure on the farmers. The increasingly common transfer of agricultural property to residential or holiday home use often means that walls lose their purpose as stock boundaries, fall into disrepair and crumble, because the people living there are not keeping sheep or cattle. As the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee said in the excellent, thorough inquiry that it carried out two years ago, the situation is worrying.

The answer is twofold—there should be incentives and disincentives. There must be not only an extension of the incentives to protect dry stone walls, but a clear disincentive, backed by legislation if possible, to prevent the removal of the whole or part of any dry stone wall without good reason. That is especially necessary in areas of outstanding natural beauty, conservation areas and national parks.

The disincentives could include a requirement to get permission from a national park or a local authority, or consult a local conservation body. The Minister might consider that that work could come within the remit of the local access forums, when they are established. I am not calling for a rigid ban on the removal of the whole or part of any stone wall; such removals are part of the evolutionary process in the countryside. However, the key phrase in the new legislation, which is central to the Government's policy, is "good countryside management". The laissez-faire attitude cannot continue.

Moves by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to put countryside management and stewardship schemes at the heart of its grant regime are to be wholeheartedly welcomed, as is the recent

announcement that the money going into the schemes will be increased. Local farmers in my constituency often talk to me through the NFU, the Dry Stone Walling Association and the Council for the Protection of Rural England. They say that, although they are committed to restoring and maintaining walls on their land, the countryside stewardship grant schemes insist on their being part of an integrated countryside management structure, while farmers are often looking for something simpler. They want to be able to say, "I want a programme of restoration for the walls on my land, which would take three or four years, and some grant aid would help me do the work over one or two years." The proposal is supported by the Council for the Protection of Rural England and the Dry Stone Walling Association and was included in their briefings on the Countryside Bill and their response to the Select Committee's report. I understand that the Yorkshire dales, which I am sure the Minister knows well, runs a programme of countryside protection in which barns and walls are given extra European money. That category in the grant regime has stemmed the deterioration of the limestone walls and miles of walling have been renewed and restored. That is an example of how the grant regime can be improved.

I am discussing not just walls, but the traditional skill of walling and the people with that skill. The inhabitants of Dungworth in my constituency always know that walling is taking place when they hear the beautiful baritone voice of a farmer called Hector, who sings hymns as he mends walls.

In that context I pay tribute to the efforts of the Dry Stone Walling Association, which has pressed wallers' arguments strongly. I agree with the officers of that association that it is not good enough to allow grant schemes to go forward without any check on whether the work is being done by skilled or expert wallers. If it is not, walls will continue to crumble, which would not be good value for money.

As well as the wallers' skills, voluntary conservation groups play a key role. In another part of my constituency a volunteer group goes out on Sunday mornings under the guidance of a trained waller to tidy up and strengthen walls around woodland areas. The volunteers learn a skill, increase the community's appreciation of the environment and improve the look of the woodlands and the strength of the walls.

If the House is serious about looking after the countryside in our overcrowded islands, action is needed. The public will not forgive us if we simply watch in the hope that our country's heritage remains. Without action, it will be too late. I urge the Minister to talk seriously to his colleagues. A major Bill is passing through the House with the protection of the countryside at its heart, and I support its principles. Today, I want to raise awareness of one small element of the countryside—field boundaries, which are a crucial part of our upland countryside. The public and those who love the countryside would not forgive us if we missed this opportunity to prevent deterioration in dry stone walls, which will inevitably occur if we do not take steps to prevent it.

12.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Chris Mullin): My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hillsborough (Helen Jackson) has raised an important issue, and I thank her for initiating this debate with great distinction and charm. The way in which she presented her case demonstrated that she cares about this subject, but I have a small quibble. My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, West (Mr. Dowd), who has left the Chamber, advises me that newts are amphibians, not reptiles.

Helen Jackson: The Minister is of course correct. Frogs, toads and great crested newts are amphibians, but I am informed that reptiles such as the grass snake also enjoy hibernating in the central areas of dry stone walls, which provide warmth.

Mr. Mullin: I shall not follow my hon. Friend down that path, because I would quickly be out of my depth. As she probably knows, I am walking in four stages from Holy Island to the Lake district—a journey of about 250 miles, much of which passes through the Pennines. So far, I have reached Barnard castle. I passed many stone walls along the way and, as she said, they are in varying states of repair and neglect.

Since taking on this post, I have noticed that differing forms of boundary can excite many, often mixed emotions. Some people are keen to do away with boundaries such as the dreaded leylandii hedge, a subject on which we receive more letters than any other. However, there are other boundaries to which we want to give tender loving care, and dry stone walls fit firmly into that category.

My hon. Friend vividly described the various reasons why we want to save and nurture such features of the landscape, and said that they help to define the character of the countryside. There are often local differences in stone type and building techniques, and such visual variations are appreciated by passing ramblers in particular and the public in general. As she said, dry stone walls are important to a wide range of wildlife, and they remain functional. As well as controlling and sheltering livestock, they may help to prevent soil erosion and water run-off.

As has been said, dry stone walls are at risk. Although the countryside has never remained static, changes in recent decades have given rise to concern about the rate at which walls are disappearing. According to the countryside survey of 1990, there were about 86,000 km of dry walls in England—a dramatic decrease of about 15 per cent. in six, which was particularly serious in marginal upland andpastoral landscapes.

Helen Jackson: After this intervention, I shall let the Minister get on, but I want to emphasise a point that is relevant to my constituency and many others. Does he agree that there is a particular problem for countryside that abuts major urban conurbations?

Mr. Mullin: I am sure that that is right.

Only about 4 per cent. of walls were described as being in excellent condition. Where the stones of walls fall down, the wall can be put up again, but in the vicinity of some urban areas, the walls are disappearing. Some of the instant makeover gardening programmes may have a little to answer for in that respect. Against that background, my hon. Friend has called for the

[Mr. Mullin]

Government to give statutory protection to walls, which the Select Committee recommended. As the figures suggest, much of our knowledge about dry stone walls is five or 10 years old. We are updating ourselves on the countryside survey 2000, which will provide reliable estimates on the number and condition of walls, and an improved base line for detecting changes to those features in future. We consider further legislation when the survey becomes available.

My hon. Friend mentioned the Countryside and Rights of Way Bill. As I am sure she will appreciate, we are not short of suggestions for additions to that Bill, or to nearly every major Bill. Someone, somewhere, at a slightly higher level than me, has to make the harsh decisons on what will be included. I regret that I cannot hold out any prospect that the matter will be dealt with in that Bill. We do not rule out the possibility of legislation, although the survey results will not be available until the end of the year, which would be too late for incorporation into the Bill.

My hon. Friend suggested that protection might come within the remit of the proposed local access forums. Those non-statutory bodies will have an important advisory role in helping to ensure that new opportunities for recreational access are implemented sensibly and sensitively on the ground. Their focus will be on promoting responsible public access to the countryside rather than on conservation. Although we must await the results of the survey before making final decisions on legislation, I note the general view among experts who gave evidence to the Select Committee inquiry—for instance, the Dry Stone Walling Association—that the biggest threat to walls was posed by neglect rather than deliberate destruction. I accept my hon. Friend's point about what happens in the vicinity of human habitation. No amount of legislation can deal effectively with walls falling into disrepair and becoming derelict. Sound management of walls is a long-term activity that requires the continued commitment and enthusiasm of land managers. It is a question of winning hearts and minds, which is best achieved through advice and incentives.

My hon. Friend mentioned the incentive schemes administrated by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, which offer funds for the restoration of stone walls in England. Under country stewardship, payments are available for major rebuilding if a wall has collapsed, become unstable, is in danger of collapse or has slumped—I have never thought of stone walls as slumping, but apparently they do—or is no longer stock-proof. To maintain the historic value of the walls, the scheme requires that the work should retain as much fabric as possible. Traditional materials, in keeping with existing walls, should be used. The source of all stone has to be identified and agreed. The stewardship scheme has led to the restoration of more than 1,000 km of stone wall since 1991. The trend is not entirely downhill.

Similar arrangements apply in environmentally sensitive areas, such as my hon. Friend's doorstep in the Pennine dales. MAFF will pay farmers up to 80 per cent. of the cost of repairing and maintaining dry stone walls. In the Pennine dales, 5.3 km of stone wall have so far been restored with funding from the scheme. That does not include work done on stock-proof walls, which must be maintained as a requirement of the ESA scheme. My hon. Friend believes that more walls could be saved if there were a separate grant scheme that focused on maintaining and repairing walls and other field boundaries. That point was also raised in the Select Committee report. As our response indicated, experts have advised that the best value for money, and the most benefits for landscapes and biodiversity, will be achieved through an integrated approach to conservation. We do not consider it right to divert funding from existing agri-environment schemes to separate grants for ad hoc boundary restoration.

Helen Jackson: The point made to me is a call not for the diversion of funds from agri-environment schemes, but for a simpler subsection within those schemes that would focus on walls and field boundaries.

Mr. Mullin: I thank my hon. Friend. I am sure that those who work on such matters will note that point.

Earlier this year, my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food announced that more than £1 billion would be available over the next seven years for countryside stewardship, environmentally sensitive areas, organic farming and farm woodland premium schemes. We hope that that will mean that more walls can be restored in future.

As my hon. Friend acknowledged, MAFF is not alone in supporting the active management of dry stone walls. National park authorities operate local grant schemes in recognition of the important contribution that walls make to natural beauty and heritage. For example, restoring walls is a high priority for the Peak district park authority, which restored 13,260 m of wall in the 10 years up to 1999, and has in recent years given grant aid for more than 10,000 m of wall a year. That is a good record. The North Yorkshire moors national park offers land managers 70 per cent. grants for the restoration and repair of dry stone walls. Since July 1997, more than 22 km of wall have been repaired under that scheme, at a total cost of about £109,000, and several jobs have been created.

That leads me to another point that has arisen during the debate. We have heard about the importance of ensuring that traditional wall-building skills are passed on to future generations. I am aware that there is a problem in some areas with a shortage of skilled labour able to carry out restoration work. Local intelligence suggests that, but for that, more Pennine wall could be restored. However, the training opportunities that are available should help to increase the pool of skilled workers. For example, Lantra—the national training organisation for industries that make a living, directly and indirectly, from the land—has developed a series of courses on landscape boundaries within its environmental training portfolio, including units that specialise in dry stone walling skills. All Lantra's training courses can be counted towards national vocational qualifications. I pay tribute, as did my hon. Friend, to the part played by the Dry Stone Walling Association and voluntary bodies such as the National Trust and the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers.

MAFF hopes to be able to provide help with training in the near future. The European Union's rural development regulation will provide aid for vocational

training for farmers and others involved in agricultural and forestry activities. Several priority areas have been identified, including countryside and environmental skills such as dry stone walling. MAFF is planning to make available a total of £22 million over seven years for its training scheme, subject to the European Commission's approval. It is a case of "watch this space".

My hon. Friend paid tribute to the key role played by voluntary groups. She may like to pass on to them the news about a new national grant scheme that helps local groups to investigate, explain and care for local landscapes, landmarks and traditions. The local heritage initiative launched in February is planned to run for 10 years at a cost of £45 million, and is expected to support about 300 projects each year. It is administered by the Countryside Agency, with funding from the heritage lottery fund and the Nationwide building society.

This has been a good debate about an important issue. Given what I have said, I hope that my hon. Friend agrees that the picture is not entirely bleak. A great deal of progress is being made, and we must ensure that that continues. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising the subject.

Latin America

12.29 pm

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): It is perhaps a sign of the times that a debate of such importance should be shuffled sideways to this parliamentary annexe. It may suit the Government, who do not seem to be as interested in—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Frank Cook): Order. I point out to the hon. Gentleman that this annexe, as he calls it, is the House of Commons.

Mr. Wilkinson: I understand that; it is perhaps convenient for the Government, but it belittles the House as a whole. However, I hope that my brief remarks will be a useful postscript to the much fuller debate in the House of Lords on Latin American trade, admirably initiated by Baroness Hooper on 8 February, which itself complemented the debate on Latin America on 9 June 1999, led by Lord Montgomery, who has made such a notable contribution to the promotion of trade and good relations with Latin America. The loss to Parliament of his expertise and that of Lord Dundonald, the honorary consul for Chile, will be a sad side effect of the so-called reform of the other place.

As secretary of the British Latin American all-party group, officer of the Colombian and Chilean groups and a member of the Latin American Trade Advisory Group—as well as of Canning House for purely educational reasons—I have a personal but not a commercial interest in Latin America, which is strongly inspired by a love of Chile, the land of my wife's birth. I hope that the Minister will understand where I am coming from.

Distance and lack of contact deepen British business pre-conceptions of Latin America, often deterring many small companies from exporting which, with more knowledge and support, could find significant niche markets there. Big firms need less assistance to identify, analyse, develop, exploit and sustain export opportunities. Yet in Latin America, local understanding and personal contact are essential, and small and medium-sized enterprises need all the help that they can get.

A few major economies dominate the region, but even Brazil ranks 29th in a list of countries to which the United Kingdom exports, and Argentina 39th. Of the nations from which the United Kingdom imports, Brazil ranks 31st, Mexico 40th and Chile 44th. I know the great interest that the Minister for Trade takes in these matters from a meeting that we both attended on Brazil not long ago. Nevertheless, the potential is immense, not just for British investment. In this regard, the United Kingdom does well. I believe that we are the third biggest investor in the region, after the United States of America and Japan. However, potential exists for burgeoning British export trade in carefully selected markets.

The resurgence from recession of the Brazilian, Mexican, Chilean and Argentine economies is impressive. Bolivia has been a model of good economic managment. Bolivia and Peru offer more optimistic prospects than the other Andean community countries—Colombia, Ecuador and Venezuela—but,

[Mr. Wilkinson]

with rising oil prices and a resolute effort to tackle political and social difficulties, their time will come. Expert guidance to exporters to such markets is essential. I was pleased that the Department of Trade and Industry organised an excellent seminar on the Andean community, which I had the privilege of attending only a few days ago.

The formation of British Trade International as a consequence of the Wilson report, to bring together the trade promotional functions of the Department of Trade and Industry and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, is laudable, but its benefits could be vitiated in Latin America. The idea of a single committee for the Americas in British Trade International may appear to be a grand rational strategy on an organogram, but if it subsumes the work of the Latin American Trade Advisory Group in a single in-house operation, I fear that the loss of LATAG's wide, practical business experience of Latin America's exceptionally diverse, sensitive and sophisticated markets would soon be deeply regretted by British exporters, especially small and medium-sized enterprises. For example, the chairman of the British Argentine chamber of commerce, Mr. Peter Edbrooke, wrote to me on 10 March stating:

In all its bilateral activities the—

British Argentine chamber of commerce—

works closely with a number of other bodies, prominent amongst which is the Latin American Trade Advisory Group . . . Bilateral relations with Argentina have developed and strengthened after the significant problems of 1982 in the South Atlantic. They nonetheless remain delicate. In this context, the BACC views with great concern recent considerations to abolish Area Advisory Groups.

We believe that such a move, in addition to considerably weakening Britain's resources and its effectiveness in its trade relations with Latin America would be interpreted by most Latin American countries, including Argentina, as a retrograde and even slightly insulting move.

I trust that you will able to make known and support our views.

The attitude of unjustifiable British condescension must always be vigorously resisted. Damage was done, if we are candid, to the United Kingdom's commercial relations with Chile by the British detention of Senator Pinochet. The Government failed to understand that General Pinochet secured as high a percentage of the popular vote—44 per cent.—in the plebiscite that caused him to relinquish power as the Prime Minister received in the 1997 general election. Chile has a sophisticated economy and is a stable democracy. It is not the cold war cockpit of the early 1970s.

I am pleased that the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office went to President Lagos's recent inauguration. Ministerial visits are important and the Minister is diligent in making such visits, but they should be carefully focused. Perhaps too many Ministers have been to Cuba, which receives only £25 million of British exports a year, and not enough have been to Chile, which takes almost 10 times as much. The official visits to the United Kingdom of President Frei of Chile, President Menem of Argentina and President Cardoso of Brazil in recent years have opened doors to British exporters. The Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry should spend less time at European Union meetings and more time in Latin America and other global markets. Diplomatic missions in Latin America should be beefed up, not reduced, and where there are opportunities for British defence sales, the number of attachés, including service attachés, should be maintained, not diminished.

In the meantime, full opportunity should be taken of the reform of export promotion by Sir David Wright, head of British Trade International. He brings impeccable personal credentials to the task, not least from his long diplomatic experience in Japan—a tough market for British exporters if ever there were one. The key must be to build on the strengths of the Latin American Trade Advisory Group and Canning House. LATAG's committee of business people to provide strategic advice should still advise British Trade International on British exports and investment in Latin America. LATAG's secretariat is ideally qualified to maintain awareness of business opportunities in the region for small and medium-sized enterprises. LATAG's assistance with trade missions and seminars is invaluable and its co-operation with trade associations and chambers of commerce is exceedingly effective. We must build on its strengths. Its location in Canning House offers the key.

Canning House is the centre for Latin America in London. It is a prestigious, internationally recognised centre for informed discussion and study of Latin American politics, business, literature and culture. It has the support of political bodies, finance, business, the British Government and the European Union. The benefits of merging the Latin American trade advisory group and Canning House have been compellingly spelt out in a memorandum of 21 February from Sally Unwin, chairman of Canning House, and Alexander Kennedy, who is chairman of LATAG. Hon. Members who participate in events organised by the British and Latin American parliamentary group will have gained a first-hand appreciation of the wonderful work done by Canning House in the annual parliamentary seminar that it organises for hon. Members and members of the House of Lords.

The memorandum of 21 February, from which I shall briefly quote, spells out the benefits of a merger. It states:

By merging the two entities, the delivery and cost effectiveness of the services now provided separately to UK businesses and to government can be improved, as well as providing a platform for their further development.

The single entity would reinforce the complementary link between the UK's cultural and trade interests in the region.

It would . . . address admirably one of the issues highlighted in the Wilson review, by resolving the confusion, in the UK and Latin America, over the relative functions and roles of the various private bodies and government departments working on overlapping aspects of the region.

The merged organisation would provide government and British Trade International with one stop access to specialist skills in trade promotion in Latin America.

It would constitute the only source of strategic, regional advice on Latin America to SME's.

It would concentrate the existing strengths and identity of LATAG and Canning House.

As I said at the beginning of my speech,

Canning House would provide specialist, regional, private sector input to the Americas Umbrella Group of British Trade International through LATAG.

Conversely, if LATAG were to be removed from Canning House, all opportunities for synergies and savings would be lost and Canning House would have to curtail, perhaps drastically, the scope of its existing activities and we should not underestimate its negative impact in the region.

The memorandum concluded:

British Trade International is embarked upon a modern and more innovative approach to trade development and export promotion. We recommend the above proposals on the basis that they promote the same agenda and offer a genuine partnership between the public and private sectors.

So do I.

12.42 pm

The Minister of State for Trade (Mr. Richard Caborn): I thank the hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) for initiating this dabate. He and I have two subjects in common—Latin America and the aerospace industry. His contribution to both is well respected in the House, but his analysis lacked its usual objectivity. I detected a little of his party political views in his comparison of the vote for President Pinochet with that for my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister.

This debate gives me the opportunity not only to respond to the hon. Gentleman's points but to discuss relationships and set out what the Government are doing. In doing so, I shall explain our plans for improving delivery of services and support to British companies. The main vehicle for the new approach is British Trade International, to which the hon. Gentleman referred. The debate is timely, in that it coincides with this week's important visit to Brazil by my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister, accompanied by a strong team of business men and women. I shall return to that visit in due course.

I doubt whether any hon. Member needs to be convinced of the importance of Latin America and the role that it will play in Britain's economy in the future. I became convinced of that in 1995, when I visited the Argentine and Brazil with the Select Committee on Trade and Industry. What we found is as true today as it was then, and the report at the time made several recommendations to the Government. The opportunities for trade and investment were—and are—substantial. Over the past decade, the region has been transformed. It was once a region where too many countries suffered from rampant hyperinflation, unmanageable debt, high tariff walls, low foreign investment and military Governments. The Latin Americans themselves talked about "the lost decade", which is now well and truly behind us. Throughout the region, countries have tamed inflation, slashed tariffs and opened their economies to foreign and intra-regional investment. Developments in the region have brought countries closer together, both politically and economically, and reduced historical animosities and conflicts.

Mercosur—the common market of the south—is recognised throughout the world as a growing economic force and a necessary partner. In 1995, when I was in Latin America with the Select Committee, Mercosur's development was impressive by any standard. The speed at which change has been managed has had a substantial impact on the development of Latin American economies. Mercosur and the people who put these developments in place deserve credit for that.

As has been said, the Andean community seeks a free trade area with Mercosur. That continuing integration, together with an improving economic climate, will open up vast opportunities for trade and investment. Indeed, the growing robustness of Latin American economies was amply demonstrated during the economic crisis in Japan, south-east Asia and Russia. That crisis, combined with low commodity prices and sluggish world exports, has severely tested the Latin American economies. However, most have come through in a way that has surprised many observers—none more so than that of Brazil. A little more than a year ago, following devaluation of the currency, there were dire warnings. Recession and the re-emergence of rampant inflation were predicted to follow. The picture is now very different: Brazil has achieved a remarkable out-turn. Growth, though small, is defying the doomsters, and inflation has been kept in single digits. Last year saw record investment, so we have a picture of a continent that is very much in business and eager to develop partnerships.

Unfortunately, Britain has been slower than many of our competitors in recognising those changes and the opportunities that have arisen from them. I think that the hon. Gentleman has drawn that to the House's attention. Latin America still does not receive the attention that it deserves in this country in the media, among the business community, or from politicians, despite the efforts of many hon. Members. On the other hand, there has been a striking growth in the teaching of Spanish in our schools and elsewhere. Indeed, two members of my private office staff are taking lessons, so it has even spread to Government Departments. I do not know why; perhaps my staff are trying to tell me something. Perhaps they are on their way.

The striking feature of Britain's involvement with Latin America—as opposed to that of many other countries—has been the prominent role of investment. That means investment in machinery, plant and fixed capital, as opposed to portfolio investment in stocks, shares and other securities. Investment has continued to grow, and has been stimulated by the right economic and political conditions. Britain has long been the leading European investor, athough other countries, such as Spain, which are generally taking a more active role in privatisation, are challenging that. We have a good record in the Argentine, and I hope that our record in Brazil is changing. That is why the Deputy Prime Minister is there—for important investment involving British Gas and the national grid.

When the Select Committee was in Brazil, British Gas—as the whole company was called in 1995—was in the Argentine, laying down a major part of the energy infrastructure. It brought much of its supply base with it. I remember a welding company from Warrington that flew out there as a supplier and sub-contractor to British Gas. The technique of welding was picked up; a good deal of work was fed back to the UK; and a totally different relationship with many of the Argentine companies developed. Many opportunities were created.

Our strength in investment has not acted as it should as a catalyst for trade in goods. Britain has a markedly lower share of Latin American imports than inward investment. It has generally been below 2 per cent., while our share of world imports is closer to 5 per cent. We

[Mr. Richard Caborn]

have much to do to correct that imbalance and to start catching up with some of our competitors. Our task is simply stated, but will require a major effort to ensure that many more British companies seize the opportunity for trade, investment and partnership in Latin America.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): In my capacity as chairman of the all-party Latin American group, may I thank my right hon. Friend and former squash partner for all the work that he has done in Latin America? Does he intend to see Michael Valdez-Scott and the Latin American trade advisory group about these problems? Is he coming on to that?

Mr. Caborn: Yes, I am coming on to that. It is many years since my hon. Friend and I played squash together. Taking it up again would be no bad thing in view of my current weight.

Much has already been done, but we must look firmly to the future. We must do as much as we can to ensure that our businesses are well equipped for the task ahead. That means ensuring that the support and promotion services provided by the Government are the best available and meet the needs of the business. They must be customer-focused and we must ensure that we use our resources more effectively.

When we came to power in 1997, we began that process with the export forum. Its aim was to assess the effectiveness of existing services and we implemented its key conclusions—more refined market priorities, a greater emphasis on sectors and outward investment, and customer focus, which was to be the key. Having assessed the requirements for services, we needed to establish how best to deliver them. The Cabinet Secretary, Sir Richard Wilson, was appointed to that task in 1998. His report on export promotion resulted in the establishment of British Trade International, whose aim was a more coherent approach with an overriding customer and sector focus, an improved regional delivery service and a shift towards trade development. It helped companies, especially small companies, to develop the capacity and ability to tackle overseas markets.

Much has been achieved in a short time by bringing two major Departments of State—the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department of Trade and Industry—together to drive forward the agenda on trade promotion and development. For the first time, there is a published national strategy for trade development and promotion. There is a board, of which I am co-chairman with my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, consisting primarily of business people, who meet regularly to help to drive the agenda forward.

Perhaps most importantly, we intend to raise awareness of our services—essential if we are to make an impact in developing British business success overseas. Over the coming months we shall see regional events and a high profile national launch. We shall tell British business and our partners about the important changes in the means by which we provide our services. We shall focus particularly on the new electronic gateway to our services, provide a new emphasis on trade development services and new regional structures, and offer a new service brand unifying our various activities in one joined-up package.

As the hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood knows, and as I explained in my recent letter to him, the Wilson report also recommended that the board should review the structure and role of the business advisory groups involved in carrying out promotional activities and providing advice. I reported that those groups vary their focus, financing and role. That task has been undertaken by Sir Martin Laing, until recently the vice-chairman of the board. He has already presented his initial recommendations and I expect him to put his report and final recommendations to the board at the end of this month.

In examining the role of groups such as the Latin American trade advisory group, it is important to distinguish between two separate main functions:advising the Government on a strategic approach to the region; and promoting opportunities in the market. LATAG was set up to give private sector advice to the then British Overseas Trade Board on doing business in Latin America. In addition to serving a committee of private sector representatives, the secretariat also assisted the Department of Trade and Industry in promoting markets, advising on business inquiries and running trade missions. This promotional role supplements a much bigger initiative which the Government have in place to promote Latin America.

Private sector business advice is not confined to LATAG. Our commercial teams in both the United Kingdom and our posts in Latin America include people who have extensive business experience in the region. There are seven export promoters in the UK. They are senior executives who have been seconded from the private sector and have first-hand experience of particular markets and sectors. Staff have been recruited for their business experience and clear knowledge of their own markets. Throughout England, 80 export development counsellors have been recruited from the private sector. They operate within business link networks to assist companies with exporting. Many export development counsellors have been taken on missions to Latin America via British Trade International to familiarise themselves with the markets.

Sir Martin Laing's initial recommendations looked at four strategic multi-market groups which mirrored the internal structure of BTI. These groups could provide advice on regional priorities and spend. Sir Martin also proposed the establishment of export groups associated with these multimarket groups to provide more focus, advice and activity. The groups would be established for a defined period at the end of which their continued relevance and contribution to BTI's objectives would be reviewed. Sir Martin will present his recommendations, including options for the structures of business advisory groups, to the board of BTI at the end of the month. Meanwhile, no decision has been reached on the structure or role of existing groups such as LATAG. When a decision is reached, it will take full account of the contribution that such organisations might make to the delivery of BTI's objectives. It will also take account of other considerations such as efficiency and value for money. It is both helpful and constructive, therefore, that LATAG, in association with Canning House, has submitted proposals to Sir Martin Laing on how its relationship with BTI might evolve. We shall consider the proposals seriously when decisions are taken.

I wish to make it clear that none of that is preventing the Government from driving forward their commitment to a closer business relationship with Latin America. We are doing this on a number of fronts. But we are targeting specifically the major markets of Brazil and Mexico, by promoting trade missions to and from the region. We are supporting companies which wish to exhibit at trade fairs by supplying a range of support services and through ministerial visits. The Deputy Prime Minister is visiting Brazil this week. The brochure entitled "The Visit to Brazil by the Deputy Prime Minister" sets out the names of the people who have accompanied him and the areas that they will cover. There is an impressive array of top business people from various sectors such as banking, ports, airports, construction, water, telecommunications and energy. My right hon. Friend will meet President Cardoso, senior Ministers and other members of his Government as well as important players in the business community.

Yesterday, we announced increased export credit guarantee cover and reduced premium rates for Brazil. Rates will compete internationally and extra credit will be sufficient to cover the expected significant increase in business. This underlines our commitment to this huge important market and will be an important element in the second year of our initiative to target business opportunities in Brazil and the wider Mercosur region.

In January, I launched a three-year promotion campaign to help British companies develop their business with Mexico. The campaign will involve a range of new services and initiatives to attempt to raise awareness of Mexico among British businesses, support outward investment, especially by medium-sized companies, encourage the use of digital technology for commercial purposes and develop regional links. As my noble Friend Lord McIntosh of Haringey announced in the upper House last month, we are planning a touring millennium products exhibition next year to several Latin American countries, including the Argentine, Brazil, Chile, Mexico and, possibly, other countries. It will be supported by other events promoting Britain as a country at the leading edge of technology, design and innovation. Finally, there will continue to be a full programme of support for trade fairs and trade missions throughout the region. That programme is intended to be the biggest ever, and will take many British companies to new, exciting markets.

That all adds up to a substantial effort to back our commitment. Indeed, at a recent event attended by the hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood, the Brazilian ambassador offered congratulations—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We must wind up.

It being One o'clock the matter for the Adjournment of the sitting lapsed, without Question put.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 15 March 2000

[MR. MICHAEL J. MARTIN *in the Chair*]

Fair Employment (Northern Ireland)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mr. Sutcliffe.*]

9.30 am

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): It gives me great pleasure to open the debate on the fourth report of the Select Committee on Northern Ireland of the previous Session. The report, which is entitled "The Operation of the Fair Employment (Northern Ireland) Act 1989: Ten Years On", is based on evidence taken by the Select Committee between December 1998 and May 1999. The Committee was ably advised in its inquiry by Dr. Christopher McCrudden, then reader in law at Oxford university and a fellow of Lincoln college, Oxford. Dr. McCrudden has since been elevated by the university to the chair of human rights law and I congratulate him on that well-deserved promotion. The Committee was congratulated on the thoroughness of its report by the Committee on Administration of Justice, but we were reminded that follow-ups would be desirable. This debate affords an opportunity for such a follow-up.

The centrality to the difficulties in Northern Ireland of discrimination in general and in employment in particular has been recognised for many years. The first fair employment legislation for Northern Ireland was enacted in 1976. It was significantly amended and strengthened in the Fair Employment (Northern Ireland) Act 1989. I was in the Commons during the concluding stages of the Act's passage, which occurred during the curious week in July 1989 when I had been appointed Secretary of State for Northern Ireland but had not yet taken office. The Act created the Fair Employment Commission. During its passage, the Government committed themselves to review its operation and such policy in general within five years of its enactment. The independent Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights, to which the task of the review was ultimately entrusted, recommended substantial changes in a report published in June 1997.

The Government set out their response in the "Partnership for Equality" White Paper, which was published in March 1998, and accepted some of the recommendations. However, they went further and proposed the merger of the four existing equality bodies, which included the Fair Employment Commission, into a single equality commission. The White Paper triggered the Committee's inquiry, although, upon its renewal in July 1997, the Committee had already discussed the possibility of such an inquiry and deferred it until we could pass the verdict of a decade on the working of the 1989 Act.

The Belfast agreement gave added impetus to the further reform of fair employment legislation as it included a Government commitment to make rapid progress with measures for employment equality. The Northern Ireland Act 1998, which implemented the Belfast agreement, accomplished several aims in the broader equality field, including the merger of the four equality bodies and the imposition of a duty on public sector bodies to ensure that each paid due regard to the need to ensure equality of opportunity between a wide range of groups in the operation of its functions. Those measures were followed in December of that year by the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998, which implemented many of the White Paper's proposals and repealed and re-enacted the remaining provisions of the 1976 and 1989 Acts. As a result, all the fair employment law is now contained in a single piece of legislation.

Our inquiry was therefore undertaken at a time of considerable change in Northern Ireland's equality framework. In particular, there was major institutional change. The Equality Commission assumed the functions of the Fair Employment Commission, and the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order extended both the scope of the legislation and the number of employers covered by it. Obviously, the Committee had little or no chance to see before we reported how the new measures were working in practice. The Equality Commission had not then even been appointed.

The Committee's report contained more than 30 principal conclusions and recommendations on a wide range of matters, including the unemployment differential—a touchstone, to many people, of the extent of discrimination in Northern Ireland against the Catholic community, the cost burden on employers of fair employment legislation and the implications both of merging four specialist equality commissions into one multi-functional Equality Commission and of the new equality duty on public authorities set out in section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act. Other conclusions and recommendations related to the institutional arrangements for handling equality within government, the potential contribution of contract compliance and whether existing affirmative action exceptions should be broadened.

The Government gave a broadly welcoming response to the report in October 1999, underscoring the Select Committee's comments on the importance of equality of opportunity issues to the peace process and to Northern Ireland's future. As five months have elapsed since that response, I hope that the Under-Secretary will give hon. Members an idea of the progress that has since been made in this vital matter and offer an initial assessment of how the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order is working.

The Government's response prompts me to raise several points. First, what progress can the Under-Secretary report on reducing the backlog of live industrial tribunal and fair employment tribunal cases? The response described a welcome increase in manpower and physical resources, and I hope that there has been a significant reduction in cases from the July 1999 figures.

Secondly, is the Equality Commission satisfied that it is adequately resourced? The Minister will recall that the equality working group concluded that an additional £525,000 of public money would be necessary. How

[Mr. Peter Brooke]

much extra money have the Government made available to the commission this financial year, and what further resources will be provided next year?

Thirdly, the Committee sought an early announcement about the public authorities to be designated under section 75(3) of the Northern Ireland Act and the response promised an order last autumn. As far as I am aware, no such order has been made. What caused the delay, and when is the order expected?

Mr. John M. Taylor (Solihull): Will my right hon. Friend enlarge slightly on the curious lack of decisions by the Secretary of State defining the bodies that must comply with section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act? Does he, like me, recognise that the Equality Commission is particularly exercised about that?

Mr. Brooke: That is the nub and substance of my question to the Under-Secretary.

When does the Secretary of State expect to approve the draft guidelines on the form and content of public authorities' equality schemes, proposed by the Equality Commission some time ago? The Minister will recall that public bodies are under a statutory duty to submit their equality schemes to the commission by 30 June.

Fourthly, the Government's response to our recommendation in paragraph 105 on public procurement was ambiguous. Will the Under-Secretary enlarge on that somewhat elliptical response, which included the words "in due course", and explain what arrangements will be made to ensure proper assessment of procurement policies under the equality duty?

Fifthly, the response stated that the Government would review progress on the promotion of fair participation in the senior civil service and identification of further measures to help the Northern Ireland civil service at senior levels to become more representative of the Northern Ireland community as a whole. It stated that

> the remit and conduct of the review is under consideration and will be announced shortly.

What progress has been made, and when can the announcement be expected? I ask that in the context of a response that was given last October.

Sixthly, interwoven questions arise from our recommendations in paragraphs 122 and 123. Before the Executive was suspended, it was envisaged that changes would be made to the equality unit in the office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister. Will those changes be implemented? What will be the staffing arrangements at higher and lower levels? Will the unit be headed by a deputy secretary?

In a linked question, the Government said that appropriate structures would be established to ensure that the responsibilities of the Secretary of State would continue to be performed under devolution, but no equality unit has been created in the Northern Ireland Office. During suspension, will the Secretary of State employ the equality unit of the Northern Ireland Executive or his own Northern Ireland Office civil servants? What is the Minister's reaction to the observation that the lack of an equality unit in the Northern Ireland Office has caused the delay in obtaining the Secretary of State's approval of the designation order and the draft guidelines—a matter on which my hon. Friend intervened?

Finally, in this series of questions, what progress has been made in developing a memorandum of understanding between the Equality Commission and the NI Human Rights Commission to minimise the impact of the possible overlap of their respective jurisdictions?

Mr. Roy Beggs (East Antrim): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the evidence of witnesses clearly gave the impression that unlawful employment discrimination on political and religious grounds had declined significantly? Has there, or has there not, been a decline? We should not, 10 years on, be left perceiving that there has been a decline.

Mr. Brooke: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. It is true that we received a great deal of evidence on the beneficial effects of the 1989 Act. I hope that those benefits continue. During our review of the working of the Act, we examined the issues in the current context. That is the basis of my questions to the Under-Secretary. It would be helpful if he mentioned the achievements of the 1989 Act.

The Northern Ireland Act set out the allocation of responsibility between Westminster and Belfast on equality issues. The substantive provisions were transferred matters. The Secretary of State retained responsibility for the statutory equality duty as it affects the public sector and for the Equality Commission. I hope that the Minister will assure us that progress will not be slowed by the suspension of the Executive.

As this is a short debate, I have highlighted only a few matters raised in the Select Committee's report. Northern Ireland has some of the most advanced anti-discrimination legislation in Europe, if not the world. The Government are committed to reviewing the legislation and related policies by 2005, which the Select Committee welcomes. As the hon. Member for East Antrim (Mr. Beggs) implied, aspects of the legislation remain controversial, but I am pleased to report that the Select Committee's opinion was unanimous. I commend the report.

9.44 am

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): Unlawful discrimination on the grounds of religious and political opinion seems to have declined in the Province. In "Employment Equality: Building for the Future", the Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights examined the monitoring data that the Fair Employment Commission published annually. It assessed the impact of the 1989 Act on the employed work force.

Analysis of appointments by larger firms shows that the Catholic share of applicants has increased in the public and private sectors among men and women. The statistics seem to show a good match between the proportion of Catholic applicants and appointees, but with minor variations. Although SACHR concluded that neither community was experiencing systematic

discrimination at the point of selection, there have, without doubt, been individual cases of discrimination against Catholics and Protestants. However, emphasis should be placed on the word "systematic", and it is mainly in that respect that improvements have occurred.

There seems to have been a reduction in the under-representation in employment. The Fair Employment Commission's statistics show that the overall Catholic share of employment rose by 4.3 per cent. between 1990 and 1998. The statistics show an under-representation of Catholic males, but an increasingly small under-representation of Catholic females. However, the Catholic share has risen in every occupational group since 1990. Catholic representation in the public sector increased by 3.4 per cent. in the same period.

In security-related occupations, however, only 8.4 per cent. were Catholic in 1998—a 1 per cent. increase since 1990. Security-related occupations still lag far behind. The Patten report on policing recognised the need to attract more Catholics into the service. That is not a matter for us to debate today, but we should recognise that it is a serious problem that must be resolved. The private sector has seen a significant increase in the proportion of Catholics in employment. The Catholic share for males increased by 4.7 per cent. between 1990 and 1998, and for females by 4.5 per cent.

Those statistics are important, as they suggest that things are improving in Northern Ireland. They also demonstrate consistent progress in all walks of life for men and women. Despite that, however, there is still some way to go.

Unemployment occurs for many different reasons, but all those affected are socially disadvantaged and they deserve the assistance and encouragement of Government agencies to help them to find productive work. The unemployment differential between Catholics and Protestants is still significant, and the rate for Catholic men is still twice that for Protestants. That is not necessarily the direct consequence of discrimination; nevertheless, something must be done. I believe that that is partly the result of fair employment not occurring across the full gamut of occupations and partly the result of employment practices not being equitable throughout the community.

It is apparent that the persistence of the unemployment differential is not a valid indicator of the success or otherwise of fair employment legislation. We cannot say that the legislation has failed simply because those differentials exist. However, we must recognise that, although progress is being made, it will be a long haul to achieve what we want.

Mr. Beggs: Does the hon. Gentleman accept the Fair Employment Commission's assessment that there has been a sea change in attitude to fair employment within the Protestant and Roman Catholic communities? In fact, the greatest factors that have influenced the opportunities available for those under-represented in employment have been the extent of recent under-investment and the significant number of new jobs created as a result of the new deal in Northern Ireland.

Mr. Öpik: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. The attitudes that tend to support discrimination are unsustainable if the primary dynamic is economic. The importance of inward investment cannot be overstated because, as Northern Ireland returns to normality, so it needs to recruit the best people. Recruiting the best people tends to mitigate the discrimination that we have seen. Indeed, it is that attitude that has allowed employment legislation to work. Overall, it is clear that the legislation has made an important contribution to improving fairness in employment in Northern Ireland, even if the precise extent of that contribution cannot accurately be determined.

Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act provides that each public authority shall have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity. I should like to ask the Minister a few questions, to which I hope he will be able to reply when he responds to the debate. First, do the Government have any plans to extend fair employment legislation specifically to monitor equality of opportunity among the groups mentioned in section 75 of that Act? Specifically, do the Government intend to monitor equality of opportunity between persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status and sexual orientation? It would be helpful if the Minister could say whether the Government intend to monitor equality of opportunity between men and women, between persons with and without disability and between persons with and without dependants. We all recognise that Northern Ireland has the potential to be a role model for equality of opportunity. It would be a wasted opportunity not to monitor the impact of the legislation way beyond the more traditional divides that probably prompted the legislation in the first place.

Secondly, the report of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee on the operation of the Fair Employment (Northern Ireland) Act said:

> We consider that the community differences in unemployment should remain an appropriate and important issue of concern for Government.

What progress has been made in setting targets for the reduction of those community differentials? It might be useful to set specific staging-post targets towards the longer-term goal of entirely eliminating those differentials.

Thirdly, can the Government outline the timetable for circulating the final guidelines on equality? There has already been some delay, which I would not want to be extended. Are the Government taking steps to ensure that the schemes will be sufficiently detailed and concrete to serve their purpose, because vague plans are worse than no plans at all? The right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke) mentioned the civil service, where it seems that an issue still remains, but that is an area in which the Government can make a more direct intervention. What progress has been made in the review of senior Northern Ireland civil service appointments, given that a profound differential still exists? I accept that part of the differential is historic and will take time to equalise as people percolate through the system.

The report also stated:

> We recommend that, in order to prevent conflicts of interests arising, the Secretary of State should establish her own Equality Unit within the Northern Ireland Office, in part to advise her on the exercise of these functions, and in part to co-ordinate the equality schemes of UK Departments and public authorities designated by her under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

[Mr. Öpik]

What measures have been introduced to ensure effective quality of advice to the Secretary of State with the creation of an equality unit within the Northern Ireland Office?

The fact that we are having this debate and that there is some reasonably good news on the subject should give us grounds for optimism. Therefore, I hope that the Government will take the opportunity to welcome the momentum that has already been generated, thanks to the legislation, and ensure that, in terms of attitudes, the civil service acts as a role model for the public and private sectors it is efforts to eliminate what has perhaps been a slightly neglected issue, and which has unquestionably been a source of great irritation of certain sectors of the Northern Irish community.

9.54 am

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): I compliment the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke). I am a peripatetic constituent of the right hon. Gentleman—not that I ever vote for him, as I am sure he appreciates.

This is a fine report, which makes many significant recommendations. Joan Harbison and her excellent team at the Equality Commission play an important role in such matters, but—as I have said to Ministers before—I am anxious that the body's staffing may not be adequate. I, too, think that the Fair Employment (Northern Ireland) Act 1989 has worked well, and those of us on this side of the water have much to learn from it. However, there are still problems, as has been acknowledged.

Employment practices in Northern Ireland are increasingly anti-discriminatory. Discrimination does still exist, some of which is structural. For example, as the report mentions, there are problems in the civil service and with the delay in the designation order, which I am sure the Minister is addressing.

Mr. Beggs: The hon. Gentleman's observations on senior staffing levels in the civil service may be a little out of date. The establishment of the Northern Ireland Assembly and 10 new Departments has led to the creation of new posts, affording the first opportunity in almost a lifetime to ensure a greater spread of representation at a senior level.

Dr. Godman: I am delighted to hear the hon. Gentleman praising the Assembly. As he knows, I was there on the day of the farmers' lobby and saw it at work. Indeed, at the conclusion of the day's business, the hon. Member for Belfast, West (Mr. Adams) said to me, "Norman, you have seen for yourself that this place works." Indeed, it does. I look forward to it being reinstated soon so that the fair employment practices mentioned by the hon. Gentleman may be re-established.

The hon. Gentleman is right: the Assembly provides an opportunity for everyone in Northern Ireland who recruits and trains employees to be as fair as possible in their gatekeeping work. I should be delighted to learn that discrimination in the 10 new Departments is being given the boot and kicked out of the door. It is for the Minister to provide such an assurance; it is not humble—or perhaps, not so humble—for a Back Bencher such as myself.

Discrimination still exists, especially in relation to the long-term employed. What is being done to help such people? On page xxxvi of the report, the Select Committee notes

> the continuing under-representation of Roman Catholics in the Senior Civil Service.

Is that still the case? If so, what are the Minister and the Secretary of State doing about it?

What is being done to help the over-50s back into employment? They are at a particular disadvantage in finding decent work with good terms and conditions. How many civil servants are aged over 50? What proportion of the civil service do they represent? Do they hold senior positions? I am getting perilously close to my retirement, having hit 60, but I am not looking for a job with the Under-Secretary, if he will forgive me for saying so. The important point is that many people aged over 50 to whom I have spoken in Northern Ireland, as in Scotland and elsewhere, feel that they have been discarded from the labour market. The Minister must devote serious resources to finding work for the long-term unemployed, especially those aged over 50.

I shall respond to another comment made by the hon. Member for East Antrim (Mr. Beggs). The other day, while at the Royal Ulster Constabulary Markets division, I spoke to Sergeant Stephen Jones, who won the good community policing award last year for the remarkable work that he does in a nationalist area—albeit, a small one—and a commercial area. I told him and the others who were at the meeting that I had stayed at the Hilton the night before and asked them how many people from the Markets area had found work at the Hilton or elsewhere in that area. Some of those people mentioned the new call centre that is being built on the old gasworks site, which will provide 500 jobs. I have no doubt that, following the good practices under the Fair Employment (Northern Ireland) Act and the recommendations of the fine Select Committee report, the employer will ensure that equality rules the day in recruiting those 500 employees, but I hope that older people, as well as young people, will be taken on.

Mr. Beggs: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, instead of the Industrial Development Board devoting much of its resources to supporting training in companies that have decided to move to Northern Ireland, serious consideration should be given to targeting the unemployed, of whatever age group, and making available specific funds to ensure that those people have the skills that will enable them to apply successfully for jobs in call centres or other targeted sectors of employment?

Dr. Godman: I find myself in the curious position of constantly agreeing with the hon. Gentleman today. Employment in call centres is important, but we must train youngsters and others so that they can take on highly skilled work in Northern Ireland. The 1989 Act and the recommendations in the report will encourage many firms to set up in Northern Ireland. I do not want all such companies to go to Northern Ireland; I should like some of them to come to Greenock. However, they will be encouraged by the concerns that the right hon.

Member for Cities of London and Westminster and his colleagues have shown about the Act, which was passed, I seem to recall, by a Conservative Government.

We must prepare people on an absolutely fair and utterly anti-sectarian basis for employment, with good terms and conditions. Those to whom I spoke in the Markets area the other day had two overriding concerns: to live in decent, affordable houses, which many do—new kitchens, for example, are being installed—and to have a decent job. It goes without saying that people want to live in a peaceful community, but they want access to the labour market too.

Mr. John M. Taylor: A moment or two ago, the hon. Gentleman permitted himself an aside, saying that he thought that the legislation under review was passed by a Conservative Government. I confirm that it was; at that time, I was the Government Whip responsible for conducting the measure through the House.

Dr. Godman: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. He is a delightful fellow, but, he is not known for his modesty. I made the aside because I thought that he might take the bait, or, as he is a fly fisherman, the fly. The measure is good legislation, as Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland have told me. The Under-Secretary must re-examine the policy on targeting of social needs. I know that it is under consultation, but it should not be a blunt instrument; it must be sharp enough to get at the problems that some still believe cannot be eradicated.

I want briefly to refer to highly skilled jobs at Harland and Wolff. A couple of my Catholic constituents—one, Bart Monaghan, a good friend of mine, was a shop steward—were sent to work in Harland and Wolff. Bart was advised to learn the words of "The Sash" and be able to sing it before he went to Belfast. In those days, a Catholic had enormous difficulty finding work in Harland and Wolff, no matter how highly skilled he might have been back on the Clyde, although that has now changed.

It is essential that the Government and the Departments involved, including the Ministry of Defence, ensure that the shipyard remains open. I was a shipyard worker, although I doubt that I would get a job in my trade of shipwright now. I want lots of orders to go to the Clyde, but orders from the Ministry of Defence and others can be shared with Harland and Wolff. Every vessel that has gone down its slipway is a testimony to that yard's find tradition and superb skills, which must be maintained.

The Minister must carefully consider the report and what the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster said about it, especially the matters relating to the Equality Commission. The targeting of social need must be a sharp weapon to deal with the problems. The Minister must do all that he can to ensure that Harland and Wolff remains in business. He must keep up the good fight against discrimination, which still means a lousy life for many Catholics in Northern Ireland.

10.9 am

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): As I am a member of the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs it would be immodest of me to praise the report, but I am pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman) did so. However, I can praise the work done by the Chairman of the Select Committee, the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke). The 1999 issue of *Irish Political Studies* recognises fully the right hon. Gentleman's role on that Committee. I declare an interest in that I am a member of the Political Studies Association of Ireland.

Growing and full employment help to tackle bias and unfairness in employment. Full employment at least reduces the scope for unfairness in employment to the level of discussing promotion and who gets which jobs. That is one aspect of the problem of unfairness in job distribution in Northern Ireland.

Mr. John M. Taylor: I follow the hon. Gentleman's line of argument entirely sympathetically. Will he join me in noting that unemployment in Northern Ireland has halved in the past 10 years?

Mr. Barnes: I was about to point to the success of the new deal, which has already been mentioned. The Select Committee is examining the question of inward investment, which is important for job creation in the Province. Such developments help to tackle some of the problems of unfairness in employment.

I have always thought that full and fair employment is both a cause and a consequence of developments towards peace in Northern Ireland. It is easier to achieve the objectives of the peace agreement in a setting of full employment. Peace itself helps to achieve that where it is missing. It is not easy to distinguish which element needs to be more fully discussed, but the two issues—the cause of peace and the consequences of it—seem vastly important. Our discussion is of matters that are of significance to people's daily lives, and fairness between groups of people, but we are also discussing the peace process and the possibilities within it. We were right on two grounds to involve ourselves in this investigation.

In the modern world, employment often requires people to be highly mobile. Sometimes jobs are available only for specific periods, after which people have to move and look elsewhere. That is a bigger problem in Northern Ireland than elsewhere in the United Kingdom. People in the Province are now more divided into separate Catholic and Protestant communities than at any time in their history. As a consequence of the troubles, people have been moved from areas and have gone to the communities where they feel safest. That obviously creates difficulties for the establishment of fair employment. Economic developments will take place more readily in some areas than in others. That creates a problem because people need to move around and into new areas, so it is important to move away from placing people in areas that become almost ghettoes.

Mr. Beggs: Does my hon. Friend accept that, although civil unrest has existed in Northern Ireland for 30 years, unrest has never reached the workplace, and that Northern Ireland's record will show that, compared with other regions of the United Kingdom, less time was lost in industry and commerce because of

[Mr. Beggs]

industrial disputes? That shows how well people from each community worked together in the workplace to ensure each other's prosperity.

Mr. Barnes: The tensions within Northern Ireland were reflected in the working communities, but the Northern Ireland trade union movement always directed itself to tackling that problem, and always sought reconciliation and agreement between groups rather than play either card or fly the flag of a united Ireland or of the United Kingdom. It organised its own campaigns against violence and intimidation. It saw that that attitude among the work force could reach out into home and community life, and we should fully recognise the importance of that.

It is interesting that my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) took part in the inquiry, although he is now busy with other activities within the London area. However, in our first question and answer session, my hon. Friend said:

> I was one of those who felt that the 1989 Act was just a sop to try and buy up the campaign for the MacBride principles. In the event, I am clearly very glad to see it has turned out to be much more effective than many of us feared.

The significance of the legislation was recognised by someone on the Committee whose political views could be said to be close to the aspirations of republicanism and to some of the Catholic community's ideals for a united Ireland. Much propaganda had been associated with the MacBride principles, but it was recognised that something significant had been achieved, and that was reflected in the evidence provided to us and in the report.

Mr. Jeffrey Donaldson (Lagan Valley): If the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) had been living in Northern Ireland, does the hon. Gentleman think that he would have had a case against the Labour party's selection procedures under the fair employment legislation?

Mr. Barnes: I might have many things to say about that, but on another occasion. On this occasion, what I say will remain entirely relevant to the matter in hand.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Nicholas Winterton): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Barnes: The Department of Economic Development in Northern Ireland supplied us with evidence, which produced the response from the hon. Member for Brent, East. It showed that between 1990 and 1997, Catholics employed in firms with 26 or more employees had risen from 33 per cent. to 36.9 per cent. If the non-denominational were excluded, the rise was from 34.9 per cent to 38.8 per cent. There was still a bias in view of the potential number of Catholic workers, but significant developments were clearly taking place.

Maldistribution is shown clearly in the statistics for 1997: 42.4 per cent. of Catholics were employed as plant and machine operators, but only 36.5 per cent. were employed in management and administration. The wider issue of who secures which jobs is still significant, and still needs to be properly investigated.

The Fair Employment Commission's statistics showed that some fluctuation had taken place and that Catholic employment in the public sector had barely increased between 1991 and 1995, although it was claimed that that was because various measures had previously been introduced that had helped to achieve an increase. In the private sector, some significant developments occurred between 1991 and 1996, although the number fell back in 1997.

As the Chairman of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee said, the Equality Commission was established on 1 October 1999 to take over from the Fair Employment Commission, as a consequence of the peace agreement. It is important that we are updated on developments in order to ascertain whether the hopes that were placed in the Equality Commission to extend the work of the Fair Employment Commission have been fulfilled, or seem likely to be fulfilled, as the period involved is short.

Mr. Beggs: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that a continuing vital role for the Equality Commission will be detailed monitoring? In the event of clear evidence of under-representation of one or other community in either the public or the private sector, we must ensure not only that the figures involved are reported, but that we are shown evidence of on-going monitoring to correct imbalances.

Mr. Barnes: I am sure that, given the work of the Fair Employment Commission and the work that will be done by the Equality Commission, such considerations will be to the fore.

I am worried that the Equality Commission has taken on rather more than it can handle, given its size, having assumed responsibility for gender, race and disability. Will those aspects work together? The commission has to work that way as a result of the Belfast agreement, and I do not complain about that, but I have always been worried about disability legislation in the United Kingdom. We have established a Disability Rights Commission in Britain, but disability is part of the Equality Commission's responsibility in Northern Ireland. In Northern Ireland, a commitment has been made to full civil rights for disabled people. That has been reflected in the House and by all the political parties in Northern Ireland outside the House that I have contacted in the past, which favour such measures. The only body from which I have not received a response is Sinn Fein, which may be embarrassed that it has been in the disability-creating game for a time.

I hope that the Equality Commission's range of responsibilities will enliven its ability to tackle those areas, rather than detract from it. However, we must be careful that one aspect does not miss out at the cost of another.

The report shows that, given the massively difficult circumstances in Northern Ireland, some satisfactory advances have been made. It is a matter of prodding and pushing, and ensuring that we are not complacent and that objectives are delivered in line with agreed principles. What emerged from the contribution of the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster was that he wanted to pursue several detailed points, and although he did not disagree on the

principle or direction he wanted those points to be acted on. That is a correct role for a Chairman to play in ensuring that a Select Committee's work leads to responses from Government Departments.

10.24 am

Mr. Jeffrey Donaldson (Lagan Valley): I welcome the opportunity to participate in the debate. One of the conclusions in the report of the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs related to the parliamentary scrutiny of fair employment legislation in Northern Ireland. The Committee felt that it was inadequate that such an important matter should have been dealt with by an order rather than primary legislation. It hoped that any review of and changes to the legislation would be dealt with by primary legislation, so that more adequate parliamentary scrutiny could be ensured.

The Ulster Unionist party clearly wants fair employment, but we feel that it must be created using the principle of merit. When the fair employment legislation was introduced in Northern Ireland, we were concerned that it would be a blunt instrument that would not properly and fairly tackle problems such as long-term unemployment. We have worked with the legislation and encouraged our constituents to use it when necessary. We have tried to improve it and the methodology that was used by fair employment tribunals and the former Fair Employment Commission.

We have adopted a positive approach to the legislation in seeking to deal with religious discrimination. It is important to recognise that that problem is not one-sided. There is evidence that both the main traditions in Northern Ireland are discriminated against. Some large employers have serious disparities between the levels of Roman Catholics and Protestants employed, and the register of companies monitored under the fair employment legislation shows that some of the worst cases involve under-employment of Protestants.

The problem is portrayed as one-sided because of the over-use of the unemployment differential, which is constantly mentioned as an example of discrimination in employment. That creates a wrong impression. The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee concluded that the unemployment differential was not the only measure of the differences in unemployment between the two traditions.

Lately, we have seen the effect on the economy of Northern Ireland of changing global situations that do not discriminate against one community or the other. Global changes and difficulties in competition from the far east may lead to the closure of the Harland and Wolff shipyard. That will have a serious impact on the community in east Belfast. As the area has a large Protestant majority, it will disproportionately affect the Protestant community.

The recent decline in the textile industry has led to several factory closures in North Down, which have had a disproportionate impact on the Protestant community. Unemployment in Northern Ireland is principally due not to discrimination per se, but to economic and social factors that are influenced by matters far beyond the purview of Northern Ireland and by the fact that we have many multinational employers. To argue that unemployment is caused by religious discrimination is to minimise the problems that exist in the affected areas.

Mr. Beggs: My hon. Friend rightly drew attention to the threatened crisis if there is no direct intervention and Government support for the mainly Protestant work force of the Belfast shipyard. He also mentioned the employment losses in textiles in North Down, which again is a mainly Protestant area. For the sake of the balance that we both seek, does my hon. Friend agree that in the shirt factories of Londonderry, where more than 90 per cent. of the work force are Roman Catholic, cheap imports are forcing cuts and closures, and are having a damaging effect on employees?

Mr. Donaldson: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. He is right. I was about to make the point that the social trends and economic conditions that have given rise to recent closures and job losses are by no means restricted to the Protestant community. The impact on the textile industry in the west of the Province, particulary shirt manufacturing, has had a disproportionate effect on the Roman Catholic community there. Two thirds of the long-term unemployed are Roman Catholic: that is not acceptable. My party wants the problem of long-term unemployment to be addressed. Resources need to be targeted at areas with high long-term unemployment, regardless of the community's political colour, demography or religious balance. Long-term unemployment must be tackled, and the best way of doing that is to create employment by bringing jobs to such areas.

The hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman) referred to a friend who went to work in a Harland and Wolff shipyard who had to learn not only the words of "The Sash", but how to sing it—there is a difference between knowing the words and knowing how to sing it. The hon. Gentleman will be only too aware of Monklands council, close to his own constituency, where there were cases of religious discrimination. Religious discrimination is not exclusive to Northern Ireland. I am not suggesting that the hon. Gentlemant is arguing that it is a major factor, and nor am I denying that there is such religious discrimination in Northern Ireland, but it is important to place it in context.

Dr. Godman: Monklands is some distance from my constituency. Historically, the cane sugar refineries overwhelmingly employed Catholic employees. The campaign to keep Harland and Wolff open could learn a great deal from the campaign that was waged on the upper Clyde to keep the Govan shipyard open. I hope that there will be some interchange between the two.

Mr. Donaldson: The hon. Gentleman is right. Many sub-contractors working in the Belfast shipyard were previously employed in yards in Scotland and the north of England. I hope that we can combine our efforts to maintain employment in the Belfast shipyard, not only for the good of the employees who live in Belfast, but for those who live in other parts of the United Kingdom whose skills are being utilised in the Belfast shipyard. The retention of those skills is important to our economy.

[Mr. Donaldson]

I shall deal now with some aspects of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee's report and the Government's response to it. I touched on the issue of long-term unemployment, and I urge the Minister not to believe that the employment differential is the only way in which to tackle the problem. Employers are worried about the growing cost of compliance. I welcome the Government's proposal to undertake research into compliance costs for the next review in 2005. Such an important matter cannot be ignored.

I welcome the moves taken by the Government to increase the number of part-time chairmen serving on the fair employment tribunals to double the number of lay members of those tribunals. It is frustrating for people to experience long delays before their cases are heard, and I hope that the Government's action will lead to a reduction in the backlog.

We expressed concern during the passage of the Northern Ireland Bill about the problem that may emerge if religious discrimination and related issues dominate the work of the Equality Commission. We hope that the valuable work on gender imbalance carried out by the Equal Opportunities Commission will continue, and that it will be enhanced by the Equality Commission.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim (Mr. Beggs) has referred previously to the problem of disability discrimination, and there is much work to be done in Northern Ireland on that. I hope that the issue will not be marginalised by the decision to bring it under the umbrella of the Equality Commission.

Although race relations is not a major problem in Northern Ireland, it must still be given its proper place in discussions. Age descrimination is an emerging factor not only in Northern Ireland, but throughout the United Kingdom, and I hope that the Equality Commission will bear that in mind when allocating resources.

Reference has been made to appointments at senior levels within the Northern Ireland civil service. My hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim rightly drew attention to the restructuring of Government Departments in Northern Ireland as a means of redressing the imbalance at senior levels in the civil service and providing an opportunity on the basis of merit for people from the Roman Catholic tradition to apply for senior positions.

Applications from the Roman Catholic community to the Royal Ulster Constabulary have increased considerably since the reinstatement of the IRA ceasefire. Recruitment is now at more than 20 per cent. We welcome that. It points to a clear link between intimidation of people from the Roman Catholic community who want to join the RUC and the number of Roman Catholics actually in the RUC. I hope that the continuation of the ceasefire will give more Roman Catholics the confidence to join the RUC. We welcome the fact that more are now being recruited.

Finally, I want to speak briefly about targeting social need, which recognises that a range of social factors contribute to long-term unemployment. It is important to consider the indices that are being applied, and the use of local government wards to identify pockets of social need, because some areas and pockets of social deprivation are being missed under the targeting social need initiative. For instance, the Seymour Hill ward in my constituency is just outside the area covered by the making Belfast work initiative, and it sits alongside the electoral wards of Twinbrook and Poleglass, which attract assistance under the TSN initiative. High levels of social deprivation are found in the Seymour Hill ward, yet its people are not being assisted under TSN, unlike people in neighbouring wards. I hope that the Government will deal with that problem.

10.41 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. George Howarth): This has been a useful debate. It has given us the opportunity to review progress since the report was published, and we have had the chance to discuss some of the issues that are important to ensuring equality and fair employment in Northern Ireland.

I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke). His involvement with Northern Ireland matters is long and distinguished. That service continues to great effect in his role as Chairman of the Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee. In his opening speech, the right hon. Gentleman raised most of the critical issues to which we must now turn our minds.

The hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Mr. Donaldson) made a typically thoughtful speech, which raised some slightly different matters that need to be considered. His later remarks were about targeting social need, and he argued that we should revisit the methodology and the statistical base involved in TSN. I am certainly prepared to consider that matter with my officials. I may or may not agree with him on the subject, but it is important that we should give some attention to such constructive criticisms.

A number of issues on fair employment law were dealt with under the Northern Ireland Act 1998. It is, of course, a transferred matter. At the time of devolution, we implemented a number of new provisions, some of which passed to the offices of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. One of the first substantive issues to come before the Assembly was an equality Bill that dealt with disability—an issue that was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes), with which he has long been associated. The Government deeply regret the circumstances that led to the suspension of the Assembly, and we hope that in the near future the devolved institutions can be restored.

The right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster gave us a history of fair employment and equality legislation. It would be superfluous to go through that again. However, he raised an issue that is of great concern to the House and should be of great concern to everyone who takes an interest in the issues that have divided society in Northern Ireland for so long. If we are serious about getting things right in Northern Ireland, it is vital that we address issues such as equality and fair employment. The effects of not having policies to promote equality and fair employment are deeply corrosive. One need only to

consider the history of the past 30 or 40 years to see just how corrosive those effects are and to understand how people feel when they believe that they are being discriminated against. If we are not fair, especially in employment matters, that feeds the arguments of those who would take a completely different path from the democratic process that we believe is the right way forward for Northern Ireland.

I shall now deal with some of the specific points raised by right hon. and hon. Members. The hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik) said that community differences in unemployment should remain an important issue for the Government, which I fully accept. However, I should reiterate the Government's concern about the differential impact of unemployment in the two Northern Ireland communities. The latest data collected in 1998 suggest that the ratio of the proportion of male Catholics and Protestants unemployed is 2.3, and the comparable statistic for women is 1.4. People might hold different opinions about the current and historic factors that have created those differentials, some of which were referred to by the hon. Member for Lagan Valley. However, they are unacceptable and the Government are committed to their reduction. It is heartening that everyone who has spoken in the debate subscribes to that central tenet of Government policy, which is part of the solution to the problems that we are all eager to address.

In order to tackle the ugly scar of long-term unemployment, the Government have introduced several new initiatives, including the new deal and the new policy on targeting social need. My hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman) raised an issue, which was echoed by the hon. Member for Lagan Valley, about those older members of the potential labour market who are unemployed. They will both be aware that the Government intend to introduce the new deal for the over-50s this year, and it is right that we should do that. I say that not only because I have recently passed the age of 50 myself, but because a significant proportion of people of that age in Northern Ireland and elsewhere still have a contribution to make and are still capable of supporting themselves and their families. They have been overlooked. It is especially important that we should tackle that serious problem in Northern Ireland through the new deal for the over-50s because that source of discrimination, or perceived discrimination, may hit hardest those groups who are least able to find their way back to remunerative employment without help.

The Equality Commission has a role in advising the Government on measures to reduce the religious imbalance among unemployed people, and on targets and timetables. I shall say a little more about that in a moment. We regret the fact that persistent long-term unemployment differentials exist, but progress has been made to close that gap, especially since the Fair Employment (Northern Ireland) Act 1989 was introduced. It has not been closed entirely, but we are moving in the right direction. The data show that the gap stands at 1.3 percentage points compared with 3.4 percentage points in the 1991 census. That is an important sign that we are making progress towards fair participation. It clearly demonstrates an achievement of fair employment legislation.

Dr. Godman I am sure that the Minister will write to me if he cannot respond now, but what is the record of the Northern Ireland Office on the recruitment, selection and employment of people aged over 50?

Mr. Howarth: My hon. Friend is right; I do not have those statistics, but I am reasonably confident, having looked around a room of civil servants at briefing meetings, that a fair number of staff at a senior level are over 50, although there are exceptions, as your gaze indicated, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I shall write to my hon. Friend if I can obtain reliable statistics.

The Select Committee's report raised a number of issues on the Equality Commission, especially on appointments, resources and the need to avoid an overlap between its work and that of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission. The work of the Equality Commission is a priority. The Government will ensure that adequate resources are made available to enable it to carry out its work effectively. The commissions are discussing a memorandum of understanding and are liasing well on a range of matters in which they have a mutual interest. On appointments, I can add little to the Government's response. We do not consider that a review of the appropriateness of the Nolan-Peach procedures is necessary but we hope that with the return of the devolved responsibility that will be a matter for local consideration.

I pay tribute to the work of the commissions and their chief commissioners, Joan Harbinson and Brice Dickson. They were good and far-sighted appointments. They have worked well together and with the Government, sometimes explaining how we could improve our performance. I am confident that their productive relationship will continue.

In addition to the establishment of the Equality Commission, other important developments have taken place since the Select Committee produced its report. Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act became operational on 1 January. By 30 June 2000, those public authorities to which it applies will have to submit equality schemes to the Equality Commission. Work is progressing on those, with a view to early public consultation. They will set a framework for the assessment of the impact of policies and for consultation.

The targeting social need policy has also developed. Draft action plans were published in November 1999, and consultation ended on 28 February. Northern Ireland Departments and the Northern Ireland Office are considering the proposals contained in approximately 150 responses. Finalised action plans will be put to Ministers. As in all consultation, we welcome constructive criticism and hope to respond positively where appropriate.

The equality agenda is progressing in line with the spirit of the Good Friday agreement and the 1998 White Paper "Partnership for Equality".

Mr. Brooke: I put six or seven questions to the Under-Secretary on behalf of the Select Committee, and I appreciate that he may write to me about those to which

[Mr. Brooke]

he does not respond now. However, I should like to ask specifically about section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act, and when he expects the Secretary of State to approve the draft guidelines put to him by the Equality Commission.

Mr. Howarth: I shall come to that. If there is time, I hope to deal with all the points raised by the right hon. Gentleman.

We are conscious of and concerned about the backlog of employment tribunal cases, which the right hon. Gentleman mentioned. As the hon. Member for Lagan Valley readily conceded, resources for the tribunals office have been increased: more staff, panel members and tribunal rooms have been made available. The number of complaints has reduced—there were 666 in 1997 and 499 in 1999, which is a 25 per cent. reduction. It is important to resolve cases as quickly as possible and not to allow backlogs to build up.

The right hon. Gentleman also raised the issue of the equality unit in the office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister. Plans for its expansion, agreed by them, will go ahead. A deputy secretary will be appointed to head the unit, which, during suspension, will advise the Secretary of State on equality issues.

We are conscious of the issue of monitoring and targets, which was raised by the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire. We and those who advise us on the subject are trying to set realistic and achievable targets that are properly monitored.

As to contract compliance, it is important, as an objective of procurement, that the securing of value for money for the taxpayer should not be distorted by the use of other purchasing objectives. However, in Northern Ireland, a formal feature of contracts is that contractors are bound to observe the equality and fair employment legislation. We are keeping a careful eye on developments in England, where, through the single regeneration budget, local authorities and central Government agencies, we are investigating how to use the appropriate leverage to create employment opportunities for local people. We may be able to learn from that.

The hon. Member for Montgomeryshire also asked about the Equality Commission and its resources. A further £425,000 is earmarked in the year. We are committed to ensuring that the resources necessary for it to carry out its duties will be made available.

As to designations, we consulted the Equality Commission before finalising our plans. Several suggestions from the commission are under consideration. Some hon. Members, including the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster, will appreciate that there were problematic issues with respect to further and higher education. I understand that some progress has been made on them. We hope to make the initial designation order shortly, but it is likely that a further and more comprehensive order will be made later in the year, after consultation.

The hon. Member for Montgomeryshire asked about anti-discrimination law. Perhaps we can debate that important matter on another occasion.

I have not been able to answer all the questions put to me, but I shall write to the hon. Members who asked them.

Conflict Prevention

11 am

Mr. Bowen Wells (Hertford and Stortford): The report of the International Development Committee on conflict prevention and post-conflict reconstruction lies at the heart of developmental issues. Many of us who have been in the field for a long time are aware of the need for stability. Lord Judd and I discussed that need at the beginning of this Parliament, and concluded that unless there are conditions of stability and an absence of conflict, development is not only impossible but will go backwards. People in unstable countries and areas of conflict would become much poorer, so conflict prevention lies at the heart of development debate and policy.

Conflict haunts the developing world and prevents a 50 per cent. reduction in the number of people in abject poverty by 2015, which is one of the main objectives of the Department for International Development, as set out in its White Paper. The prevention of conflict and post-conflict reconstruction therefore lie at the heart of the developmental objectives not only of the Department for International Development but of all the national and international institutions and non-governmental organisations engaged in this field, from the International Monetary Fund and the World bank to the smallest non-governmental organisation working in one country.

The report attempts to bring together all the factors and initiatives that can prevent conflict in the first place, or begin the task of reconstruction after conflict has ended. It cannot be simple coincidence that 20 of the poorest 34 countries of the world are either in the middle of armed conflict or have recently emerged from it. Conflict and poverty may not be recognised as causally connected, but they are very close companions. There is no better way to produce abject poverty than conflict. Many years of painstaking development work can be destroyed in a few months by an outbreak of hostilities that takes many more years to repair. Without political stability and security, development and poverty reduction cannot be achieved. It is for those reasons that the Committee embarked on its comprehensive review of conflict and the policies that would prevent it in the first place or help rehabilitation in the second.

The production of the report took the Committee many hours of painstaking work, combined with visits to Uganda, Rwanda and Kenya, and later to Kosovan refugees in Macedonia. In a departmental memorandum, the Secretary of State for International Development stated:

> The damage done to development by violent conflict is enormous. To give but one example, the 15-year civil war in Mozambique destroyed 70 per cent. of the country's schools and cost the country an estimated US$15 billion. Today, Mozambique is officially designated as the world's poorest country.

As we know, the world's poorest country has suffered in recent weeks the most devastating floods around Maputo, where the Limpopo has overflowed its banks because of the unprecedented rainfall in the interior of the country and in Zimbabwe, Botswana and Zambia. It will therefore take many more years than we had anticipated to begin to enable Mozambique to climb out of its serious difficulties.

The Committee concluded that sustainable development alone provides genuine solutions to endemic conflict. It is difficult to isolate individual factors that bring about conflict, although the report covers the principal causes: poverty, inequality, economic shocks, such as the sudden drop in the price of coffee in Rwanda which affected two thirds of the country's farmers, human rights abuses, failures and abuses of political leaderships, arms proliferation and the exploitation of poor countries, especially in Africa, by both sides in the cold war.

I shall highlight the causes of which the Committee had first-hand experience. On our visit to Rwanda, the effects of over population were immediately apparent. Every hill and valley was totally exploited for farming. The hill tops were covered not with Rwanda's natural vegetation but with eucalyptus trees, presumably imported under the colonial Belgian administration. As a result, individual farmers had only a tiny piece of land. Rwanda's traditional land usage practice of dividing land equally between each family member meant that such people had unsustainable plots scattered over the village and surrounding areas. Families were therefore incapable of sustaining the most meagre life. Indeed, they could not sustain a recognisable standard of living.

Such circumstances are likely to lead to conflict and jealously, although that is not necessarily so. Mr. Chairman, out of desperation, people—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Nicholas Winterton): Order, I hesitate to correct the hon. Gentleman. However, in this place, a Deputy Speaker presides over debate.

Mr. Wells: I am sorry, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am not accustomed to speaking in this Chamber.

In Rwanda, land is precious and has been made infertile by over-cultivation. That leads to desperation, which erupts in unpredictable and un-African conflict. Generally speaking, Africans are accommodating and generous to their neighbours. They do not object to large numbers of refugees coming to live in their country, unlike people in the United Kingdom, who object strongly to only a few refugees taking up residence here.

Rwanda exploded into conflict between the Hutus and Tutsis and was invaded by Tutsi forces based in Uganda. The international community did not help to prevent that conflict and did not even take elementary precautions when it was obvious that conflict was inevitable. Rwanda was not the central focus of developmental assistance, although it needed such assistance to prevent the outbreak of conflict between the Tutsis and Hutus. We should do something about that, but we are failing to do so. However, I am sure that hon. Members will attest to the seriousness of the position.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): I know that my hon. Friend will cover a great deal in our debate. The aftermath of the Rwandan conflict has moved west into the Democratic Republic of Congo, formerly Zaire. Things have not improved since our report was published. The DRC is involved with Zimbabwe, whose helicopters were not available to support Mozambique because they were being used in a conflict in the DRC. We have seen only the tip of a dreadful, unending circle of conflict in Africa.

[Mr. Andrew Robathan]

Mr. Wells: My hon. Friend is entirely right. The conflict in Rwanda has spread into the DRC, because the Hutus are being looked after in camps run by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, where they have been able to reconstruct their activities. That is another factor to be taken into account when we consider the role of international organisations in such situations.

The conflict that threatened Rwanda's stability led to attacks on DRC forces, and hence the DRC war, which brought in Angola, another very poor country, and Zimbabwe, whose economy has been brought to its knees. Thus the whole sorry tale continues. It is essential in the war against poverty to try to prevent conflict in Africa and to help with reconstruction after the conflict has subsided.

We must consider how to put in place secure governance, which includes an Executive and an impartial system of justice. To prevent the outbreak of conflict, the people who feel aggrieved must be confident that their problems will be sorted out in a just and objective manner that is accepted by the whole country. Such systems were absent in Rwanda and, at times, in Uganda. Uganda under President Muzeveni is having a renaissance because of the lack of conflict in most of the country. The Committee visited the north of Uganda, which borders the Sudan, where there is conflict. We witnessed the people of north Uganda in the most appalling conditions of poverty and fear because of the conflict overflowing from southern Sudan, where the forces of the Government of the north are constantly engaged in a war against John Garang. He, in turn, is taking teams of armed soldiers, many very young, into northern Uganda, capturing boys as young as 11 or 12, keeping them in conditions resembling slavery and teaching them to be soldiers, on threat of death. We met some of those young soldiers: the story was in their eyes. They were listless and in despair; many have committed suicide because of the hopelessness of their situation. They are the victims of conflict, and we must help them to go back to a reasonable life.

We cannot help development in northern Uganda while such activities are going on. I hope that the debate will bring the conflict to the top of the in-baskets at the Foreign Office and the offices of the international organisations. We have a responsibility to settle the war in the Sudan and north Uganda, where there is terrible starvation and horrendous offences against women and children happen every day. Unless we achieve a settlement, there can be no development in northern Uganda or the Sudan.

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the world appears to have forgotten what is happening in the Sudan? The British Government should be making much more of an effort to resolve the conflict, which has been running intermittently for 30 years.

Mr. Wells: I hope that the hon. Lady's ambitions for the Sudan, which are the same as mine, will come to fruition. It has been forgotten, and I cannot understand why. The country is well known to the British, and many friends of the British live there. We should be striving to find a solution in order to restart development in that country. It is a tragedy, and it requires the combined efforts of Saudi Arabia, the United States and its neighbours Kenya and Uganda, as well as Britain and the international organisations, to make progress there.

I cannot help thinking of another country in which I spent seven years of my adult life helping to further its development, which was going very well in the 1960s and early 1970s. It experienced not a conflict, but a serious failure of governance in which elections were rigged by the then President Burnham to keep him and his party in power. A one-party state was established, and from one form of corruption—the corruption of the electoral machinery—others followed. The sugar, bauxite and timber industries and the retail sector were all taken over, as was anything else that the Government could lay their hands on by borrowing money that they could not repay. Guyana was reduced from a middle-income, least developed country to one of the poorest countries in the world. It was one of the first countries to benefit from the HIPC initiative—the world community's attempts to write off debt, so that development can be restarted in heavily indebted poor countries.

Governance is hugely important in itself, and conflict breaks down governance. The whole of the judicial system in Rwanda was obliterated: there were no judges, no magistrates, and no clerks to magistrates or to any other courts. We witnessed an event that will always haunt me—the incarceration of 1,200 prisoners in an old warehouse in Kigali. When we visited those prisoners, they had been there for four years. None had been charged: they were simply there, and their morale and physical condition was constantly deteriorating. Many suicides took place within that prison.

Ms Oona King (Bethnal Green and Bow): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that attempts by the United Nations to bring many of those implicated in the genocide to justice were not as speedy as they should have been and, in some respects, hindered the Rwandan Government's attempts to do so themselves? We should be pressing the United Nations to ensure that justice is more readily available to countries such as Rwanda that are facing complete and utter annihilation.

Mr. Wells: I very much agree. We should contrast the condition in which the international community left Rwanda—without any capacity to implement justice—with what is happening in Kosovo. I hear that we are going to send judges, magistrates and clerks to help provide a system of justice—only a year after the Kosovo conflict. That did not happen in four years in Rwanda, although some people are now being trained there to take on the task of administering justice. Without justice, and the capacity to charge and try people objectively, there can be no resolution of conflict. That became clear in Kosovo and action was taken, but it was not taken until much later in Rwanda, and it is still rudimentary justice.

Mr. Robathan: My hon. Friend and I reached similar conclusions when we discussed the report. I wish to reinforce his point about governance and political

leadership. In the countries that we examined, and in some that we visited, governance and political leadership were fundamentally important. Where there has been conflict, invariably there has been poor governance. That was so in Iraq, in Rwanda before the war and in Mozambique, whose problems are extremely complicated. When a better Government is in place, as in Uganda, in Mozambique now and in Rwanda, although it is not a democratic Government, and there is better governance, it becomes possible to suppress conflict and drive it away.

Mr. Wells: I agree entirely with that analysis. A good system of justice is a major way of preventing conflict in a country. Objective judicial systems are needed to begin with; they have to be in place to prevent conflict. They must not be corrupt in any way, and the people must trust them if they are trying to reconstruct a country that has suffered conflict.

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): My hon. Friend made the powerful point that within a year of the conflict in Kosovo we are sending in a barrage of lawyers to underpin the legal system. That never happened in the four years after the conflicts on Africa. Does my hon. Friend agree that that raises serious questions for western Governments, especially our own, as regards employing double standards between European countries and African countries? We must be careful to be even-handed in our approach to conflict anywhere in the world, be it on our doorstep or in Asia.

Mr. Wells: Our report contrasts the amount of money that was donated and committed to the reconstruction of Kosovo with the sum that was committed to the reconstruction of Rwanda. Kosovo was over-subscribed, while Rwanda received less than 25 per cent. of the amount that was thought necessary for immediate disbursement there. That shows that the international system is not even-handed, and it will encourage jealousies and distrusts, which we should not excite in any way. The world must address itself to this problem, because it is clear that there is one generosity for those with whom we can identify—white people, not to put too fine a point on it—and another for black people. No self-respecting person or institution can sustain that, in this country or anywhere else. I agree with my hon. Friend, and I am extremely angry that it is happening. None the less, we must keep working to ensure that international assistance is given to places such as Rwanda, Guyana, Zimbabwe and South Africa.

Our report also refers to truth commissions and the application of other methods of justice in post-conflict situations. When justice has broken down completely and there are no people to set up and administer justice, let alone conduct court cases, other methods must be used to bring about reconciliation. It is important to learn from the truth commisison in South Africa, which has shown that there is a way quickly to re-establish justice, albeit a rough-and-ready method. There are faults with that system, but at least it would have prevented 1,200 young men from having to sit in a warehouse in Rwanda for four years with nothing to do, deteriorating in every possible way. Resentments and jealousies build up, and that may lead to further conflict. These methods must be worked on, improved and refined, but they represent a quick way to begin to re-establish justice in a post-conflict situation, which is essential.

In Africa particularly, but also in Europe, democracy is crucial to providing a stable system of government. It has served this country well. It is evolving and changing all the time to adjust to new circumstances and demands by the electorate. It also provides a means of changing Governments without conflict.

The report examines whether it is possible, in view of their history, to establish a sustainable democracy in countries such as Rwanda, Mozambique and South Africa. My answer is yes, it is—partly because democracy is an African form of government. In truth, democracy is not just an African or European form of government, but a human form of government. It provides the essential element of justice, because it provides a method of discussing issues that engenders consent to the decision adopted by the majority. A bad or wrong decision can still be obeyed under the rule of law, and people can live with it for the time being until others come to power and change the Government. That is the essential element of decmocracy and it is an African system.

The Committee visited Swaziland only two weeks ago. The King of Swaziland is one of the few remaining monarchical figures in Africa, but he is not a military dictator or a dictator of any sort. He has to hold meetings in the traditional fashion and in two Houses—an aristocratic, landowners' House and a non-landowners' House. Is that not familiar to people who know the Westminster system? As I say, that is a traditional African system. The King has to find out the majority opinion among his people before he implements any decisions. Democracy can assist Africa to avoid conflict, as the report confirms, but, if democracy is to be firmly established, it must have help.

We were in Malawi two weeks ago. The Malawi Parliament meets twice a year for two weeks because it cannot afford to meet more often. I do not accept that, but that is what it says. There is a shortage of money, but it has a public accounts committee and a treasury committee, and a committee dealing with labour standards—and it looks wonderful. Those committees have to share two or three clerks to help them with their deliberations. I asked when they last met and was told that they had never met. The reason is that they have to meet at the same time as the Parliament and there are not enough staff to run both Parliament and the committees. That suggests that the country needs assistance with running its Parliaments—the essential part of its democracy.

Such countries need assistance to run their electoral systems properly, to evolve their government and call their Executives to account. That is vital to producing a framework for economic development.

Another important issue is the role of the private sector. The White Paper on international development clearly recognises that the private sector is the engine of development, and that money that flows into private sector investment and trade far outweighs any sums that can be produced through aid agencies, the Department for International Development, the World bank and the International Monetary Fund. It is essential for the private sector to be involved. However, it may

[Mr. Wells]

contribute to the difficulties that a country faces if it becomes involved in corrupt practices. Paragraph 15 of the report states:

> The Development White Paper lists the consequences of corruption—higher prices and fewer employment opportunities, the diversion of scarce resources away from poverty elimination, constraints to growth due to the uncertainty and unpredictability of costs to prospective investors, reduced representation for the poor and the perpetuation of elites.

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Faversham and Mid-Kent): Does my hon. Friend share my sense of outrage that when we were in Malawi and saw one of the few functioning anti-corruption services, we were told that to pursue a pretty obvious case of corruption within the country, the service had applied to the United Kingdom for assistance and had been told by the Department of Trade and Industry that there were no powers within that Department to compel a British company to explain its conduct. When the service went to the Home Office for help, the latter said that the matter was nothing to do with it.

It is disgraceful to be preaching the gospel of anti-corruption abroad, only to find that our own legislative practices make it impossible for developing countries to pursue crooks there.

Mr. Wells: Yes, I share my hon. Friend's disgust at that. He will remember that in the report that we are discussing we made a positive recommendation that legislation should be enacted in the United Kingdom to make it an offence to bribe government officials and any other persons in a third country. As far as I know, such legislation has not yet come before us. It is essential that it be introduced at the earliest possible opportunity. We should at least put our own house in order. Bribery takes two people, the person to offer and the person to accept. Sometimes Mr. Fayed seems also to forget that, but that is another matter.

I shall illustrate the corruption that is taking place, especially in regard to power supply. In each of the countries that the Committee has visited recently—India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Malawi and Zambia—we found that the power supply company had been corrupted. These companies have been corrupted by their Governments because they do not pay their bills. If Governments do not pay their bills, the price of power supply has to increase for those who do pay their bills.

Corruption arises in other ways. We are told that in Bangladesh, electricity is supplied to large undertakings at very much lower prices than the standard tariffs. We find that power supplies are continually undermined by Governments and by powerful people within the community. As a result, the electricity service deteriorates and it cannot be supplied to rural areas to poor people. That is extremely important in developmental terms, because electricity provides a source of light that does not strain people's eyes if they are studying at night. Education is hugely important in the anti-poverty drive. Electricity is very important also because rural people without a power supply are obliged to cut down trees to enable them to light fires to keep warm and cook food.

These corrupt practices do not need to happen in a developing country. Electricity supply companies should be profitable and should be contributing to the elimination of poverty by supplying power to rural and other areas. They are not the most profitable areas to supply, but it is essential that they be supplied, in the drive for development. A regular power supply is essential to run computers and other modern equipment. It is only by jumping over developmental gaps into new technology that many countries will begin to work themselves out of poverty.

The corruption that we have witnessed in power supply companies is extremely dangerous. Sadly, it is typical of much of what we find in developing countries. Much of the corruption is caused because these countries do not collect their revenue properly. They need assistance in collecting taxes and in devising means by which their customs and excise services can be run properly. They need assistance in collecting sufficient revenue to enable them to pay their civil servants properly. That applies also to their police forces and armed services. As these people are not paid anything like a living wage, minor corruption—it is huge in its impact, because almost every one of them has to be corrupt—is a serious problem in introducing good governance in developing countries, and we need to help them overcome the problem. I know that the Department for International Development is doing a great deal in this area, and I am sure that the Minister will tell us about some of the initiatives that he will take.

There are non-oppressive methods that can be used to defeat corruption. I take as an example the road that is being built between Johannesburg and Maputo. It crosses an international boundary, and it will be built by the private sector, which has been given a 25-year lease. It is required to provide toll booths and to ensure that lorries using the road are not overweight and that drivers do not exceed speed limits, for example. The private sector will have to maintain the road for 25 years and hand it back at the end of that period, or possibly renew the arrangement.

Such an arrangement has the benefit that it eliminates the many forms of corruption that are still taking place on the road between Mombassa, Nairobi and Kampala in east Africa. In that area, Ministers own trucks and shipping companies. They overload their trucks because that is clearly beneficial for them. The road deteriorates and collapses as a result. That is a typical example of corruption.

In the context of the road between Johannesburg and Maputo, if the private sector pays more in bribes or if there is ministerial corruption, the price of the road and hence the tolls will increase. If the toll is fixed, the private sector will not get its money back so quickly. Corruption can be eliminated by the way in which the contract is let. Such arrangements should be thought out and considered in developing countries. That will lead to a reduction in corruption and its pervasive influence.

Good governance and good administration and justice systems are essential if development is to take place. The absence of conflict is essential. Development cannot take place in circumstances where violent conflict is an ever-present threat or reality. Progress towards the achievement of international targets for development and the halving of poverty by the year 2015 cannot take place in those circumstances.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Before I call the next speaker, I remind hon. Members that we have taken up 40 minutes of a one-and-a-half hour debate. It is clear that other hon. Members want to speak and it will be appropriate, although my successor will be in the Chair when the Minister is asked to reply, to give the Minister adequate time to respond. I hope that all hon. Members will note that.

11.39 am

Mr. Tony Worthington (Clydebank and Milngavie): Because of the time left, I shall be brief. In fact, I shall make only one point, which is to follow on from the remarks that the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells) has made about the crucial issue of governance. We must invest in governance—in capacity building and co-ordination of capacity building—if only because of the financial cost of the destructive consequences of a failed prevention strategy.

The issue of governance is rising up the development community's agenda. It is no use investing money in good services such as education and health unless those services are properly administered. In Bangladesh, the administration of the Government education system is appalling. Good systems of administration are needed if services are to be delivered effectively.

There are innumerable agencies other than the Department for International Development now involved in good governance activities: the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, through know-how funds; the British Council and the Commonwealth; the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and the Inter-Parliamentary Union; police services, local government bodies and trade unions; and the European Union, through its administration of the PHARE and TACIS funds. In addition, the World bank, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organisation are involved. Only last week, the director-general of the WTO said that one of his priorities is capacity building, because if countries cannot be part of the world trading system owing to a lack of capacity, it is a recipe for disorganisation and future conflict.

Non-governmental organisations do a great deal of work in this sphere, and I pay tribute to two with which I and other hon. Members have been associated. The Westminster Foundation for Democracy, which was established by the previous Government with all-party support, does invaluable work. I have been involved in its activities in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Nigeria and Kenya. It is soon to start operations in Sierra Leone. That organisation enables parliamentarians to help parliamentarians of other countries to establish systems of good governance, and I commend its highly fulfilling work. I also pay tribute to the BBC. Under its retiring head of training, Gwyneth Henderson, the BBC World Service has done a huge amount of work to train journalists in central and eastern Europe who are attempting to set up a free press, free television, free broadcasting and so on.

We have to ask whether we are getting full value for money from all the activities associated with good governance. Institution building is extremely difficult: it is easy to rebuild buildings and physical infrastructure, but building social institutions is far harder. Our current experiences in Northern Ireland and Kosovo tell us that. I am pleased that such activities are occurring, but they are unco-ordinated, even when only the British Government are involved. Countries such as Sierra Leone and Nigeria present huge challenges, but much of our work is short term, unco-ordinated and not part of a general plan of social reconstruction.

What I would like to know from the Minister—*[Interruption]*—is how we stop that noise.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: All I can suggest is that we continue to make progress while those who are in charge of the sound try to do something about it.

Mr. Worthington: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

In places such as Nigeria and Sierra Leone, the amount of investment needed, especially in human resources, is vast. I understand that the Department for International Development is soon to produce a governance strategy paper; perhaps that will provide the focus that is needed. Certainly, the theme of governance needs to be focused on more tightly, and a catalyst is needed to bring together available resources. We do not need to create a new institute or academic institution, or to reinvent existing structures. For example, if the problem is media operations in a democracy, the BBC, the independent television companies and the free press can help.

Long-term work is needed to achieve good governance, not short-term projects. We as a country have great assets: our language, our contacts with many parts of the world, our democratic stability, our key membership of bodies such as the Commonwealth, the United Nations Security Council, the World bank and the International Monetary Fund, and the quality of work done by the Department for International Development and other agencies.

I draw hon. Members' attention to paragraph 42 of our report, which states the views of International Alert and Oxfam. International Alert told the Committee that

> attempts to persuade governments to engage in peaceful conflict resolution had in the past "been made difficult by the lack of consistency in policy on the part of the international community."

Oxfam stated that in the area of conflict prevention

> more than any other, a consistent approach is needed across government departments, bilateral donors, multilateral organisations, non-governmental organisations and the private sector.

The issue of structural stability, about which the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford, the Chairman of the International Development Committee, spoke, is one that needs our finest minds and our best work on institution building. Much of our activity is worth while, but I am not convinced that we have recognised the scale of the work that is needed and the extent to which planning of that work is needed.

11.46 am

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells) on the sympathetic and knowledgeable way in which he has presented the report. Like him and the hon. Member for Clydebank and Milngavie (Mr. Worthington), I look forward to hearing the Minister's speech. The report of the International Development Committee was published some time ago—indeed, much of the evidence was taken in 1998—as was the Government's response. I am sure that I am not alone in thinking that a report of such significance and importance should have been debated on the Floor of the House and afforded a three-hour debate, instead of being debated for one and a half hours in Westminster Hall. I hope that the Minister will write to hon. Members who raise points to which he is unable to respond in the time available to him.

I am only too aware of the results of conflict. That knowledge is shared by the entire population of the United Kingdom, because of the rapid communications systems available in the modern world. Improved communications have great benefits, and they allow to be beamed straight into our sitting rooms reports that reveal the sights and sounds of conflict. However, that greater awareness can result in complacency, or acceptance of the inevitability of conflicts in some parts of the world. We should not delude ourselves, either, that conflict is inevitable, or that it can always be prevented. Instead, we should use our increasing awareness to focus on what is possible and on the programmes and actions that can be pursued, especially by our own Government.

I believe that the report makes a contribution to that process. It offers an invaluable insight into events around the world and the Government's attitude toward them. It has not escaped my notice that the report received unanimous, cross-party support on the Committee; there were no dissenting voices.

A story broadcast on the radio this morning caught my attention, because it involved a fellow European Union country. As a current example of conflict, the story concentrated on Angola and the possibility that diamonds are being brokered through Belgium. A Belgian Foreign Office spokesman acknowledged that the diamonds probably were coming through Belgium and being sold so that arms could be supplied to fuel the conflict in Angola.

In the papers this morning we read of the potential conflict in the Pacific rim. In Taiwan, one of the candidates in the elections there has expressed views on independence, which brings its own dangers.

The media bring into our homes daily stories of potential and existing conflicts all round the world. We must not take our eye off the ball. We must concentrate on what we can do to help to prevent those conflicts or limit the damage from existing conflicts.

I shall not take up the Chamber's time for too long as other hon. Members want to contribute, but I wish to raise a few issues arising from the Government's response, to which I hope the Minister will reply.

In paragraph 2, the Government express the view that

> the international community has an array of measures—including development co-operation and security sector reform as well as diplomatic pressure and UN interventions.

I hope that the Minister will join me in pressing once again for a full examination of the situation in Kosovo, so that we can evaluate the success, or rather the failure, of the diplomatic pressure that was brought to bear in Rambouillet. The Opposition have called many times for a full investigation to be undertaken, instead of the matter being left to three Select Committees. I hope that the Minister will respond on that.

The Minister should also consider what the European Union is doing. In a recent *Conflict Prevention Newsletter*, it was noted that the Helsinki summit in December decided to go ahead with a rapid reaction force, but that

> progress on the conflict prevention agenda, by contrast, is modest.

We need to know what the EU will do to help to apply diplomatic pressure, and what other measures the EU has at its disposal.

The Government stated in their response that the

> DTI will carefully consider the Committee's views in preparing future departmental reports.

That was on 21 October 1999. In the light of comments that we heard earlier about the trading position, can the Minister tell us what steps have been taken by the DTI to move that agenda forward? What evidence of progress can the hon. Gentleman offer?

Paragraph 11 deals with institution building. The Committee rightly drew attention to the work of the British Council, and in particular requested information on how the British Council was engaged in conflict prevention through institution building. What is the Minister doing to support the British Council? Reports show that his Department is withdrawing projects from the British Council. In Africa, British Council activity has diminished substantially, as a direct result of the withdrawal of contracts by the Department.

Paragraph 33 refers to the International Criminal Court. I am particularly disturbed, as was the Committee, that the legislation to allow the UK to ratify the statute of the International Criminal Court has not yet been introduced. Can the Minister update us on the progress that has been made in that regard, and tell us whether the draft legislation will be produced this year, next year, some time or never?

There are many other issues in the report that I should like to cover, and many Government responses that need to be probed further. However, I notice that I have been speaking for eight minutes, and I want to give others a chance to speak. I hope that the Minister has made a note of all the questions that I posed. I shall write to him about other matters that I have not been able to raise in debate this morning, to which I hope he will respond.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady.

11.55 am

Ms Oona King (Bethnal Green and Bow): I must follow in the footsteps of my hon. Friends, who have acted with more restraint than I have ever witnessed in politicians during my time in this place. I shall omit most

of what I had intended to say, and concentrate on one salient point. That concerns the rules-based approach to international conflict resolution, about which we have heard so much.

Everyone in the Chamber is agreed that without a rules-based approach, we will for ever be faced with conflicts like the one in Rwanda. Instead of the UN doing what it was set up to do in the aftermath of the second world war, it did the reverse, for whatever reason, and left the country when it was on the brink of genocide, instead of stepping in to prevent that genocide.

What practical measures can my hon. Friend the Minister and the Department suggest to prevent that? I have read most of the literature on the subject, and I can see no realistic alternative in the long run to some type of UN standing army. A UN intervention force must not be subject to the national interests of certain member states; at present, they judge whether it is in their interest to get involved in a particular conflict, rather than considering the merits of saving the lives of those at risk.

We saw in Rwanda that one Canadian UN general with 200 UN troops saved the lives of 25,000 people. Because America had had a bad experience in Somalia shortly before, it was not prepared to send in Americans. There have been other occasions when we have not been prepared to send British soldiers in.

There will always be occasions when member states think that, for their own political interests, it is not appropriate to step in at the point at which conflict prevention is possible. That is the subject of the report.

Politics is the art of the possible. If the Minister tells me that at present it is impossible to assemble some type of UN standing army operating on a rules-based approach as opposed to national interest, what can be done to make it possible? That is our job. If my hon. Friend cannot respond in detail now, I should be immensely grateful if he wrote to let me know the Department's view.

There is cross-party consensus in the Chamber on most of what we are discussing. That makes it more likely that in the future we can create the political space needed to achieve the desired result. That is the only way in which I believe we will bring about early intervention by the UN to prevent the sort of conflict—or rather the carnage—that the Committee witnessed in Rwanda.

11.58 am

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Faversham and Mid-Kent): I shall be brief. I want to make three points. First, I am struck by the Department for International Development's extraordinary and largely politically correct reluctance to engage with the faith communities in various parts of the world. If we go abroad as a Select Committee, it is extremely difficult, unless we specifically request it, to have meetings with the leaders of religious organisations included in the programme. In a country such as Rwanda, where the only medium of communication with the mass of the population is the regular church service on a Sunday, such pussy-footing is extraordinary.

I understand that the matter is complex and difficult and that some conflicts are fuelled by the faith communities themselves, but unless we engage with them and recognise their long experience of the countries in which they operate, we are missing an important trick.

The power of ideas as the basis for conflicts is underestimated. We still have the notion that if we improve economies and provide better health and education, we will eliminate conflict. I am sure that that would help. However, some powerful ideas are being batted around the world, and the developed world must accelerate the dialogue between, for example, the Muslim and the Christian countries about the theological bases on which they proceed. That will prove one of the most important ways of eliminating conflict.

Secondly, for understandable reasons, one of the Government's more ambivalent replies to our report relates to our position as a major arms supplier. Over the next few years, this country must reconsider whether it can credibly go round the world claiming that we must reduce conflict while supplying more arms to more people than anyone else in the world apart from the Americans.

Thirdly, I have been struck by the influence and importance of the diaspora of the countries that we have considered. The Department for International Development is engaged in consultations with some of them. As an international community, our use of disapora needs to be better organised. Many of the most influential, intelligent and best educated people have fled their countries because of conflict. They have established themselves in many countries overseas and become extremely sophisticated; they are often well off. Their contribution to preventing conflict needs to be developed and encouraged.

12.1 pm

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): I welcome the debate on the report. I was a member of the Select Committee on International Development when the report was produced. We spent many hours interviewing witnesses and had an unjolly trip to Africa, where we had experiences and heard stories that we shall remember for the rest of our lives. I have no time to tell them, but they were unforgettable.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells), the Chairman of the Select Committee. He is extremely knowledgeable, fair and good humoured. He always rules us with tolerance and kindness.

I want to comment on two aspects of the report which concern me greatly. The first is co-ordination between Departments. The Under-Secretary of State for International Development—who, more often than not, is on the side of the angels—is present, but where are the boys from the Foreign Office, the Department of Trade and Industry, the Ministry of Defence, the Treasury and other Departments that I shall mention? Their absence is my only sadness about the debate.

The Department for International Development has created a conflict and humanitarian affairs department: great stuff; it has produced good pamphlets. There is an interdepartmental working group on conflict and we hear about conflict impact assessments. However, do other Departments take that seriously? I reiterate that the Department of Trade and Industry, the Treasury, the Ministry of Defence, the Foreign and

[Dr. Jenny Tonge]

Commonwealth Office and even the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food need to take it seriously. Where is the evidence that they do?

Paragraph 10 of the Government's response to the Select Committee report deals with policy coherence and consistency. It states:

> DTI is taking development increasingly seriously and working closely with DFID, particularly in the context of trade policy.

Can the Under-Secretary provide some examples? I know of two examples that show the contrary. We have heard about the DTI failing to take action on corruption when British companies operate abroad. As far as I know, it has taken no action on the ethical trading initiatives; DFID has done that.

Paragraph 13 refers to early warnings of conflict. Jane Sharp of the Centre for Defence Studies gave evidence to the Select Committee. She said:

> in most conflicts we are not short of early warning—we are short of political will—and I think that sometimes, particularly in the United Kingdom, you have staff in British Embassies overseas who could be monitoring human rights abuses, but in fact invest a lot of time pursuing arms contracts.

The Government's response was confusing. It implied that the responsibility was split between the FCO and the Ministry of Defence. There is no co-ordination, despite the Government's claims.

There are many other examples: arms sales to Zimbabwe and Indonesia; multinationals operating with Government blessing in Colombia and Burma, where there is real and threatened conflict; British firms encouraged by the DTI to invest in the Sudan. Warnings have been issued now, but it is too late.

Civil war has raged in Sudan for 30 years. The Canadian Government commissioned a report, which condemned the activities of one of its oil companies, Talisman, around the oil fields in Sudan, where the Nuer people are being raped, taken into slavery and driven off their land. Yet a British company operates there and helps with the pumping equipment that pipes the oil to the north of Sudan. Where is the commitment across Departments to conflict prevention?

Arms proliferation is the second subject that I want to tackle.

Mrs. Gillan: Does the hon. Lady agree that the proliferation of small arms is important? My hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells) referred to children in conflict. Small arms proliferation perpetuates children's involvement in conflict. Does the hon. Lady agree that the Government's response is inadequate?

Dr. Tonge: Yes. I had adequate proof of that when I visited southern Sudan last year. I asked the rebel leaders whether they had any problem in obtaining arms—there is, after all, an embargo on both parts of the Sudan. They looked at me as if I was mad. They can get small, large or middle-sized arms from anywhere they like. As the hon. Lady said, the small arms do much damage in developing countries.

Discussing the subject has become almost boring—I have been accused of raising the matter almost every day. I do. However, the Select Committee's recommendations on arms proliferation were clear and unanimous. We acknowledge that countries may need to defend themselves. The Government responded positively to the Committee's recommendation that the interdepartmental working group on conflict should agree policies on the security requirements of specific developing countries. How many times has the working group met? What are its conclusions on the requirements?

The hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan) pointed out that Zimbabwe is engaged in a war with the Republic of Congo. Where was the consideration of security requirements in Zimbabwe vis-a-vis development? Is there any progress on Sierra Leone and Nigeria? I look forward to the Under-Secretary's reply.

I remain unconvinced that DFID's advice on arms exports is taken seriously. I shall give two examples, which were mentioned in the report: Eritrea and Indonesia. The Government's response to criticism about arms to Indonesia stated:

> particular arms exports would not, by themselves, hamper Indonesia's development.

DFID was not allowed to examine the cumulative effect of many individual arms exports. That is crazy and irresponsible. It is like saying that alcohol will not make us drunk if we take each drink in a separate glass. That is nonsense.

On Eritrea, the Government's response states that DFID raised anxieties about poverty and development. Criterion 8 of the European code of conduct on arms sales clearly deals with the effect of trade on development in specific countries. However, the FCO ignored it.

We are told that the Secretary of State for International Development does not sign the annual report on strategic exports because the Department sees only 15 per cent. of export licences. That is also utter nonsense. That 15 per cent. represents exports to the most sensitive areas of the world—those countries at most risk of conflict. Who are the Department of Trade and Industry and other Departments trying to kid?

I could go on, but I dare not. Instead, I shall end with some questions. When will the arms trafficking and brokering Bill be published? We have been promised, it so when shall we have it? When will the Scott report recommendations be implemented? They are four years old. When will we have a register of arms brokers in this country? When will the Government fully comply with the European Union code of conduct on arms sales and, in particular, criterion 8, which deals with the effect on development? In short, when will the Government take development and conflict prevention seriously?

12.10 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Mr. George Foulkes): Notwithstanding the speech of the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) and the challenging questions she posed, the Government greatly welcome the International Development Committee report. We also welcome the debate, albeit that it has lasted only an

hour and a half. It was open to the Opposition to choose conflict prevention as the subject of a three-hour debate on the Floor of the House tomorrow.

Mrs. Gillan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Foulkes: It worked.

Mrs. Gillan: This is not a question of the Minister's remarks working because it is worth pointing out that Mozambique has been chosen as the subject for tomorrow's debate. It also deserves to be debated in the light of what has happened. He is quite uncharitable and makes a bankrupt point.

Mr. Foulkes: The members of the Select Committee know that the Secretaries of State for International Development and for Defence gave extensive evidence on Mozambique to the Committee yesterday and they were well received. We commend the Committee's work on that particular area.

I want to answer as many questions as possible and shall endeavour to answer in writing any that I do not touch on, as requested by the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan), who spoke for the principal opposition party. I shall move on, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Is that the right form of address, John?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. John McWilliam): Order. The Minister is confused. He has had to call me everything from treasurer to Mr. McWilliam to Mr. Deputy Speaker over the years so I can understand why he has problems. However, the correct form of address is Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Foulkes: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

The Committee has, like many others, recognised that the nature of conflict has changed, that wars increasingly take place within, rather than between, states and that, tragically, civilians, rather than soldiers, are the main victims of those wars. It is widely appreciated that in many developing countries war and violent conflict are the major cause of poverty—as the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells), the Chairman of the Select Committee, said in his introduction—and a major barrier to progress in development. The Chairman also mentioned the clear acknowledgement from many people, including other Development Ministries around the world, that the development and security agendas are inseparable and that violent conflict arises, more often than not, because of the failure of development. As Kofi Annan put it:

> The prevention of conflict begins and ends with the promotion of human security and human development.

The best guarantee of peace and of stability is economic and political development, which, as a number of hon. Members said, gives people a stake in their society and the government of their country. As the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford generously acknowledged, since the election in May 1997 the Government have led a radical shift in the focus of our development work towards the goals of poverty reduction and the achievement of the international development targets. All our work is now geared to that end. Our commitment to a human rights-based approach to development is about giving people a stake in the political system of their countries—that is one of the key elements—and a say over decisions that affect their lives. That means helping countries to improve the effectiveness of governmental and administrative systems, supporting legal and judicial reforms such as those that have been asked for in the debate and providing support for action against corruption, to which hon. Members also referred.

In relation to corruption in particular, hon. Members should read the Government's reply to the Select Committee report:

> The Home Office is currently conducting a review of the UK's existing legislation. The intention of this exercise is to tighten certain definitions used in the application of law and to consider related issues, such as the extent of the territorial jurisdiction of offences of corruption.

Action is being taken by the Government, as our reply shows.

Our work will help to build societies in which disputes can be managed peacefully rather than through violence. That is why we believe that our development and conflict prevention strategies are one and the same. Promoting sustainable development also means promoting the conditions for sustainable peace. The hon. Member for Richmond Park asked about Departments working together. I am pleased to tell her that the Department for International Development, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Ministry of Defence work closely together to tackle these areas.

My hon. Friend the Member for Clydebank and Milngavie (Mr. Worthington) referred to that work. We use diplomatic and other assets to detect, monitor and address rising tensions and, together, promote human rights, good governance, democratisation, working together, the rule of law, the development of strong and vibrant civil societies and sustainable economic growth, which benefits all sections of society. As he said, we are about to produce a target strategy paper on good governance which covers all those areas—corruption, accessible justice, the rule of law and conflict. Hon. Members, and members of the Select Committee in particular, will be able to contribute to the paper during the consultation.

A number of hon. Members concentrated on Africa, and the Department welcomes that concentration as it is one of our major areas of activity. Africa was compared with Kosovo: members of the Select Committee and other Members of Parliament are pressing us to take further action there, but it is wrong to compare one with the other. We have intensified and increased our activity and our spending in Africa, and hon. Members should recognise that. Africa currently accounts for half the armed conflicts in the world and is an example of the devastating impact of war. For example, it is estimated that about 50,000 people have died in the tragic war between Ethiopia and Eritrea. In Angola's civil war, 200 people a day are dying from war, hunger and disease, and about 1.7 million people are displaced. In Sierra Leone, upwards of 50,000 people have been killed and a quarter of the population has been displaced. More than 1 million people have died in the long-running civil war in Sudan, which hon. Members mentioned.

[Mr. Foulkes]

I say to the hon. Members for Richmond Park and for Hertford and Stortford that Sudan is not forgotten and we are active there. The peace process is absolutely vital and we are the forefront in urging it on.

Dr. Tonge: Does the Minister think it wise to continue to refuse development aid to southern Sudan when the war is continuing and children are not even allowed any sort of educational aid? How can that part of the country be denied development aid when the war has gone on for so long?

Mr. Foulkes: As I have said to the hon. Lady before, where we do not work through Governments we can work through agencies, non-governmental organisations and the United Nations and its agencies. We continue to provide humanitarian aid.

Dr. Tonge: Not development aid.

Mr. Foulkes: That is another matter and we can discuss it on another occasion.

To ensure that we tackle conflicts in Africa in the most effective way, we are undertaking an innovative inter-departmental cross-cutting review of conflict in the continent. That will please the hon. Member for Richmond Park. The review is chaired by our Secretary of State, but includes representatives from the Departments that she mentioned, and its conclusions will be announced in due course as part of the 2000 review of public expenditure. I say to the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham that it took our Government to institute that review of Africa, although the previous Government could have done so.

Over the past two and a half years, we have moved into more controversial territory—conflict analysis, in which the Committee is particularly interested, security sector reform, post-conflict peacebuilding and small arms trafficking. There is also our collaboration with private sector business, which a number of Members raised. Those are all new issues taken up by the new Labour Government, although, again, the last Government could have done it.

Let us take conflict analysis, in which, as I said, the Committee has shown a particular interest. We are currently conducting conflict assessments in a number of countries—Moldova, Sri Lanka, Krgystan and Nepal. An explicit and systematic analysis of conflict will assist in the identification and design of development and emergency interventions that are sensitive to the dynamics of conflict, and will thus produce opportunities for contribution to long-term stability.

Security sector reform is also a priority for us. Participatory poverty assessments clearly show that the poor of the world place a high priority on security, justice and order, for the simple reason that without those things it is impossible for them to continue. A security sector that is well tasked and well managed serves the interests of all, especially the poor, but in too many countries a bloated security sector soaks up resources that would be used better elsewhere, while elements in that sector can be a major source of insecurity and human rights abuse.

The security sector also tends to pose particular problems in post-conflict societies. In such circumstances, numerous ex-soldiers without employment or the prospect of employment are often waiting for long periods for the chance to return to a normal civilian life. If action is not taken to deal with that, there is a real prospect that demobilised soldiers will resort to violent crime, the underlying causes of conflict will be reactivated and full-scale civil war will recur.

Sierra Leone is a perfect example of the dilemma, and provides the first practical test of our work with the Ministry of Defence and the Foreign Office on security-sector reform. The signing of the Lomé agreement gives Sierra Leone a chance of peace and development. As well as providing humanitarian assistance for those who have been made homeless by the war, Britain is giving emergency budgetary support to the attempt to sustain the essential functions of government and to implement the peace agreement. Just as we were the first and most generous donor in the case of the floods in Mozambique, we are the most active and generous in Sierra Leone. Members should acknowledge that.

Mr. Rowe: The Chairman of the Select Committee pointed out that a tremendous problem is the inadequate salary—or, indeed, lack of any salary—received by many public servants. We were told an extraordinary story. A policeman had been extracting food bribes at a road block, but it turned out that the poor chap, who had been put there by his Government, had received no food or salary for the preceding three weeks, and was dying of starvation. In a sense, it would not have been exactly corrupt of him to start asking for a bit of food from passers-by.

Mr. Foulkes: That is why we are putting more resources into Sierra Leone, and why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I have urged other countries to join us. This is not just Britain's responsibility, although we accept a great deal of the responsibility. Since March 1998, we have contributed more than £50 million to the post-conflict reconstruction and humanitarian needs of the people of Sierra Leone.

Sierra Leone demonstrates that many donor countries are happy to sign up to conflict prevention and peacebuilding in theory, but are deeply reluctant to engage in practice. That is often due to an unwillingness to become involved in what can be very risky environments. We acknowledge that we are all taking a risk in Sierra Leone, but it is right and worth while to do so, because the potential achievements and rewards are so great.

A number of Members raised the subject of arms exports and small-arms proliferation—in particular, the hon. Member for Richmond Park. Again, for 18 years under the last Government nothing was done, but action is now being taken, although—rightly—we are being pressurised to do more. We have received representations from the Select Committee, and, in July 1997, the Government announced new criteria for the assessment of arms-export applications. Arms exports are not permitted if they might be used for internal repression or external aggression, or if they would seriously undermine the sustainable development of the

recipient country. Our Department is particularly concerned about that, and our criteria were incorporated in the European Union code of conduct that was adopted in 1998.

Ours has been the first British Government to publish annual reports on strategic export controls. We give details of the export licences that we have issued and those that we have refused to issue. That puts the United Kingdom at the forefront in terms of transparency on arms transfers.

The hon. Member for Richmond Park asked whether the Secretary of State would sign future reports. We are reviewing that in the light of recommendations made by the quadrilateral committee, in which members of the Select Committee participated. The hon. Lady also asked about arms trafficking and brokering. The new export control Bill will introduce tougher controls, and not before time. The Department of Trade and Industry is currently preparing draft legislation based on the White Paper on strategic export controls, and taking account of subsequent comments. After 18 years of no action, within less than three years action is being taken by this Government. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I have just heard a device go off. Madam Speaker deplores such activities. Anyone who has a bleeper switched on must either switch it off or take the batteries out.

Mr. Foulkes: Not only Madam Speaker deplores such activities; I do as well.

A number of Members mentioned military expenditure. We have just held a major seminar, bringing together representatives of developing countries, international financial institutions, other donors and non-governmental organisations, in order to encourage a more informed debate about the appropriate levels of such expenditure—and they need to be appropriate. Many developing countries divert resources into the military that would be much better spent on the basic social needs of the poor.

Mrs. Gillan: Because the device interrupted us, I did not hear the Minister say when the legislation would be introduced. Did he tell us?

Mr. Foulkes: The hon. Lady did not miss a thing. I said that it would be introduced as soon as possible.

Mrs. Gillan: When?

Mr. Foulkes: As soon as possible. The hon. Lady's Government had 18 years in which to act, and did not do a thing. We are acting within a much shorter period.

Our Department, working closely with the Foreign Office, is taking a greater role in the attempt to limit the means of waging war by acting to curb the proliferation of small arms and light weapons—another subject that was raised today. We are also trying to find out whether it is possible to curb the illicit trade in diamonds, which was mentioned by a number of Members and which has provided the funds to fuel and prolong conflicts in Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Sierra Leone.

At an international level, the Government strongly support the European Union's programme to prevent and combat illicit trafficking in conventional arms. We are also working with the private sector—a new area for us. The project starts from the premise that conflict is bad for business, and that companies have much to gain from the development of effective conflict prevention strategies. Our primary aim will be to produce specific tools for companies to help them to develop such strategies.

I have not had time to answer all the questions that were asked, but, as I said earlier, I shall write to Members about the specific points that they raise. I thank members of the Select Committee for their report, which we think is a great step forward. We believe, however, that the Government are taking even greater steps forward: we believe that conflict undermines the poor people of the world, and that preventing it is one of the most important things that we in the Department and the Government can do.

Sixth Form Colleges

12.29 pm

Mr. Kelvin Hopkins (Luton, North): I am grateful to have secured the debate and to have an opportunity to speak up for sixth form colleges. They are bright stars in our educational firmament and have been a shining light amid the educational gloom. I am concerned that they should be properly appreciated, nurtured and supported.

I should declare something of an interest. I have been a governor of Luton sixth form college since incorporation, as well as in the early 1980s during its earlier local authority incarnation. Both my children attended the college and were, in their turn, chair of the student council and of the student governors. My wife was at one time a parent governor, so we have strong family connections.

The college has been part of my life for almost 20 years and does a superb job for the young people of our town. It was the first of its kind; is one of the largest colleges; and has been confirmed as one of the best, as evidenced by its glowing inspection report last year. My regard for sixth form colleges in general is, I hope, objective, but I cannot help but see a rosy picture from my Luton experience.

Sixth form colleges are part of the further education sector, which is funded through the Further Education Funding Council. As treasurer of the all-party group on further education, I am an enthusiast for further education and, indeed, have in my constituency Barnfield college, one of our largest and best further education colleges.

In the 1970s, I taught in a college of further education and undertook some part-time teaching in FE in 1995. For some years, I was chair of governors of the former Luton college of higher education, now the university of Luton. At that time, more than one third of its capacity was devoted to further education.

Sixth form colleges have been grouped with further education colleges, although they do a rather different job. There is some overlap with further education colleges, but they complement each other, rather than competing. Luton sixth form college has a significant number of general national vocational qualification courses, but the centre of gravity of further education and sixth form colleges, their focus and core business are different. There is a spectrum of provision, with further education towards one end of our post-16 rainbow and sixth form colleges towards the other, with tertiary colleges bridging the gap.

Sixth form colleges look to schools more than further education colleges. I am conscious that in some areas there is competition for sixth form students between schools and sixth form colleges. I instinctively prefer planned provision rather than competition, but some competition is inevitable where there is parallel provision.

In Luton, we have 11-to-16 high schools feeding our colleges and one 11-to-18 Catholic high school, which is generally over-subscribed because of the large Catholic population in Luton. Therefore, I am perhaps freer than some Members to extol the virtues of sixth form colleges without offending other post-16 providers.

Why are sixth form colleges so good? From the students' point of view, they provide extraordinary flexibility in choice of courses. With a large number of students, they can provide parallel classes in the same subject at different times, so that students can tailor their pattern of courses precisely to their needs. I went to an old-fashioned grammar school and was given the blunt choice of languages, science or classics. At sixth form college, I might have chosen a different pattern of A-levels and possibly other courses, had they been available. The sheer number of A-level subjects that are taught at sixth form colleges is astonishing. At Luton, we have around 2,000 students, who can choose between 37 A-level options, 10 advanced GNVQs and a range of other courses.

Even large schools, understandably, cannot match that range of provision. Academically, sixth form colleges are successful. If students wish to achieve good examination results, to maximise their chances of progressing to higher education on a course and at an institution of their choice, or to move to a good job, they cannot do better than study at a sixth form college.

Sometimes, students from fee-paying schools have chosen to transfer to a sixth form college because of its record of success—students moving from the fee-paying education sector to the state sector for positive educational reasons—but I am much more concerned about sixth form college successes with students from non-traditional, non-academic and less-affluent backgrounds. In that respect, sixth form colleges do a wonderful job.

In Luton, approximately 60 per cent. of students are from ethnic minority backgrounds, often the first generation of families who have not previously had any prospect of educational advance beyond an elementary level. The educational value added achieved by sixth form colleges such as Luton is remarkable. They make an immense contribution to widening participation in education and to providing a springboard to further educational advance and better life chances. They are also a great social integrator, especially in towns such as Luton.

If sixth form colleges are doing such an exceptional job, why have I chosen to seek the debate? The truth is that the value of sixth form colleges is not properly recognised. We have warm words from official quarters, but I am sorry to say that it is not always matched by the provision of adequate resources. Many areas have no sixth form college and many Members are not familiar with sixth form college provision. I do not think that it was properly understood and it was certainly not appreciated in Government circles at the time of incorporation.

Sixth form colleges were allocated to the further education sector, but I have a distinct feeling that that was a rather arbitrary decision and that they could equally well have been left with local education authorities, along with schools. As a result, sixth form colleges have had an uncomfortable time in recent years. Funding comparisons have often been made with further education colleges, rather than schools. In reality, further education colleges derive much of their funding from external sources, whereas sixth form colleges are entirely funded by the state through the Further Education Funding Council. If the comparisons are made with schools, sixth form colleges

come into their own. They have such economies of scale that they easily outperform school sixth forms in value for money.

That again presents a problem. Schools understandably are sensitive about those comparisons. Where school sixth forms operate alongside sixth form colleges, in an environment where Governments are looking for efficiency advantages, schools feel uncomfortable.

What is extraordinary is that the funding gap between school sixth forms and sixth form colleges has been increasing, rather than narrowing. Given their success, it is surprising that sixth form college teachers are paid less than their counterparts in schools. A salary difference of between £500 and £600 a year is typical and promotion in school sixth forms is easier to achieve than in sixth form colleges. I am not suggesting that good schools should be shorn of their sixth forms to create sixth form colleges, but sixth form colleges should at least be funded fairly.

Britain has a varied pattern of school and sixth form provision. If one could start from scratch, a sixth form college system throughout the country would be very attractive. It would be of advantage to students and to public finances, but no Government would countenance such an upheaval, so I will set aside that possibility now.

We are entering a new and exciting era with Curriculum 2000 beginning in September. I have long thought that the A-level curriculum for most students is too narrow. I strongly support the reforms. Sixth form colleges are well placed to make those reforms a success, with their wide range of courses and their flexible teaching provision, but Curriculum 2000 will need additional financial provision. Information gathered from sixth form colleges in recent days suggests that nowhere near enough money has been provided. The Further Education Funding Council must look again at sixth form college allocations.

I understand that an assumption has been made that half of sixth form college students will follow Curriculum 2000 from September, but the reality is that the great majority of all sixth form college students will do so. Some colleges have been allocated only a fraction of what they need to provide Curriculum 2000 for their students.

Before the general election, many sixth form colleges were facing financial crises. Class sizes had risen, pressures on teachers had greatly increased and the crunch was coming. Additional funding provided by the new Government relieved the pressure, but that merely staved off disaster and did not really provide the additional general funding that colleges required. Some additional funding has been allocated, but much of that is targeted, at additional IT provision, for example. Sixth form colleges need more money, so that they can pay staff salaries at least comparable with those in school sixth forms.

I am sorry that I have had to raise the difficult subject of funding as I know that every area of the public services has the same concerns. However, sixth form colleges have had a hard time. If they are to continue performing as well, they must be adequately funded. The issue will not go away.

In 1996-97, students studying for three A-levels were funded by 25 per cent. more in schools than in sixth form colleges. The most recent information from the Association of Colleges for Further and Higher Education says that the gap between sixth form college and school funding has increased to nearly 30 per cent. Sixth form colleges also face additional costs relative to schools, including provision for internal and external audit. Sixth form colleges have an average class size of 18, but it is quite common to have 25 or more. As I have said, an assumption has been made that 50 per cent. of sixth form college students will require additional Curriculum 2000 resourcing. In reality, the figure will be much higher. One college reported to me this week that 85 per cent. of its students will be covered by Curriculum 2000.

In its report on further education published in June 1998, the Select Committee on Education and Employment, emphasised the need to ensure that harmonisation is achieved by additional funding for the further education sector rather than the process of levelling down. The report says:

> It should be possible to establish a common entitlement for 16-19 year old students on similar courses at schools and colleges and to fund it accordingly.

A substantial change in the funding arrangements and co-ordination of 16-to-19 education and training will occur when the Learning and Skills Bill becomes law. I welcome the change and believe that it will provide closer co-operation between different types of institution and more coherent and rational provision for all students.

I do not underestimate the difficulties involved and I hope that the minority sixth form college interest will be well served by the new learning and skills councils. The Bill envisages the creation of local education authority sixth form centres and I ask my hon. Friend the Minister and his ministerial colleagues to ensure that sixth form colleges are funded fairly within the new arrangements.

There are some issues that I cannot cover in the time allowed, but I hope to raise some of them privately with my hon. Friend and his Department. I re-emphasise my view that sixth form colleges are an immensely valuable national resource, providing first-class education for thousands of students on quality courses with dedicated, highly qualified and highly skilled staff. They remain minority providers across the country as a whole with less than a quarter of hon. Members having a sixth form college interest. The great value of sixth form colleges may not, therefore, be fully recognised. The quality of education they provide is of the highest order. They make a vital contribution to the economy and, above all, to the advancement of those students fortunate enough to pursue their studies at such a college.

As a nation, we could do well to expand sixth form college provision, but, even at present levels, colleges must be nurtured, sustained and properly and fairly funded. I look forward to my hon. Friend's response and to on-going dialogue in the coming months and years.

12.42 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. Malcolm Wicks): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Luton, North (Mr. Hopkins) for raising this important issue. I know that sixth form colleges have coped effectively with a variety of challenges and new opportunities in

[Mr. Malcolm Wicks]

recent years and have shown professionalism and dedication to their students. I have no doubt that they will continue to do so under our proposed new arrangements for post-16 provision, in which they will continue to have an important role. I know of my hon. Friend's close interest, advocacy and involvement with sixth form colleges in his town.

The chief inspector's annual report for 1998-99 reported that much of the work of sixth form colleges is of good quality and of significant benefit to students and the nation. There is clear evidence that overall levels of achievement are rising and that the great majority of colleges are well managed. The report highlighted the valued service that sixth form colleges provide to their communities.

In a recent inspection report, Luton sixth form college, which as my hon. Friend said was the first of its kind in this country, was judged to provide excellent facilities for its staff and students. The report also highlighted outstanding provision in business studies and said that the college was exceedingly well managed. I take this opportunity to congratulate the college and its staff and students on that report.

I am pleased to see that staff in many sixth form colleges are working constructively in response to the Government's agenda of raising standards. Many have recognised that the most effective way to improve quality is for them to take responsibility for their own quality assurance by evaluating their performance and making the necessary changes. That is clearly an area which Luton sixth form college takes seriously.

It is clear that many sixth form colleges have high levels of achievement and are good examples of excellence in the post-16 world. An obvious indicator of that is that four of the 15 further education colleges so far accorded beacon status by Ministers are sixth form colleges. Those beacons will help the Government raise standards by spreading good practice across other sixth form colleges.

The latest inspection evidence shows that there are 30 sixth form colleges with achievement rates of 90 per cent. or higher. The list of colleges with outstanding achievement shows that four of the six colleges with that rating for science are sixth form colleges. All five with that rating for business studies, including Luton, are sixth form colleges. The colleges are to be congratulated.

Sixth form colleges have a vital contribution to make to our level 3 national learning targets. We want to see 60 per cent. of young people achieving level 3 by the age of 21. I am delighted that success at A-level continues to grow. Since incorporation, the number of sixth form college students achieving three or more A-levels has risen from 18,300 to 25,600.

Mr. Hopkins: Will my hon. Friend look at value added measures as well as simple A-level success? Many sixth form colleges are in central urban areas with many students from deprived or non-traditional academic backgrounds. Therefore, their performance is even more remarkable by value added standards than by a simple A-level pass standard.

Mr. Wicks: I agree with my hon. Friend. I wanted to emphasise the A-level standard because, understandably, a great deal of emphasis is placed on it. I agree, though, that in our society, other measures are sometimes more important. The way in which a school or college works with a pupil and enables him or her to make progress is crucial.

In his polite and calm manner, my hon. Friend cast some doubt on the Department's commitment to sixth form colleges. Since becoming a Minister at the end of July, I have had many discussions and been involved in dialogue with sixth form colleges and those representing their interests. On a personal level, our three children attended and enjoyed John Ruskin sixth form college in Croydon. I hope that that personal involvement will convince my hon. Friend that, although I am trying to use part of my speech to deal with policy issues, I have some parental understanding of the subject.

Mr. Hopkins: I know of my hon. Friend's support and admiration for sixth form colleges. I was not intending to level accusations at the Department. I was talking about a lack of appreciation in the generality of the government machine and the House, arising from the fact that so few members are familiar with sixth form colleges. I was emphasising a general lack of appreciation rather than criticising the Department.

Mr. Wicks: I understand that.

There are equally outstanding activities in sixth form colleges, beyond exam success: sport, music, the arts, community services and many other activities flourish and provide the opportunity for young people to develop across an enormously wide and enriching spectrum.

For the future, the new post-16 arrangements announced last summer in the White Paper "Learning to Succeed"—the Bill is now before the House—mark a step change in the organisation of education and training for people aged 16 and over. As I said earlier, sixth form colleges will continue to play an important role as we put into practice the Government's vision for post-16 learning. They can help us with our aims of widening participation. By implication, my hon. Friend was referring to that when he talked about the value added role. Sixth form colleges can offer young people a broad range of high-quality options from which to choose.

I recognise that the previous Administration's disastrous approach to further education funding means that sixth form colleges are now funded well below school sixth forms. That was the burden of much of my hon. Friend's comment. He made some forceful points in this debate about the disparity of funding between schools and sixth form colleges. I assure him that we are aware of the situation. Last summer's consultation paper on school sixth form funding put the disparity at 20 per cent. for a student taking a package of three A-levels. In response to that consultation, further education and sixth form colleges were very clear that they did not want downward convergence for schools, but a levelling upward for themselves. Of course the Government agree with that clear point.

Mr. Bob Russell (Colchester): Colchester sixth form college operates in a town with three schools with sixth forms. Will the Minister confirm that the funding gap

between schools and sixth form colleges is approximately one third, not the figure that he gave? The gap can be even wider where schools with sixth forms rearrange their finances, essentially to suck up money from the 11-to-16 age group.

Mr. Wicks: The disparity that I cited was 20 per cent. However, I should be very happy to write to the hon. Gentleman on the matter, and to copy the correspondence to my hon. Friend the Member for Luton, North, so that we can be absolutely clear about the figures.

The Government agree that upward convergence for further education colleges, including sixth form colleges, is the way forward. However, we realise that that can only happen over time, and subject to resources being available. I am convinced that such convergence will come. I think that the new learning and skills councils, with their overview of all post-16 provision outside higher education, will help with that aim.

Mr. Hopkins: I should like to bring a little comfort to my hon. Friend and the Government. I believe that sixth form colleges would not need exactly the same funding levels as schools, as they have natural, built-in economies of scale, and that substantial movement towards school funding would solve all the problems.

Mr. Wicks: Clearly, we need to move towards a position in which every young person doing A-level or vocational courses at that level—regardless of whether they are in a sixth form, sixth form college or an FE institution—is being treated properly and fairly. That is our objective, but it will take some time to achieve.

Meanwhile, let us not forget that the Government have been responsible for the biggest ever injection of funds into further education and sixth form colleges. Hon. Members will know that further education is to receive significant additional funding. We are confident that our planned investment of £3.9 billion, in 2001-02—including the largest-ever annual increase for further education, of £365 million, for that year—will provide significant help to those making 16-to-18 provision in the FE sector. We have also substantially moderated the efficiency gains required by the previous Administration.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): I have a specific question that I should like to ask the Minister on behalf of the principal of the Farnborough sixth form college—which is one of the very best in the country, and is everything that the hon. Member for Luton, North (Mr. Hopkins) said. Given that there are to be the new local sixth form colleges under LEA auspices, will the Minister give an undertaking that the 20 per cent. differential between sixth form colleges and sixth forms will get no worse, and that he will try at some point to close that gap? Otherwise, the new colleges, with existing sixth form schools, will continue to enjoy an advantage over sixth form colleges.

Mr. Wicks: I give that reassurance to Farnborough college, and to the sixth form colleges that I have already mentioned in my speech. We want to bridge the gap positively, with sixth form colleges moving upwards. I should be grateful if, in the final six minutes of the debate, hon. Members will bear with me and allow me to make some progress in my speech, to address the issues raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Luton, North.

As for the post-16 curriculum reforms—known as qualifying for success, or in some quarters as Curriculum 2000—the Further Education Funding Council has made it clear that it will have early discussions with those colleges requesting increases to their provisional allocation formula for 2000-01. Each college will have a different mix of students and courses, and will decide for itself how best to implement the new post-16 curriculum. The Government are not seeking to prescribe a particular kind of curriculum, but we do want to see broad-based and flexible programmes of study. The FEFC has also guaranteed that those colleges that have requested increased funding will receive confirmation before Easter of a revised provisional allocation, where appropriate.

Today, the FEFC has provided me with the following reassurance:

> Colleges are in the process of responding to their provisional funding allocations. Early indications suggest a positive take up of Curriculum 2000, particularly for sixth form colleges and general FE colleges with large numbers of A level students. Where colleges are informing the Council that they expect to have an increased number of students following the new expanded programmes, the Council will fully fund the expansion and revise colleges' funding allocations straight away.

I hope that that reassures hon. Members participating in this debate.

Sixth form colleges should also bear in mind and take full advantage of the FE standards fund. The fund was introduced to implement improvement strategies for better achievement and retention in FE. It can be used to rectify areas of weakness in colleges, for training and professional development of staff, and for the dissemination of good practice.

As has been noted in the debate, the Learning and Skills Bill makes it possible for LEAs to establish and maintain schools—sixth form centres—that cater solely for 16 to 19-year-olds. The Government have no preferred model of post-16 provision; nor would we wish to prescribe one. The opportunity for LEAs to create those new institutions should not be seen as any form of threat to sixth form colleges and their valid place in 16-to-19 provision.

Sixth form colleges will remain firmly in the further education sector. They are different types of animals and will serve different purposes. It will still be possible for new sixth form colleges to be established, if that is felt to be the best way of meeting the needs in a particular locality. LEA-maintained 16-to-19 institutions are not intended to compete with sixth form colleges, but—when appropriate, and with the agreement of the local learning community—they could provide an alternative way of meeting local needs.

Our drive is to bring more coherence to the 16-19 sector, and, simultaneously, to increase choice, drive up standards and offer breadth of provision. When individual school sixth forms cannot offer sufficient curriculum breadth, the school and the LEA will need to look carefully at a range of options, such as collaboration, consortiums agreements and LEA-maintained institutions.

I hope that the outcome of the new, more joined-up approach to the post-16 world will be much better collaboration between sixth form colleges and school

[Mr. Wicks]

sixth forms. The joint report, at the end of last summer, from Ofsted and FEFC inspectors, gave some clear messages about the value of such an approach. Above all, collaboration serves to broaden the curriculum on offer. Additionally, a greater number of courses and more subject combinations are available to students, and there is a wider range of routes for progress. Moreover, courses can be provided more economically when collaboration tackles the issue of classes that individually would be too small. I hope that sixth form colleges will show a willingness to open their doors to such arrangements.

The new post-16 arrangements are designed to ensure that patterns of provision meet local needs, drive up standards and encourage greater collaboration. I give the clear assurance to my hon. Friend the Member for Luton, North that sixth form colleges have a vital role to play in that process, in delivering the high-quality education that young people in this country need to enable them to make the most of themselves, and of the opportunities that are available to them, as they move forward into adult life.

Our commitment, as a Department and as a Government, is not to structures—and it is not our desire to side with school sixth forms against sixth form colleges or FE colleges. Our concern is to enable our young men and women, post-16, to have the very best opportunities, whether academic or vocational, or sometimes a mix. Different institutions—including schools, sixth form colleges and those in the FE sector—have a vital role to play in that significant agenda for our country.

Once again, I thank my hon. Friend for addressing this important issue, and for doing it in such an able way.

Barclays Bank Closures (Northumberland)

1 pm

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick–upon–Tweed): I am glad to see a north-east Member in the Chair, a north-east Minister here to reply to the debate and at least one other north-east Member in this Chamber.

At the beginning of March, Barclays customers in Belford, Lowick and Norham received a patronising letter telling them that their branch would close in five weeks' time. A map was enclosed showing that there was another branch between eight and 16 miles away. No bus timetable was enclosed, as that would have revealed the near impossibility of getting there and back again and transacting banking business. The branches recommended were in Seahouses and Wooler. The Seahouses branch presents additional practical problems for anyone needing to park their car and deposit cash at the bank.

To add insult to injury, Barclays customers found in the newspapers at about the same time a two-page full colour advert saying:

> A big world needs a big bank: with more offices in Europe than any other bank.

As far as Barclays current management is concerned, rural Northumberland is not in the big world or in Europe, so it does not deserve any offices or branches of the bank.

The implications of the Barclays closure programme for the Government's policy for regenerating rural areas are devastating, particularly when combined with threats to post offices. They affect pensioners and families, particularly given the Government's plans to have benefits paid through bank accounts—what bank accounts at what banks?

My constituency is not alone in this deprivation. There are 17 motions and many amendments on the Order Paper attacking Barclays bank closures—more than I have seen on any other single issue in 26 years in the House. Whatever else it has done, Barclays has scored another public relations disaster to rival its grasping plans for cash machine charges.

Who on earth will want to bank with an institution that is so disloyal to its customers? Some people have no choice. Since the days of Martins bank, which Barclays took over, Barclays has been the dominant banker in the rural communities of Northumberland. Outside the three main towns there are only two branches of banks other than Barclays and no building society branches. There are no cash dispensers. In the three communities where Barclays branches are being closed, there are no other banking services apart from those provided by the invaluable local sub-post offices, which are themselves deeply worried about the future.

The two smaller communities of Lowick and Norham are nevertheless larger villages by Northumberland standards. I know that the Under–Secretary, the hon. Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin) is familiar with them. He likes to spend his spare time in my constituency and I often encounter him around the countryside of Northumberland, so he knows the distances involved and the communities that I am talking about.

Lowick used to have many shops and businesses and no fewer than six churches. It still has several businesses, three churches and two pubs. There are many pensioners and numerous disabled people who need access to a bank, with the part-time sub-branch of Barclays meeting their needs. It is many miles to the towns where there are banks. Norham still has a butcher, a baker and several shops and needs its banking services. Again, many pensioners there depend on the bank.

Perhaps the most extraordinary closure plan is at Belford, which is thought of as a large village, but has many of the features of a small market town, with quite a wide range of shops and businesses and large numbers of summer visitors. It is a community that is determined to build for the future with the very active Belford Trade Association working enthusiastically with local councillors and with me to promote improvements. With an active rail users group, it is well on the way to getting Belford station reopened for passengers. New signs that have been planned for the A1 will bring many more visitors to use the local services, and they will expect a bank to be one of those services. The community is working on funding to revive the town's industrial estate. The community is designated for growth by both borough and county councils, yet Barclays wants to abandon this growing and strengthening community where more than 700 people hold Barclays accounts and many more Barclays customers use the branch to service Barclays accounts elsewhere.

Mr. Denis Murphy (Wansbeck): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree with my constituents in Newbiggin-by-the-Sea and Guide Post who have also been affected by a recent Barclays closure announcement? They were absolutely dismayed to see Barclays spending tens of millions of pounds on an advertising campaign to attract new customers, having turned its back on customers who have been loyal for many years. Does the right hon. Gentleman further agree that that money would be better spent on providing a service for existing customers, and that Barclays should immediately lift the threat of closure from those branches and reopen the banks that it has recently closed?

Mr. Beith: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. Indeed, some of my constituents in the village of Lynemouth used to use the Barclays branch in Newbiggin-by-the-Sea, which is also threatened with closure. Barclays' advertising campaign must have been one of the most wasted in history as its actions speak so much louder than its words. The two-page advertisements telling you to open an account at Barclays will be totally unconvincing to my constituents who will see that as soon as you open an account, the branch will be closed—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. John McWilliam): Order. The right hon. Gentleman is referring to me. I can reassure him that I have no such intentions, particularly in current circumstances.

Mr. Beith: Indeed. I was referring to you figuratively, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am sure that you apply your customary shrewdness in choosing where to bank.

There is no evidence of decline in the use of the Belford branch. Indeed, it is such a busy place that it is a recognised community meeting point. Many pensioners depend on the bank's facilities and are unable to travel elsewhere. A large number of local businesses depend on being able to deposit cash at the branch and do not want the wasted time and greatly increased risk of a 20 or 30-mile round trip, sometimes daily, to bank their cash. Closure would be a real setback to village regeneration. That is an issue for the Government's rural policy as well as for Barclays.

What is particularly indefensible about all the closures going ahead so quickly is that the programme takes no account of work in which Barclays is currently involved to look at banking in rural communities, including the British Bankers Association report "Banking without Branches". The British Bankers Association commissioned an independent study from Bristol university into the effects of bank closures and how communities cope without a local branch. The major banks asked for time to consider the report, but they are not giving their customers time to consider before removing their services.

The report highlighted the disproportionate effect of closures on the most vulnerable—the elderly and the disabled—and on small businesses. That was assuming that there would be a bank within four miles, even after the local branch had closed. In my constituency, the distances would be much greater. The report showed that 70 per cent. of small retailers visit their local branch more than once a week, and 80 per cent. of those surveyed use paying-in facilities. Barclays is ignoring all that.

In addition, Barclays is involved in an experiment in Cornwall looking at community banking services. There is a proposal for up to 200 Cornish post offices to take over the four basic functions of a bank for Barclays' personal customers—not business customers—such as withdrawals, paying in, cashing cheques and so on. I think that it begins this week—on 16 March—and is supposed to be in place throughout Cornwall by the end of April. It has been agreed between Post Office Counters Ltd. and Barclays, but it has not yet been agreed by all the postmasters in Cornwall. Questions are being asked about how logistically possible the arrangements are. There is no time scale for evaluating the experiment and there are security and other problems associated with it. Why is Barclays not awaiting the outcome of its own experiment before going ahead with rural closures at the other end of the country?

Barclays also make much of online banking. A survey of the 767 Barclays customers in Belford revealed that only a tiny proportion of them were engaged in online banking and most of them did not depend wholly on it; they continued to use the bank for cash facilities. One cannot pay cash into or get cash out of a computer screen. If anyone has found a way of doing that I would be fascinated to observe it. People still require a bank branch. Barclays is leaping ahead of its own customers in assuming that they do not require services that are clearly still needed. I have pleaded with the chairman of Barclays to defer the rural closures until there is a response to the survey and some results from the Cornish pilot scheme, and until there has been some

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consultation between the bank and local communities about alternatives to closure and services that could continue through local agents such as the Post Office.

I ask the Government to put pressure on Barclays to give us a breathing space and to start thinking more sensibly about rural communities. With a 30 per cent. profit increase to £2.5 billion, the bank can hardly plead poverty; it has room for manoeuvre, which it should use to help its own customers in rural communities.

I also ask the Government to give very careful consideration to the impact on rural communities of banking closures and to the measures that could be taken as part of Government rural policy. I ask them to look, for example, at United States legislation which I believe requires banks to assist in setting up alternative arrangements if a closure would leave a local community without a branch.

There is concern both nationally and regionally. The Newcastle *Journal* "Save our Villages" campaign underlines how strong the concern is throughout the north-east. With such widespread concern, the bank really ought to realise how much damage it is doing both to itself and to rural communities by rushing ahead with closures without consultation of the kind that I have described.

I hope that the Government can apply some pressure in their current discussions with the banks to get Barclays to give us some more time. The discussions have of course extended to the whole cash machine charges issue and have not been a very good omen for any further discussions that might take place.

Barclays, in particular, has not demonstrated a responsible attitude. It now has an opportunity to show that it cares about its customers and about the communities in which it has traditionally been dominant for many years. If it fails to respond, it will pay a heavy price and many people throughout the country will feel that it is not an institution with which they want to be associated in any way.

My most urgent plea of all is to Barclays: defer the closures and give rural communities a chance.

1.12 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Chris Mullin): The right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) represents one of the most beautiful constituencies in the country and, as he said, I am very familiar with it. I want to say at the outset that I share his disappointment with the attitude of Barclays towards its rural customers, and in particular the ones who will be affected by the closures.

The Government readily accept that ease of access to financial services is important in maintaining rural businesses and in encouraging rural regeneration, and that it is an important part of rural life. Barclays justifies its closure proposals by saying that it is concentrating investment in its busiest branches. It identifies what it describes as its "lowest performing branches", where it says that the number of transactions is declining. Those are the branches that have been chosen for closure. Although Barclays has traditionally been well represented in the north-east of England, it now claims that it is

re-aligning the number of branches to get best use of them.

At present, the branches in Belford and Choppington offer banking services six days a week, while those at Lowick and Norham are more restricted. Lowick opens for two hours twice a week and Norham offers two hours three times a week. None of the banks has automatic cash dispensing facilities.

Belford in north Northumberland is a typical small rural village—it says "village" here but, as the right hon. Gentleman said, it thinks of itself more as a town, as do I, of about 1,000 inhabitants, with two financial service providers: Barclays and the Post Office. The post office has longer opening hours than Barclays bank: it is open six days a week, usually until 5.30, whereas the bank closes at 3.30.

The local post office has made arrangements with Lloyds TSB, Co-operative bank and Alliance and Leicester, offering free banking services to customers of those banks. Services include both withdrawals and paying in. That shows that it is possible to make alternative arrangements if one lives in Belford, and I recommend that, if Barclays persists with the closure, those who currently bank with it consider switching to one of the three banks that have that arrangement with the local post office. I notice that Lord Walton already has plans to do that, and it may well be that others will want to follow his example.

Ms Glenda Jackson (Hampstead and Highgate): No such alternative arrangements will be available to my constituents if Barclays goes ahead with its proposed closure of its Hampstead Heath branch. The effects that the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) described will be replicated in my constituency, albeit it is not rural, and those who will be damaged most will be the bank's most loyal customers, pensioners and the small businesses in the area, the majority of whose transactions are in cash. They will face additional burdens because of their need to go to the nearest alternative branch. There is also a security element should Barclays indeed install an automatic cash machine.

I strongly endorse everything that the right hon. Gentleman said. The Government should at least ask Barclays to consult before going ahead with closures that could do enormous damage to not only rural but urban regeneration and impact against the Government's proposals for tackling social exclusion.

Mr. Mullin: My hon. Friend makes an important point. The problems in her constituency are a bit different from those in the right hon. Gentleman's, but it is true that banks are also withdrawing from some urban areas, which could have some of the effects that she outlined.

In small communities such as those that the right hon. Gentleman described, it may well be that the future of banking lies with the Post Office. The Government are providing £500 million to the Post Office for computerisation, and that will in due course enable a wider range of services to be offered. The Post Office has

about 10 times as many branches as the largest bank, which may provide an alternative for those without access to traditional bank branches.

The Post Office is currently implementing arrangements nationally and hopes to have them completed within the next 18 months. Belford post office is already connected and the postmaster there, to whom my officials have spoken in the past 24 hours or so, hopes to introduce a wider range of banking services in due course. The picture is not entirely gloomy.

As the right hon. Gentleman said, Barclays is currently carrying out a three-month trial in 270 post offices in Cornwall to see how services can be delivered through post offices. I agree that it is unfortunate that it should choose this time to close so many branches, before seeing how the experiment is working. Other banks are able to make use of the Post Office and I am disappointed that Barclays is taking what I regard as premature action in announcing the closures. At the very least, it would have been better if it had waited until its experiment in Cornwall could be assessed and alternatives set up to minimise inconvenience to customers.

In addition to the situation at Belford, Barclays proposes closing its branches at Choppington, Lowick and Norham. There are post offices or sub-post offices at all three villages and they, too, may be able to offer alternative and expanded banking services in due course. That may well be where the future lies if the big banks, or some of them, are no longer interested in customers in rural areas.

Perhaps I should say a few words about the wider picture. There is pressure not only on rural banks but on rural shops, pubs and other services, to say nothing of the current difficulties in farming. The Government intend to address the wider issues of the countryside in the rural White Paper to be published this summer. The White Paper will focus on sustainable growth and regeneration in rural areas and new directions for agriculture. It will establish service standards in rural areas and address, among other issues, social exclusion, ensuring a co-ordinated approach across Government.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has established a new Cabinet Committee, chaired by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office, to co-ordinate Government policies affecting rural areas. We have already greatly increased spending on rural programmes.

On rural transport, an additional £170 million will be spent over three years, including new support for rural bus services and encouragement for community transport initiatives. An additional £100 million has been provided for the rural bus subsidy grant to enable it to continue for a further three years past March next year. That has allowed Northumberland county council to provide improved bus services in some of its rural areas, including a post-bus service. I shall not go so far as to say that the Post Office will take over public transport as well as banking, because that would be asking too much.

The Government are encouraging local authorities to deliver improvements through local transport plans. In Northumberland, that has provided an additional £1.6 million, which may lead to an improved public transport interchange at Berwick-upon-Tweed's railway station—I expect that the right hon. Gentleman knows about that—and the possibility, to which he referred, of the re-opening of the station at Belford for passenger traffic.

The Government are implementing mandatory rate relief for village shops and post offices. Sole shops and post offices with a rateable value of less than £5,000, which will be increased to £6,000 from 1 April, in a designated settlement of under 3,000 people, are eligible for 50 per cent. rate relief. That must affect some of the shops in the right hon. Gentleman's constituency, perhaps in some of the villages where the banks are about to close. Local authorities have discretionary powers to increase that relief up to a level of 100 per cent.

On a wider front, my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food recently announced plans for £1.6 billion of spending over the next seven years—a 60 per cent. increase—on rural development measures in England. The north-east section of the rural development plan identifies "improved access to services" as one of the goals for the north-east. That will be achieved through improvements to information technology services and increasing the number of multi-use facilities. It may be possible to use community centres and village pubs as local service centres, for example.

Mr. Beith: I would be out of order if I strayed too far into the wider issues of the agricultural crisis that our countryside faces, but I wish to press the Minister to make it clear to Barclays, perhaps through his ministerial colleagues who appear to have regular discussions with the banks, that the Government see the need for the bank to offer a breathing space to communities and allow time for consultation before closures. The Minister has expressed his approval of that proposal, but I hope that it will be made clear to Barclays that that is the Government's view. I hope also that the Government will indicate their interest in the Cornish experiment and the need to see some results from it before drastic decisions are taken. I also hope that the Minister's officials in the region, who have obviously looked into the matter in detail, will be encouraged to continue to take an interest in helping us to ensure that banking facilities of some kind remain available in the villages.

Mr. Mullin: I shall certainly make sure that the message is passed to Barclays, and I have said on the record today that the Government's view is that Barclays should delay the closures until the result of the experiment is known. We are disappointed by the approach that Barclays has taken in this and other cases.

The right hon. Gentleman asked me about some legislation in the United States of America. We have briefly considered that, but we do not see that legislation would help to solve the problem. We are watching progress in the area, but there is no evidence that the US legislation has led to better access to banking in rural areas. More than 20 years after the community reinvestment legislation, the percentage of the US population without any kind of bank account is twice as high as it is in the UK, where we do not have such

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legislation. The difficulties, and the distances, are on a wholly different scale in the US, but legislation may not be the right way to proceed.

Mr. Beith: I warn the Minister to be careful about his statistics, because he may have forgotten the drastic effect of American bank collapses on the willingness of Americans to put their money in local banks.

Mr. Mullin: That is a fair point, but I shall not digress into the subject of the American banking system because I would swiftly be out of my depth.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: And out of order.

Mr. Mullin: I hope that I have said enough to indicate to the right hon. Gentleman and others that the Government take seriously the problems in rural areas in general, as well as the specific ones to which he has drawn attention. We consider that access to financial services is a vital element in achieving rural development and eliminating social exclusion. I thank him for raising the issue and I hope that Barclays is prepared to reconsider its proposals until such time as realistic alternatives are available, but if it is not, customers must vote with their feet.

1.27 pm

Sitting suspended.

Fuel Taxes (Islands)

1.30 pm

Mr. Calum Macdonald (Western Isles): I begin by expressing my gratitude at being given the opportunity to hold this debate, especially as my previous debate had to be withdrawn. It is happy timing to be able to have this debate in the week before the Budget.

You have visited my constituency, Mr. Deputy Speaker, so you know that it is composed of remote islands. So remote are they that the BBC saw fit to use one as the location for its series "Castaway". Of course, the BBC mythology that the islands are inhospitable and uninhabitable is absurd and extreme, but they are remote, and that remoteness creates difficulties for the communities who live there.

The difficulties are felt most, not by those who have to live on an island for a 12-month docusoap, but by those who live there for year after year, under Government after Government. Cheap and easy transport is essential to the economic well-being and social welfare of the communities who inhabit these remote islands.

In Britain's inner cities, social exclusion means poor education, low incomes, drugs and crime. In Britain's remote islands, it means expensive and difficult transport, which compounds the difficulties implicit in the geographic reality of remoteness. It means exclusion from the economic rhythms and benefits that mainland Britain takes for granted. Combating social exclusion in the remote areas therefore requires Government policies designed above all else to improve transport links, and to try to reduce—or at the very least contain—their cost.

I acknowledge that other parts of Britain are affected by Government policies on petrol duty and air passenger duty, and I welcome the interest of other hon. Members in this debate. However, I deliberately gave the debate a narrow title, to emphasise to my hon. Friend the Minister that the impact of those duties on remote island communities differs significantly from their impact elsewhere. The Government's future thinking must take account of that special impact.

The key to understanding the problem with fuel duty is to appreciate remote communities' greater dependence on transport by private car, given the obvious lack of public transport alternatives. I also want to highlight the scale of the gap between fuel prices in the most remote areas and in urban, mainland Britain.

Mrs. Ray Michie (Argyll and Bute): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way, and congratulate him on securing this debate. He will be aware that 68 per cent. of people in the highlands and islands own cars, or have access to them. The Scottish average is 57 per cent. Does he agree that no amount of improvement in public transport will ever overcome the need of people in remote areas to use cars? Public transport cannot go up every track and into every village. Is not it imperative that we make it clear that there is a great dependence on access to private cars?

Mr. Macdonald: The hon. Lady makes a valid point. It is especially valid in connection with remote island communities, such as those that her constituency also contains.

To illustrate the price gap that I mentioned, I have the latest "Pricewatch!" leaflet produced by comhairle nan Eilean Siar, the Western Isles council. It shows that motorists in the western isles paid 84p per litre for unleaded petrol in January. That is 10p a litre—or 45p a gallon, in the older measure—more than motorists in Glasgow paid. That is a real price gap.

The Office of Fair Trading is investigating that gap, and its report is awaited with interest. However, the high price paid in remote communities, if not the gap itself, is clearly related to the level of the duty. Higher prices in the highlands also mean that disproportionately more is paid to the Treasury in the form of value added tax. It is estimated that the Treasury collects almost £3 million more in VAT in the highlands and islands than would be the case if uniform prices were in operation across the United Kingdom.

I acknowledge that fuel duty is an important tax for the Government; for environmental and revenue reasons. I do not disregard those benefits for the Government, nor do I want to downplay them. I do not argue against the basic philosophy underlying fuel duty, which is to exert pressure to make cars cleaner and more fuel-efficient. However, it is now time for the Treasury to pause, and to take stock of how it collects fuel duty, in light of that duty's enormous and rapid growth in recent years.

Fuel duty now pulls in almost £23 billion for the Treasury. It is the fourth biggest tax levied by the Inland Revenue and Customs and Exercise, after income tax, VAT and corporation tax. In comparison, the combined duties on wines, spirits and beer raise less than £8 billion. Tobacco tax raises less than £6 billion, while capital gains tax and inheritance tax raise less than £5 billion between them. In fact, apart from the big four taxes that I have mentioned, no tax levied by the Inland Revenue and Customs and Exercise raises more than £10 billion a year.

I cite those figures because I do not believe that the Government can continue to levy so huge a tax in a rigid, uniform, one-size-fits-all way across the whole of the UK. The other three "big four" taxes are not levied in that way: fuel duty should not be levied in that way either.

We accept that the other big taxes have to be adjusted and adapted if they are to be seen as fair, and if a political reaction against them is to be avoided. Adjustments to income tax and corporation tax are made according to income levels, and VAT is made fairer by the exemption of food and children's clothes. Similarly, we should adjust how we levy fuel duty, given the scale of the revenue that it brings in.

It will not be enough to hypothecate future increases in the duty. The manner of its collection will have to be adjusted as well, if the Government wish it to continue to play an important role in achieving their targets of revenue growth and environmental improvement.

The obvious way to adjust fuel duty so that it is seen to be fairer is to provide a concession targeted at the most remote of our rural communities. Other countries do that, and so should we. There will be technical difficulties in devising such a scheme, but the Treasury must make a real effort to overcome them.

I want to leave other hon. Members time to speak, so I shall turn briefly to air passenger duty. Once again, the situation facing remote islands communities is unique. Elsewhere in Britain, air services are a convenience, or even a luxury. They are certainly not a travel necessity. For the remote islands, however, they are an essential lifeline to the mainland. That is why the health services in the remote islands use air transport regularly—almost daily—to move patients and staff between the islands and mainland facilities.

The Government provide a subsidy to maintain non-profitable island-to-mainland links. That subsidy has been approved by the European Union through a public service order. That is why I believe that it is simply wrong for these lifeline air services to be subject to air passenger tax in the same way that regular air services around the UK are subject to it. I welcome the Government's consultation on that point. It is certainly more than the previous Government ever conceded.

However, I must caution my hon. Friend the Minister that the proposed exemption of internal flights between the highlands and islands will exempt only a quarter of the flights between islands and mainland Scotland. Most flights—the most expensive ones—are between the islands and other parts of Scotland that lie outside the highlands. They too must be exempted if the Government's expression of good intentions is to be turned into reality.

That proposition has the support of the hon. and learned Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr. Wallace), who cannot attend this debate because of his duties in the Scottish Parliament, and of my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber (Mr. Stewart), who is absent for similar reasons. However, both have written to the Minister on this matter. I hope that he will take heed of their representations, and of the points that I have raised.

1.39 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Stephen Timms): I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Western Isles (Mr. Macdonald) on securing this debate. I know that he has been taking a close interest in these topics for a considerable period.

The matters that my hon. Friend has raised are of serious concern to people in remote communities. He rightly reminded us of the reliance that they place on the car for their daily transport. The hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Mrs. Michie) made the telling point that car ownership statistics were higher in this part of Scotland than in others.

My hon. Friend will recall that I acknowledged those concerns when he led a delegation from the Highlands and Islands Transport Forum, which I met at the Treasury on 24 January. The Government's White Paper "A New Deal for Transport", which was published in July 1998, set out our aim of extending choice in transport and securing mobility in a way that supports sustainable development. The White Paper recognises that fiscal measures and economic instruments have a major role to play in influencing travel choice and encouraging sustainable development. Road transport alone accounts for more than 20 per cent. of carbon dioxide emissions and nearly 50 per cent. of nitrogen oxide emissions, so limiting those emissions is potentially important in tackling the environmental challenges that we all face.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer is very aware of the concerns of people in rural areas. It was in recognition of those concerns and others that he announced in the

[Mr. Stephen Timms]

pre-Budget report in November that he would in future consider all social, economic and environmental factors when reaching his Budget decisions on the appropriate rates of fuel duty—including, of course, the affordability of fuel in remote and rural communities—rather than continuing with the automatic fuel duty escalator that has applied for a number of years. It was also in recognition of those concerns that my right hon. Friend announced that Customs and Excise would be consulting on an exemption from air passenger duty for flights from the Scottish highlands and islands. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his welcome for that announcement, and I will return to it a little later in my remarks.

My hon. Friend emphasised the price differences in petrol and diesel between the remote islands and urban areas in Scotland. He made the case for Government action to address those differences. It is worth saying that there is no difference in the duty paid on a litre of petrol sold in Glasgow and a litre sold in Benbecula. The Treasury does not collect more duty according to the retail price of the fuel. The question is why fuel is more expensive in remote areas or, alternatively, why it is less expensive in urban areas. My hon. Friend's point about VAT is accurate, but it does not apply to duty. Whether the Treasury collects less VAT as a result of that is a matter for debate, because it depends on what else that money would have been spent on. However, my hon. Friend's point about a higher amount of VAT being collected per litre is correct.

On the price of fuel, a number of different economic factors come into play. It costs more to transport fuel to remote areas, the volumes sold are not as great as in towns and cities, and there is not the competition found in urban areas, particularly given the presence of supermarkets. By contrast, in urban areas, transport costs are less, greater volumes cut operating costs and intense competition between the major suppliers lowers pump prices.

The Office of Fair Trading is working to ensure that there is no cartel on pricing in the petrol market. In May 1998, its report on competition in the supply of petrol in the United Kingdom specifically considered the supply of petrol in remote rural areas, including the structure of the market in north-west Scotland. The report concluded that consumers were not paying over the odds for their petrol in that part of the country. It said that higher prices were a function of the extra costs of supply and the fact that there is less competition there than elsewhere. There was no evidence of the operation of cartels. My hon. Friend has already said that the OFT is considering these issues afresh. Like him, I look forward to its report, which I understand is likely to be available later in the spring.

My hon. Friend makes the point that, given the size of the take on fuel duty, we cannot impose a one-size-fits-all approach. In reality, we do not—there are already differential rates for cleaner fuels, for example. That has been a feature of the fuel duty system for some time. However, on none of the taxes that he describes as the big four—his analysis was interesting—do we apply different rates on a geographical basis. I suggest that any attempt to do so would create serious difficulties. In all four cases, rates are applied in exactly the same way across the country. There is variation in the rate of those taxes, but not on a geographical basis.

The Government take seriously the transport needs of those in remote areas. We have already introduced a number of measures to address them. We allocated an additional £50 million to rural bus services in the 1998 Budget; we established the rural bus challenge fund; we set up a new rural transport partnership fund; we announced in the 1999 Budget a 20 per cent. increase in funds for rural bus services; and we announced that bus fuel duty rebate will rise in line with the rate of fuel duty for the second successive year. The rebate had been frozen for a long period, and it was unfrozen last year.

The Chancellor has said that he will consider the rates of fuel duty on a Budget-by-Budget basis. He has also said that any revenues from real-terms increases in fuel duties will go straight into a ring-fenced fund for improving public transport and modernising the road network, from which Scotland would receive its share in line with the Barnett formula.

Those are all important initiatives. I do not for a moment suggest that any of them mean that people in remote areas do not need a car. I accept that many people in remote areas and, indeed, in many parts of the country, need a car. However, it is important to emphasise how much the Government have done to improve the provision of bus and other public transport services. I would not want to underestimate the importance of the additional provision that they have made in improving public transport services for people in remote areas and elsewhere.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale): Will the Minister concede that in many of the island and rural areas that we are discussing, no amount of money put into bus services will address the essential problem to which the hon. Members for Western Isles (Mr. Macdonald) and for Argyll and Bute (Mrs. Michie) referred? We are talking about areas in which bus frequency is not measured in how many buses come per hour but how many buses come per month. Therefore, the Government's measures are not a substitute, in economic terms, for use of the car.

Mr. Timms: I accept that many people in many parts of country need to have a car. However, I would not want us to lose sight of the importance of public transport services, even in some of our more remote areas. I simply wanted to put that on the record.

When we met in January—and, to some extent, today—my hon. Friend suggested a number of measures that would help, including exempting rural motorists from increases in fuel duty and making red diesel available for on-road use. There are a number of serious obstacles to such proposals. Not only do they conflict with our legally binding obligations under European Community directives on oils taxation, but they could conflict with EC state aid rules. We had the opportunity to discuss those issues when we met in January.

EC law sets out clearly the circumstances in which oil may be subject to a reduced rate of duty. Any new differentiated rate of excise duty requires a derogation from that directive, and such derogations are difficult to

obtain. No new derogations have been allowed on a regional basis since the introduction of the single market in 1993, and it is unlikely that any would be allowed.

Even if that were not a problem, there is also a question of principle involved in asking some UK motorists to pay for the environmental consequences of burning fossil fuels while others do not. Other problems would be involved in administering the changes which, although less significant, still need to be considered.

Mr. Macdonald: My hon. Friend mentioned the difficulties with European Union regulations. Does he accept that Portugal and Greece have concessions that have a geographic basis? Why is it unlikely that the United Kingdom would be able to obtain a similar concession?

Mr. Timms: Those derogations were already in place when the single market was established. In a sense, the European Commission was willing to make an exception for some existing arrangements to bind those countries into the single market. The prospects for obtaining new derogations, in the UK or anywhere else in the EU, is pretty slim. I would not want to mislead hon. Members into thinking that there may be a prospect of that at the moment.

I certainly recognise the concerns expressed this afternoon. However, many other groups consider their need for access to cheaper petrol and diesel to be equally as great including, for example: road hauliers; people with disabilities; the unemployed; and those on fixed incomes, in particular pensioners. My postbag, and I suspect that of my hon. Friends and other hon. Members present, contains vigorous representations from all those groups.

At the meeting in January, I told my hon. Friend that the Scottish Executive should certainly consider how best to use the rural transport fund to help to alleviate some of the difficulties in remote communities. Representatives of the Highlands and Islands Transport Forum at the meeting said that they would be interested in providing advice to the Executive on how best that money could be spent. I would urge that those discussions should proceed.

When we met, my hon. Friend called for discussions about the feasibility of a vehicle excise duty concession for the remote Scottish islands. There have already been contacts between the Treasury and Scottish Executive officials to discuss both the proposal for a general concession for car owners in the islands and the scope for widening the existing small island vehicles concession for goods vehicles to cover some of the larger Scottish islands as well.

Both those measures would be complex to administer and difficult and time consuming to legislate for, but, nevertheless, Treasury and Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions officials will be discussing the practicalities of those ideas with the Scottish Executive to inform the Government's future Budget options.

I remind my hon. Friend that a lower rate of VED was introduced in the Budget last year for cars up to 1,100 cc. That rate applies throughout the country, but it has offered some relief to people in rural areas, such as the ones to whom hon. Members have drawn attention, who have to depend on a car and have chosen a smaller-engined model.

On air passenger duty, remote communities—in particular island communities—often rely heavily on air transport links to maintain their way of life. There is no doubt about that; nor have I been left in any doubt that people in those communities see the air passenger duty, which may be included in the price of their air travel, as a burden. I say "which may be included" because, as hon. Members will be aware, many routes use small aircraft, which are exempt from the duty.

The Government recognise the importance of air transport to the Scottish highlands and islands, which is why my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced in his pre-Budget report last November that we would be consulting on an exemption from air passenger duty for flights departing from airports in the Scottish highlands and islands. Our primary aim in doing so was to consider ways to reduce the impact on the region's air travellers of the removal of the present exemption for the return leg of a domestic round trip, which is necessary to comply with our European Union treaty obligations.

At present, air passenger duty is charged not on the return leg of a return flight within the UK, but only on the outward leg. This different treatment for domestic flights compared with flights within the EU needs to be ended and we are consulting on what adjustments to make to the scheme at the same time. We are consulting on an exemption for flights from the Scottish highlands and islands. The formal proposal is to exempt flights from airports in areas that fall within the EC's nomenclature of units of territorial statistics II classification, where the population density is 12.5 persons per square kilometre or less—the standard definition of sparsity.

In the course of the consultation, we have received many letters from a wide variety of interested parties, including members of the public; small businesses; tourist organisations; and members of both the Scottish Parliament and this House. As hon. Members here would expect, those letters were almost universally in favour of the proposed exemption, although many urged us to go further—as my hon. Friend has done—and to exempt flights to the highlands and islands.

Hon. Members would not expect me to comment further on the likely outcome of the consultation at this stage. That is a matter for another speech, which my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will be making next week. However, it is worth pointing out that an exemption would not merely mean that travellers from airports in the highlands and islands would pay no more duty than at present. Exempting flights made from airports in the region would mean that all passengers on flights between airports within the region would be relieved completely from air passenger duty. Duty would be due only on flights to airports in the region from outside—in other words, on one leg of a return journey between the region and anywhere else in the world, as at present, and on neither leg of a journey within the region.

I emphasise that every flight leaving any airport in the highlands and islands would be exempt under our proposal—not merely a proportion of them—

[Mr. Timms]

irrespective of destination. Inverness would be included as one of the airports to benefit, but Aberdeen, which is located in the north-eastern Scotland region, which is a less sparsely populated region on the EU definition, would not.

Some representations have suggested that the exemption should also cover flights to the Scottish highlands and islands. My hon. Friend made such representations today and when we met in January. Other hon. Members have done so by letter. All those representations are being carefully considered within the consultation exercise and I am not able today to prejudge the conclusions that the Chancellor will reach. However, I need to point out the real practical and legal difficulties that would arise from such an exemption. To remain compliant with EU law, any exemption on flights to the highlands and islands would have to extend to flights to any region in the European Economic Area that meets the same criterion of remoteness. That would probably include northern Sweden, northern Finland, Norway and Iceland. The concession would therefore have to go a good deal further than for the highlands and islands, and hon Members would acknowledge that that would present us with a problem in introducing a change of that sort.

I hope that I have been able to demonstrate to my hon. Friend and hon. Members that we take very seriously the concerns that he has consistently raised, which are shared by his constituents and hon. Members who represent the remoter areas of Scotland. Equally, I think that he will understand that major questions of Government revenue, environmental protection, fairness and European law need to be taken fully into account in dealing with these matters. I am sure that he will be listening with special interest to the announcements that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor will be making to the House next week. I emphasise to my hon. Friend that my officials and I will be happy to discuss these matters further with him once the Budget announcements have been made.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at one minute to Two o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 16 March 2000

[SIR ALAN HASELHURST *in the Chair*]

Quangos

[*Relevant documents: Sixth Report of the Select Committee on Public Administration Session 1998–99 HC 209 and the Government's response thereto Session 1999–2000 HC 317.*]

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mr. Kevin Hughes.*]

2.30 pm

Dr. Tony Wright (Cannock Chase): It is a great pleasure to kick off the debate on quangos, which arises from the report of the Select Committee on Public Administration.

One would have thought that, with all the attention focused on quangos in recent years, there would be queues at the door for our debate this afternoon with people wanting to weigh in with their views on something that has been a running theme in our political life for a long time. It is distressing and revealing that that is not yet the case.

I shall start by remembering some of the contexts. Even as a word, quangos is pejorative. It has a bad name, rather like call centres, theme parks and breakfast television. It is the sort of word that makes one want to dive under the bedclothes, but it has been at the centre of political debate in Britain for 20 or 30 years. We refer to quangocrats and quangocracy and when we wanted to attack plans for the second Chamber, we said that the intention was to create the biggest quango in the land. It has entered the language, but it seems unfriendly. In fact, it is a neutral term that came into existence in an attempt to describe the way in which whole stretches of government have been organised in recent times. Governments here and elsewhere have required new kinds of machinery to develop and deliver services. We have had to invent new sorts of bodies for a new range of activities: to distribute money, to provide a range of services, to provide advice to Government, to regulate, to inspect, to investigate, to adjudicate and so on. Whenever a Government want to do any or all those activities, they set up bodies that have tended to become known as quangos.

The word had a respectable academic origin 20 years ago, before politicians got hold of it. It was simply a word to describe the new bodies, but politicians were suspicious of unelected bodies that did not fit into the normal pattern of elected politics. However, quangos are hugely important. The core quangos—executive non-departmental public bodies—were accounting for around £24 billion of public money a couple of years ago. The current spread of quangos accounts for more than 70,000 public appointments. That is a lot of people being appointed to public bodies and half of them are appointed by Ministers, sometimes by Ministers alone.

We cannot avoid entangling ourselves in description and classification as we struggle to find a term for the curious beast that we are trying to get our minds around. These are appointed bodies performing public functions, using public money. They come in all shapes and sizes and have a variety of purposes. The original core quangos, the executive non-departmental public bodies—NDPBs—have been added to in the past 10 years or so by many more bodies. Through the 1980s in particular there was the development of what the Nolan Committee and then the Neill Committee started to call local public spending bodies. These bodies arose out of the Government's desire in the 1980s to displace local authorities over a range of functions in education, health, training, urban regeneration and elsewhere and replace them with appointed bodies. Therefore, we saw the development of local public spending bodies which are not, in Government terms, officially quangos; yet in any common-sense meaning they clearly are, because they come under the broad definition of appointed bodies performing public functions with public money. More latterly, particularly since 1997, people have looked at the development of task forces, pointing to the large number and wanting to bring them under the quango rubric too. I am sure that hon. Members will want to say something about that as we go on.

Whatever the variety or history of the bodies that we seek to identify, it is clear that they are a fixture of British government—a fixture of all Governments. Many of us have had considerable fun with this debate over the years. It is normal for the Opposition to attack the Government because they like setting up quangos and it is normal for the Government to defend themselves by saying that all Governments do those things. We certainly attacked the Conservative Government for having invented so many quangos and when Mrs. Thatcher came to power in 1979, she had been attacking the Labour party for inventing quangos. Indeed, in 1980 she set up a review under Leo Pliatsky to review quangos. Apart from producing some new definitions, it did not get far in terms of the cull that had been promised. We directed much of our energy to attacking the development of quangos during the long Conservative years, yet in office we have presided over their continuation, if not their extension.

That seems to tell a story, which is that quangos are a fixture. They are part of modern government and they perform a variety of functions that all Governments find useful. It is not helpful—this is perhaps the burden of my remarks and also the burden of what the Select Committee said in its report—to conduct the discussion about quangos in terms of a numbers game, saying, "How many are there? How many did you set up? How many did we set up? Have you set up more than we did? Are there more or fewer now?" The consistent evidence is that all Governments do it, but it does not go to the heart of the issue. In fact, it is a distraction from the central issue, which I shall define in a moment.

It is fairly well known now that quangos exist for a variety of reasons. They exist because it is useful to have bodies that operate at arm's length from Ministers and the Government to carry out the activities to which I have referred. It is useful to have bodies with that flexibility of operation and with a concerted focus on a particular task. It is not difficult to find a range of arguments why the quango model has developed and been found useful; at the same time it is not difficult to find arguments why it creates difficulties too.

[Dr. Tony Wright]

Quangos can be fragmenting. When we want services to be integrated, a model that deliberately fragments can cause difficulties. When we are talking about joining up government, the quango model, which disaggregates government, could be a source of difficulty. "Reaching Out: The Role of Central Government At Regional And Local Level", the recent report of the Cabinet Office's performance and innovation unit, shows the difficulties of joined-up government at a regional level. There are issues about delivery forms and quangos that might make joined-up government more difficult.

Legitimacy is a key issue. People rightly ask what the quangos are, who they speak for, where they get their money and why they are entitled to do what they do, as they do not arise from the elective process and cannot be booted out. Also, there are questions of accountability. To whom and how are they accountable? I pay tribute to the Government for struggling with those issues since 1997, as they promised that they would. The Cabinet Office produced a report, "Quangos: Opening Doors", which sought on a variety of fronts to make quangos more open and accountable. It disappointed those who thought that a great quango cull would happen. Such culls do not take place. At best, one can try to control quangos' growth.

The Cabinet Office has a difficulty with that. It would like a quango cull to take place, as it deals with the questions about whether there are more or fewer of them. It would be nice if it could say that there were fewer, but Ministers have always had a terrible natural propensity to want to create more of them within their programmes and initiatives. That is a permanent tension within Government.

The issue is not whether quangos should exist, as they do, but their accountability and transparency. Only through asking about that can we get answers to the big question, which is about legitimacy. I shall touch on some of the issues referred to in the report of the Select Committee on Liaison. I am a member of the Committee, and our key suggestion was the need for a map that would bring together the mess of public bodies. It should deal with how and why they are formed, under what legal framework they exist, what public money they receive, who appoints them and other issues of that kind.

We drew attention to some inaccuracies in the annual public bodies publication. The information needs to be collected in a more comprehensible form, as that document is inadequate at giving a broad picture of the range of public bodies inside Government. We need to start bringing together all the information that we have about executive agencies, the advisory agencies, the regulators, the local public spending bodies, the task forces and so on.

The Government have cautiously welcomed our proposal, but I hope that they can act on it, as the present situation is not satisfactory. The classifications do not work; some are bewildering. Our evidence raised questions such as why, until devolution, Historic Scotland was an executive agency, but English Heritage was a non-departmental public body. What is the explanation for that? Why is the Royal Parks agency an executive agency, but the Countryside Commission a non-departmental public body? There may be good reasons for such distinctions, but they are not apparent to anyone who receives the reports of those organisations. Why is the British Potato Council classified as a non-departmental public body, but the British Wool Marketing Board is not? Such mysteries defy explanation. The present classification system does not work. It is so confusing.

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): I am enjoying listening to the hon. Gentleman, but does he agree that it is difficult to work out why classification occurred in the first place? Looking at the matter from a different angle and at the consequences that flow from classification of a particular type of public body and the extent to which Ministers are held directly accountable for the activity of certain bodies, it becomes more explicable. However, that is not a desirable way in which to allocate a public body to a specific classification.

Dr. Wright: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. That is why a map is necessary. There must then be justification for why particular bodies are placed in particular categories and the accountability requirements can be matched with particular bodies. That would enable us to get to grips with such an issue that is growing like Topsy. I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman was suggesting Machiavellian reasons for such action. I am attributing it to ordinary decent British chaos. The time has now come for a system. We must have a map. It would not just be a paper exercise; it would genuinely help with accountability and legitimacy.

I pay tribute to the way in which the Government have grappled with the issue. They require the executive quangos to fulfil a range of requirements in relation to openness, publication of reports, access to meetings and registers of interest. That is essential. It should have been in place already. Public confidence is crucial in such matters and that will not exist in such bodies unless such basic reporting requirements are in place.

It is not yet clear how far we have got with some of the requirements. The fact that we do not know the answer is revealing. A quick analysis of the replies from Departments that were received by the Select Committee on Liaison showed enormous variability. As for the executive quangos—the NDPBs—95 per cent. of them said that they were under a requirement to publish an annual report. When asked whether they were obliged to release reports of meetings, the answer was that 9.5 per cent. were, although a further 19 per cent. said that they did so voluntarily. In answer to whether there was a public right to inspect the agenda of meetings, 4.5 per cent. of them said that there was, while another 8 per cent. said that they undertook that voluntarily. On whether there was a public right to see the minutes of meetings, 12 per cent. said that there was and another 16 per cent. said that they undertook that voluntarily.

The figures for advisory quangos are even more alarming. Asked whether they were obliged to release reports of meetings, just 1.8 per cent. said yes, with up to another 10 per cent. doing so voluntarily. On whether there was a public right to inspect meetings and agendas, only 5 per cent. said that there was, with another 8 per cent. undertaking that voluntarily, and on whether there

was a public right to the minutes of meetings, only 4 per cent. said yes, with another 13 per cent. undertaking that voluntarily.

These figures are necessarily imprecise, but they make the point that there is still no comprehensive system. Although there is guidance on and injunctions to do those things, there is enormous variability between bodies on whether they are done. The figures on openness were particularly dismal for advisory quangos and it is worth saying that such quangos have a central role in a range of issues, not least science, biotechnology and food safety.

I believe that, as a result of the BSE crisis and other problems, there has been a collapse of public confidence in the expert advice that Governments take and on which they rely in crucial matters. Therefore, quangos that give advice to the Government are very important. They may not seem important in executive terms—I understand why the Government view them as they do—but they are hugely important in terms of people's trust in the advice that the Government receive.

Ensuring that those bodies operate as openly as possible is therefore not a marginal or tangential matter. Indeed, it is now crucial that they do so. I urge the Government and the Cabinet Office to make sure that we make serious progress on openness. That necessity is buttressed by the House of Lords report on science and society which was issued a few days ago. It talks about the need to engage the public far more in scientific decision making and to open up some of those scientific and expert bodies to far more public scrutiny.

Another area to which the Select Committee drew attention and on which it made suggestions is that of quangos' accountability to Parliament. Several improvements can be made in that regard. We made specific suggestions, for example, that minutes of meetings between Ministers and the chairs or chief executives of major quangos should be reported routinely to Select Committees, so that Select Committees can keep an eye on what is going on. I acknowledge, and am grateful for, the cautious welcome that the Government gave to some of our proposals, but that proposal was not one that they felt able to accept. I apologise if I seem to be riding a hobby-horse, but I was struck by the terms in which they rejected it. The Government prayed in aid the Freedom of Information Bill in their argument that such reporting was unnecessary. They stated:

> The Government recognises the importance of openness and transparency, and has introduced a Freedom of Information Bill with the aim of opening up Government generally. That Bill not only provides a general right of access to information held by public authorities, but also requires public authorities to adopt a scheme for the publication of information as a matter of course. It is expected that under the Bill a great deal more information will be readily available, including for example minutes of meetings generally.

The problem is that the Bill does not say that. It provides exactly the grounds upon which that kind of information can be withheld. That is the formulation and development of Government policy and it is prejudicial to the effective conduct of public affairs. It is precisely those blanket exemptions in the current Freedom of Information Bill that make it impossible to take seriously the protestations of openness. I hope that those points can be remedied at some stage.

The sky has not fallen in because we have the minutes of the Monetary Policy Committee of the Bank of England and it is possible to have routine reporting of major meetings between Ministers and quango chiefs to Select Committees. It is possible also to develop something akin to confirmation hearings, so that Select Committees can look at those whom Ministers are intending to appoint to some of these major positions. These bodies are exercising extraordinarily important public functions on our behalf and on behalf of Parliament, and Parliament should at least be entitled to have a look at these people, nothing more. It should not be involved in the appointment process, but should simply have a chance to look at the people, invite them to a meeting, give them a bit of a going over and make sure that they are acceptable. That would be a huge infusion of parliamentary accountability into the land of quangocrats. It is something that we should develop and I am disappointed that the Government were not more responsive to the suggestion. It has been suggested also in the recent report from the Liaison Committee, representing all the Chairs of Select Committees, as something that the Select Committees should now be developing. The Government will need to think again.

The Select Committees should also be informed that the so-called prior options reviews that explore whether quangos should be established and the quinquennial reviews that explore whether quangos should continue to exist, or in what form they should exist, are taking place so that they have a chance to have an input.

Mr. Lansley: I should like to ask a question about the Committee's proposals on confirmation hearings. There is an argument that there would be some prejudice to the proposal that those whom Ministers are minded to appoint to the head of an executive NDPB should appear before Select Committees because, at that stage, they could not speak for the policy of the organisation or what they would do for it. The Committees would focus on that person's past and suitability. It is, therefore, not a policy issue so much as a personality issue. Is it really the job of a Select Committee to be second-guessing the Minister on the personality? It might be better to bring the head of an NDPB before the Committee at a fairly early moment to examine the intentions in terms of policy.

Dr. Wright: I was not sure whether I agreed with the hon. Gentleman's earlier point, but I know that I do not agree with him on this. The Committee would be seeking to explore whether a prospective appointee seems well equipped for the task. It is as simple as that. It is not a judgment about personal characteristics, but a judgment about whether someone has got the background, the expertise and the approach to undertake the public task that he is being asked to perform. It does not conflict at all with the idea that inpost this person will come back and be regularly interrogated by a Select Committee, but it is a chance to ensure that at the time of the appointment, the individual has to run the gauntlet of Parliament. If we are serious about parliamentary accountability, we must be serious about exploring the mechanisms to strengthen it. It is easy to talk about it in a rhetorical way; we do so all the time. The problem arises when we try to make something of it. We now have a series of

[Dr. Wright]

proposals designed to strengthen Parliament in relation to the Executive, and we are talking about one of them. If we believe that Parliament is an important enterprise, we should explore the various suggestions with interest.

Another aspect is accountability of quangos to the general stakeholders, including local communities. Some quangos are trying harder to be more accountable and responsive to their general stakeholders than others and I pay tribute to them. I was struck some years ago by a study that sought to establish whether members of elected or non-elected bodies were more responsive to their users or consumers. It assessed accountability in both types of bodies. What alarmed me about this reputable academic study of around 20 years ago was that in many respects the non-elected people took accountability far more seriously than the elected ones, who simply assumed that there were no issues of legitimacy or accountability about their role—after all, they had been elected. That was the end of the argument. People who had not been elected took greater steps to prove their legitimacy by activity.

An interesting issue emerges from that study. The task is to make both elected and non-elected bodies have a sense of continuing accountability. As I said, some quangos are doing well and others less well. We have to encourage those who are doing less well to do better for their community of stakeholders. For local public spending bodies, an annual scrutiny meeting with the local authorities in their areas should be regarded as a fundamental part of their activity. We need to build in those connections.

Appointment is my final subject. It is important, even though I shall not say much about it. Whatever else is true of quangos, the fact that they are appointed bodies is their raison d'etre: they are not elected, but appointed. People ask who these people are, who appoints them, what sort of people are appointed and whether the system is fair. As the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) will know, that was explored by the Nolan committee in its first inquiry because of allegations made in the previous Parliament about the impropriety of many quango appointments. We now have the Nolan rules. For executive quangos, the Nolan rules are supplied to appointments, particularly in the health service, which was the scene of much of the earlier controversy.

How we appoint people to appointed bodies poses huge issues. I argued in the Nolan committee that we should take as many appointments as possible away from Ministers and establish an appointments commission. I could not see the reason why, if civil servants were appointed through a civil service commission route, we could not appoint people who preside over quangos through a similarly independent appointments commission route. I did not persuade the Nolan committee of that. It did not recommend a public appointments commission, but it did recommend a public appointments commissioner. The point was to enable Ministers to retain the power of appointment, but to have a monitor—the public appointments commissioner—who would stalk the system to ensure that it worked properly. There were to be independent members of appointments panels, and the public appointments commissioner would make sure that the system was working properly.

Ministers in the previous Government were accused of putting their cronies on public bodies and Nolan had to explore that accusation, but if Ministers now are charged with doing that, they can claim to be doing it under the Nolan rules. That will be a good defence; it will provide Ministers with an answer to those rather difficult questions about who they are appointing and why. It is important, however, that the Nolan rules are known to be working properly.

A report is about to be published by Dame Rennie Fritchie. She is the most admirable public appointments commissioner, and she has been making inquiries on the subject. We should be genuinely troubled if she finds that the Nolan rules are not working sufficiently well. If Ministers can still appoint people for reasons other than merit, it would be an extremely serious development that should cause us to revise our view of how effective the rules are. We look forward with some concern and a great deal of interest to Dame Rennie's report, which will be published next week.

I would simply say—it is what the Select Committee says in its report—that it is time to revisit the argument on whether an independent appointments commission should do many of those jobs. I do not understand why Ministers have to make a raft of public appointments, although I realise that they can nominate people. However, if the Prime Minister can set up an independent appointments commission to appoint Cross-Bench members of the House of Lords, and if the Wakeham commission says that a wholly independent appointments commission should appoint all members of the House of Lords, apart from the small number of elected members, I see no reason why we cannot have an appointments commission to appoint those who sit on quangos. That question will surface again next week, and I urge the Government to consider it.

I commend the Select Committee's report. It contains some meaty provisions that will ensure that the system works better than it does now. I believe that quangos are here to stay. We should build on their virtues and try to overcome their vices. That will need better co-ordination, less fragmentation, and more accountability and transparency. That is where the Committee's report will lead.

3.8 pm

Mr. Norman Baker (Lewes): I congratulate the hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright), Chairman of the Public Administration Committee, on the Committee's report, which is good, and on the clear way in which he presented its conclusions to the Chamber this afternoon.

I agree with much of what the hon. Gentleman said. He began by talking about the word "quango" which, he rightly says, is a household word. It became a dirty word in the 1980s and early 1990s, which led to the sudden, overnight introduction of the non-departmental public body—the NDPB, which is an unattractive acronym. At least the word "quango" rolled off the tongue; NDPB does not. It may have been no coincidence that that collection of letters was chosen to replace quango. We have a long tradition of changing names. For instance, Windscale became Sellafield.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Mr. Graham Stringer): Liberals became Liberal Democrats.

Mr. Baker: That was an improvement.

As I said, quangos became NDPBs. I hope that I can delve into the history of quangos as it is relevant to the present. Their title became a dirty word because they were overtly used as a way of bypassing local government. When I was a local council leader, as other hon. Members who are present may have been, councils were predominantly controlled by Labour and the Liberal Democrats, but the Conservative Government had a big majority. Local councillors wanted to do things that did not find favour with that centralising Government, for whom the answer was not to respect the tradition of local government and to leave such matters to be dealt with locally, but to try to bypass councils through the removal of powers and their transfer to non-elected bodies.

It was not only the transfer of power that was offensive, although power was removed from some councils, which carried on with fewer functions. For example, the function of checking abattoirs was transferred from environmental health officers to the Meat Hygiene Service. We all know that that led to a diminished, more expensive and less credible service, at least in the short term. Some councils, including the Greater London council and the metropolitan councils, were abolished altogether. The most insidious element of the quangos, which explains why they have acquired their bad name and retain it with the public, was their use for the overt bypassing of councils and the appointment to them of people who were to a large degree sympathetic to the Government of the day. In other words, quango members were place people appointed on behalf of the then Conservative Government. Interestingly, quangos were usually strongest where the then Government were weakest, and the place men and women—they were mostly men—were present in force.

In 1994, before I entered the House, I conducted a study on the matter as leader of a district council. I discovered that in Wales, which is not the Conservatives' strongest area, 34 per cent. of Welsh Office expenditure was made through quangos. A huge percentage of public money was spent in that way on functions that, in many cases, could and should have been of local councils. I mentioned place men: 37 per cent. of people appointed to quangos dealing with Welsh issues were clearly identified as Tory supporters—there may have been more—and 16 of them did not live in Wales but felt able to deal with Welsh issues. In 1994, 14 of the 38 largest quangos had chairmen or chief executives with senior roles in businesses that donated funds to the Conservative party. At that time, 44 Members of the House of Lords popped up on quangos. Of those appointees, 31 were Conservatives, 10 were Labour supporters, three were cross-Benchers and none was a Liberal Democrat. That hardly reflected the popular vote or even the composition of the flawed House of Lords. It is clear why quangos acquired a bad name: they were used to bypass local councils, reflect Tory policy and deliver that policy where the Tories could not win local elections.

At a time when local councillors were not given the financial support that is now rightly awarded to them, it became increasingly disturbing that people employed on quangos were not subject to similar restrictions. Indeed, such restrictions still do not apply. In 1994, the part-time chairman of the Horserace Totalisator Board received £92,000 a year and the part-time chairman of the parole board received £45,000. However, councillors received £600 to £700 a year in allowances, in many cases for doing a job that involved managing a multi-million pound budget, albeit a budget that was diminishing.

That leads me to accountability, which was mentioned by the Chairman of the Select Committee. The rules did not apply equally. One would have thought that successive Governments would have ensured that unelected bodies established to deliver public functions and spending public money were subject to closer scrutiny than local councils, which—whatever their faults—can at least be turfed out every four years if they fail to deliver the electorate's wishes. The rules that apply to councils do not apply to quangos. For example, there is no surcharge on quango members as there is on local councillors if they misuse public money. That seems wrong to me.

I have not carried out an analysis, but I have anecdotal evidence that the Conservative place men and women on quangos are to some extent being replaced by Labour place men and women. That is happening in Sussex. That serious point brings the system into disrepute. I entirely agree with the Committee's sensible recommendation calling for an independent appointments commission. That must be followed through if we are to have confidence in the quango system.

The Government say that this is a subject ultimately of ministerial accountability. There are some wonderful Ministers in the Government, who work hard, are dedicated, do their best for the public and are in general superhuman beings, but how can any Minister of whatever party possibly know at any one time what is going on in all those thousands of quangos that exist across the country? How can she or he possibly be in control? How can she or he have any real accountability for those issues except in name only? The only way they can have accountability frankly is by issuing general guidance or by firefighting when a problem arises and they have to deal with it. That is the only accountability there is; there can be no other. Is a body—spending in some cases millions of pounds—to be accountable only through a single elected person? London mayors will have budgets which may or may not be substantial, but at least they will be subject to quite a lot of external scrutiny.

Individual Ministers have numerous other functions and constituency duties, and they cannot possibly have anything other than the most cursory oversight of all those quangos. Local councils are subject to a set of tight rules in terms of surcharging, the use of public money and statutory duties. The same rules of accountability are not applied to quangos and consequently there are differences in terms of legitimacy.

How does this impact on the ground? What is at issue is how this affects individuals in our constituencies. I thought of three examples on my way to this Chamber. Local councils have always taken an interest in economic development and have powers to undertake certain functions to help the economic prosperity of their areas. We have created training and enterprise councils, such as Sussex Enterprise in my region, which

[Mr. Baker]

are not accountable and are based solely on business representation. When Sussex Enterprise was set up, only two representatives were allowed from the local councils, one from West Sussex and one from East Sussex, but under a rule made by the previous Government those two representatives could not be councillors. That is the irony of it. The only people specifically excluded by law from being on that board were elected councillors. If that is not bizarre, I do not know what is. Of course, that body met and conducted its business in private. More to the point, the decisions that it reached were often at variance with the democratic decisions reached by the local councils. I do not want to criticise Sussex Enterprise, which in many ways does a good job, but it has a particular perception about what the economy of Sussex needs. Its perception is based on the A23 corridor, which it feels is the appropriate mechanism for economic development. As it is a Sussex-wide body it looks at East and West Sussex together whereas East and West Sussex county councils believe that the economies of the two halves are very different, as indeed they are. All the Government's figures demonstrate that West Sussex is much richer than East Sussex, therefore the approach needed is different. However, that is not the approach of Sussex Enterprise, so it is in some ways subverting the democratic wish of the elected county councils and district councils in that area.

That was brought home to many of my constituents a few years ago when the Victoria hospital in Lewes, which was run by an NHS trust, and a local library, which was the responsibility of the county council, were threatened with closure. When people heard that the library in Ringmer was to close, petitions were organised and letters were written to councillors. The county council meeting was packed with constituents who said, "If you shut this library, we're going to vote you out at the next election." The county councillors said, "Okay. We can't take this. Look at the number of people here." The council backed off in the face of opposition and the library remains open.

When the closure of Victoria hospital was suggested, people ran around asking, "Who is responsible? Where are they?" We had to crowbar trust representatives into talking to the press. They did not want to know. The decision was taken behind closed doors. The trust has much improved, but those two incidents displayed the stark difference between the council and the NHS trust. In the council, there was clear, public accountability and the decision was easy to reverse, but in the NHS trust, the decision, which would affect a key public service, was taken by a shadowy group of people, without public knowledge, behind closed doors.

Will that continue? The proposed national park for the south downs has a great deal of public support. We all want the south downs to receive the best possible protection, but local people—both those in favour of and those against the national park—are worried that decisions about planning matters, which are taken by democratically elected councillors in open session, will be taken by the new body. The people who are not councillors will be more remote from the sites to which their decisions relate. That is a genuine concern. The clear principle is that any person or persons who spend public money should be clearly and openly accountable for their actions. The Select Committee appears to share that view, but the principle does not apply now.

Instead of being elected, let us suppose that we were appointed by the great and the good—perhaps by the Queen's representatives who would choose us according to our good deeds on the basis of grace and favour. Suppose we were reappointed if we behaved ourselves for five years and said the right things to those who made the appointments; suppose we met in secret without members of the public or press; suppose there was no *Hansard* to record what was said; suppose there were no agendas or published minutes; suppose the press and the media could not find out what Parliament was doing with public money, but had to write to the Secretary of State who might, or might not, answer questions. That would be intolerable and we would not put up with it. Yet, that is the situation with many quangos that spend our money in the public interest.

Why can we not have openness and accountability? The Select Committee's Chairman rightly said that freedom of information legislation will not deliver on that. I am afraid that it will provide little freedom and even less information. The Government do many good things, but Home Office Bills are not very liberal, as we saw last night. We are worried that information will not be available. The Freedom of Information Bill has been roundly criticised on all sides. Since the former Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the right hon. Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark), did a fantastic job in producing the White Paper, the Bill has been filleted out. As soon as he produced the White Paper, he was sacked for being too radical. He is the first Minister that I know of to have been sacked for delivering a Government manifesto pledge. We have a pale shadow of that White Paper. It will not open up quangos. The Bill is flawed.

If we want to act quickly, why not see whether the legislation that applies to councils can be applied to quangos? Let us have the same rules and a level playing field. In 1960, Baroness Thatcher introduced her first Bill, which opened up councils effectively. Why do we not apply that principle straight away to quangos? I see no reason for bodies that spend public money not to be accountable in an open and democratic way. At present they are not.

I hope that the Government will take the issues that I have discussed seriously. I do not want to be entirely negative, although I feel strongly about the matter. The Government have listened and some of their responses are sensible and seem to go in the right direction. Nevertheless, they must deal with some key issues if they are serious about the matter, and one is the independent appointments commission. We cannot have patronage in the hands of Ministers, whether for appointments to the House of Lords or for appointments to quangos. We must remove patronage and the Prime Minister is right to want to do so with respect to the House of Lords.

Mr. Lansley: The Select Committee is not specific about the desirable extent of the remit of the independent appointments commission that it proposes. It has left that for further consideration. The hon. Gentleman seems to suggest that all public bodies—all

quangos, so called—should be subject to an independent appointments commission. Is that his party's view?

Mr. Baker: It is certainly our view that the independent appointments commission should go a long way towards being responsible for appointments. Whether it should make every relevant appointment may be a matter for debate, but it should certainly appoint those who would appoint individual members. Ministers should not have the right to pick and choose people who have given their party good service, as often happens now.

The issue is a serious one relating to freedom of information, public accountability and the proper use of public money. I congratulate the Select Committee on a useful report and hope that the Government, who have shown signs of progress in the right direction, will treat the recommendations seriously—particularly those on accountability.

3.27 pm

Mr. Jon Trickett (Hemsworth): I join the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) in congratulating the Select Committee on Public Administration on a fascinating and comprehensive report. I am slightly disappointed that, although the House of Commons authorities have found time for this important debate, hon. Members are, in the event, preoccupied with other matters. Notwithstanding that, I hope that we shall still be able to air many of the issues that would have been debated had more hon. Members attended.

I want to draw on my experience of local quangos to find some general lessons. The Chairman of the Select Committee may well be right in describing quangos as to some degree an inevitable product of the modern political process, but I am reluctant to accept that. As has been noted, many were the result of deliberate political action, particularly by the previous Administration, especially for local provision.

The debate is timely, because we are more than half way through a Parliament—past the fulcrum point—and no doubt beginning to think about the next election and beyond. The Government are committed to modernising the country. It does not surprise me that tasks other than tackling the proliferation of quangos have been given priority. I hope that more time will be found, perhaps after the next general election, to tackle them more seriously and comprehensively.

I have, for my sins, been a member of two quangos. When I was a councillor and leader of Leeds city council, I served on the health authority. That was a very large body and was in the process of reviewing all the health services that were provided to 800,000 or so people. I sat on the review body, which became known as the Leeds review. When I moved to an adjacent authority, I discovered that many of our actions in Leeds were affecting health provision in my area in a way that I would not now welcome. We planned the future of health services for many people in West Yorkshire.

I also sat for two or three years on the Leeds development corporation, which was allegedly designed to bring regeneration to part of the city. It had the most swingeing powers, including the power legally to expropriate land. When the development corporations were set up, land, buildings and other assets were transferred without compensation from public bodies that operated within the boundaries of the development corporations. Leeds development corporation also had swingeing powers to conduct compulsory purchases of private sector land. It did not hesitate to use either its powers to transfer land that it felt it might want to use from public bodies, especially the council, or its powers for compulsory purchase—it took away properties from on-going, profitable businesses.

I have described the background of the two bodies on which I served in order to suggest the scope of their acitivities. I sat on both bodies for about two and a half years, but it has always been a mystery to me why I was appointed. There had been a tussle between the then Government and the council about my original nomination—the Government refused to agree to my appointment to the development corporation. Although I was subsequently appointed, no one has explained to me why I was refused in the first place or subsequently appointed. A similarly mysterious process was involved with the health authority.

During those two and a half years, we spent millions of pounds, changed the lives of many people in the city and expropriated land. As hon. Members might imagine, I dissented from many of those decisions. Only two or three recipients of the services that the organisations provided contacted me. As an elected councillor, I was responsible for 15,000 people, and two or three people at least contacted me daily. As an elected representative, I was under continual and consistent pressure in relation to the services that the council provided, and every four years we had to submit ourselves for re-election. Those who served on the quangos did not have to do so. I was well known in the area and people knew that I was on the bodies, but no one contacted me in that regard. Pressures were put on me and other members of the board—I assume that that applies to members of quangos throughout the country—by practitioners, the providers of services, bureaucrats, clinicians, planners and experts in economic regeneration, but not by citizens, recipients of services, patients, ill people or their relatives.

Inevitably, that coloured the nature of the decision-making process. Decisions were taken on the advice of professional officers, who were employed by agencies. I did not feel that I had an active relationship with the communities to which we were meant to provide services, which was profoundly unsatisfactory. I do not doubt that that is the nature of quangos and remains so today, notwithstanding the sea change in attitudes towards quangos that has taken place since the election.

I was elected in a by-election and subsequently moved to Wakefield, when I discovered another face of quangos. Two local health trusts took a decision to unify and eventually close one of the two local hospitals, which would lead to services deteriorating. Many people contacted me and, as their Member of Parliament, I had the privilege of presenting a 60,000-name petition to the House. The quangos, the health authority and the health trusts resisted dialogue and interaction with citizens and Members of Parliament. The merger went ahead even though 60,000-odd people had signed a petition and many had written individually, so we are now facing the consequences of the possible closure of one of our hospitals.

[Mr. Jon Trickett]

The merger of the two health trusts and the subsequent decison to close a hospital was not an act of citizenry, as I have never heard an ordinary citizen or patient say that we need fewer doctors, nurses, hospitals, beds and so on. However, many clinicians and others argue that case, especially those who are health service officials. Professional pressure and expertise largely determine the pattern of service offered by quangos to communities. I do not wish to dismiss that, as it is an important aspect of the decision-making process. Pressure from the citizenry is far less significant in determining such patterns. That position prevents a proper strategic approach to service provision and is to be lamented.

Mr. Lansley: The hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) gave examples relating to health service decisions—particularly trust decisions—in their own areas. They stressed the benefits of accountability through local government as distinct from accountability exercised through Ministers, who would ultimately take such decisions. Is the hon. Gentleman criticising ministerial accountability within the health service and does he want local government accountability for local health services?

Mr. Trickett: I shall attempt to address that as I develop my argument.

There is a case for a structural review of many of the services that I am discussing. It may be necessary to introduce local accountability through councils, and regional and national government structures to bring quangos under control.

Mr. Baker: Does the hon. Gentleman think that it is inconsistent that social services departments should be run by local authorities when closely linked health issues are handled by central Government?

Mr. Trickett: I accept that entirely. There is ethical and philosophical pressure, as well as pressure from citizens, for the seamless provision of care services, especially for the elderly. Social services departments under close democratic control are increasingly being encouraged to integrate with health service provision. Different patterns of managerial structure and accountability are creating an imbalance in service provision that must be corrected. It would be sensible to bring those parts of the health service dealing with that matter closer to local authorities and under democractic control.

I shall discuss the position in Wakefield and the quangos providing services there as the spending of such relatively unaccountable bodies is startling. I have not looked at all the quangos, but have selected two or three for reasons that will become clear. Wakefield health authority spends £218 million a year, which is then disbursed in various ways. Health care used to be provided by local communities and I see no reason why that cannot be the case in future. Indeed, parts of health provision are already under democractic local control through local councils.

The Police Authority, which nowadays is a quango, spends £301 million in West Yorkshire. Wakefield TEC spends £8 million. Sadly, it is to go, but it will not be brought under council control. The council has an economic regeneration function. It will be subsumed into a larger body, a skills and learning council, and will be based in Bradford. With no disrespect to my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Mr. Leslie)—his constituency is part of the Bradford metropolitan area—I find that a ludicrous decision. What a former coal-mining area such as Hemsworth has in common with a wool textile area such as Bradford I do not know. I regret the decision to set up a larger quango that is even more remote from the people.

It is not always apparent how the £8 million a year that Wakefield TEC spends is directed towards improving regeneration. Wakefield college spends £17.5 million a year. They are large providers of services. It is true that some of the board members are appointed in a transparent, although not very accountable, way, but in some cases it is difficult to find out how they are appointed. The bodies appear to be self-renewing public bodies, with no accountability. The college appears able to appoint members of the board of governors in an on-going way. To some extent, the TEC is a mystery. I do not wish to single out Wakefield TEC or other Wakefield institutions as being better or worse than others anywhere else; I am simply trying to exemplify my point.

I have approached each of those bodies in the past few days and asked them to give the names and locations—not specific addresses—of their board members, who provide services to all the citizens in my constituency. As hon. Members may expect—they may be surprised or may even deplore it—I have met with reluctance to provide my office with background information about each of the members. That is in stark contrast to democratically elected members, whether members of the House of Commons or members of the local council, who are accessible to local communities through the democratic process, because, by virtue of being an elected member, one is accountable and accessible.

The regional development agency, Yorkshire Forward, is spending £100 million a year in Yorkshire and the Humber region, as we are obliged to call the area where we live. I have never met anybody who said that they were a Yorkshire and Humber man or woman, whether they be Yorkshiremen or people from Lincolnshire. That is a side issue, although it is not to be totally dismissed and smiled at, because we live in real rather than imaginary communities that have been created to suit boundaries that somebody somewhere has decided to impose on us.

No doubt Yorkshire Forward is excellently led. I know many of the people on the board, whom I know to be of high repute, as are all those that I have encountered on the boards of the organisations that I mentioned earlier. However, they are accountable and inaccessible. It is very difficult to get hold of the chair of Yorkshire Forward.

Yorkshire Forward is a regional development agency and has decided that Yorkshire and the Humber region should be rebranded. A marketing exercise is being carried out, which may be useful because we are all competing in a global market for inward investment. Evidence suggests that some capital is footloose and may be attracted to one region rather than another, but that is debateable. The marketing exercise will cost just over £300,000 and a questionnaire has been sent out. As

a true-born Yorkshireman, I have never noticed a crisis of identity in Yorkshire. Characters such as Denis Healey, Dickie Bird, Fred Truman—

Mr. Lansley: The Leader of the Opposition.

Mr. Trickett: The Leader of the Opposition.

Mr. Baker: Geoffrey Boycott.

Mr. Trickett: One could go on. They are not people who suffer from identity crises. Yorkshire people have a strong sense of identity.

Dr. Tony Wright: Has my hon. Friend heard it said that one can always tell a Yorkshireman, but one cannot tell him very much?

Mr. Trickett: That is a valid comment and it might apply to some of those just mentioned. Bernard Ingham is another. He is a sterling Yorkshireman, but did not always listen when points were being made to him.

Rebranding Yorkshire is an extraordinary idea. If the regional development agency was under democratic control and had to submit itself to election, I wonder whether it would set about the bizarre process of rebranding. I understand the argument for marketing and branding Yorkshire, but giving it a new brand is a surprising exercise.

As an interested Yorkshireman, I read the questionnaire carefully and thought about filling it in. Question nine, which may be the most extraordinary part of the exercise, asks the people of Yorkshire to identify any personality who might become a good ambassador for Yorkshire and the Humber region today. We are supposed to think of a name, fill it in and send it off. It is important to have regional structures, but I doubt whether an elected assembly for the region would ask the public, through a questionnaire that is sent out randomly and which can be accessed on the internet, to identify someone who could be Mr. Ms or Mrs. Yorkshire. If the board of the regional assembly were democratically elected, whoever was elected as the first minister would be the ambassador and advocate for the region and we would not be spending a substantial sum of money—£300,000—to rebrand Yorkshire, which is strange, or to find an ambassador for Yorkshire, which is bizarre.

Yorkshire Forward is falling into the trap that I described earlier. Board members are not in an active relationship with the communities for which they are providing services. They are in an active relationship only with the other members of the board and, more importantly, the professional officers serving the board, and someone has said that we need to market Yorkshire.

Many of the services that I have described, such as organisations for economic regeneration, the police force and health services, could be restructured and brought under democratic control, especially if we could establish a new democratic tier of regional government. I imagine that, in a second term, we would begin to tackle the quango state rigorously and comprehensively, to disassemble or deconstruct—whatever the jargon is—those elements that could be deconstructed. They could then be put back together under democratic control.

I hope that the Minister will say that the Government are prepared to examine the quangos, case by case, to decide whether they could be placed back in local government. That would reinvigorate local democracy more than anything else. Instead of tinkering with the structure of councils and setting up cabinets and elected mayors, we should give local government back some of its functions, because that would encourage more people to vote for local government.

3.51 pm

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the debate, which I have enjoyed. As other hon. Members have said, it was particularly enjoyable to hear the Chairman of the Public Administration Committee introduce the subject, as that helped to set the scene and to explain the Committee's recommendations. Happily, they were not too many or too detailed, unlike those in many Select Committee reports. A Select Committee should hit some key notes, and the Public Administration Committee did that well.

The hon. Members for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright) and for Lewes (Mr. Baker) partly set the scene, but there is a context to the debate that has not been dealt with. I suspect that I may fall foul of the hon. Member for Cannock Chase, but there is a numbers game behind this issue. It is not irrelevant, because it provides context, and people focus on it because it has been a way to get a handle on what goes on inside the quangocracy, which is otherwise impenetrable.

The numbers game is important because we need to understand what has happened. From 1979 to 1997, the Conservatives reduced the number of non-departmental public bodies from 2,167 to 1,128. The hon. Member for Cannock Chase made an oblique reference to the fact that many bodies that had been under local elected control were given appointed status during that time. Schools that are grant-maintained rather than maintained by local education authorities are a principal example of that. I will not engage in the pros and cons of that argument, but it is reasonable.

Examining the quangocracy is rather like trying to get hold of mercury. We all know the phenomenon whereby one examines something to quantify it and targets a number, only to find that the target has moved. The thing that one was looking for will take on a different shape, and I am afraid that that has occurred since the May 1997 election. The difficulty in the past was associated with the larger number of local public spending bodies, but now the Government have reduced the number of advisory non-departmental public bodies. Admittedly the reduction has not been large—the figure is 70 or thereabouts. At the same time, however, many task forces have been created.

The hon. Member for Cannock Chase prefaced the debate by saying that it might touch on task forces, and I will follow up that point. Two aspects worry me. The Government moved away from the process that had emerged for scrutinising NDPBs. That may or may not have been adequate, but at least it was established that a significant number of NDPBs were subject to the Nolan rules for appointment and fell under a scrutiny system that worked through the public bodies report and other means—but the task forces do not fall under the framework to the same extent.

[Mr. Andrew Lansley]

The second difficulty was that, because the Government sought to target NDPBs as a definition—if only one definition—of quangos, it was in their interest for people not to know too much about the number of review bodies and task forces that had been created. The Neill committee was explicit in the review of its first report that on the basis of written answers in the House of Lords between February 1998 to November 1999, it was impossible to determine how many review groups and task forces existed. At that point, the Minister of State, Cabinet Office came clean about how many there were—although only in response to, rather than in anticipation of, a democratic audit. That created a real source of concern, which is relevant to our debate.

As we are trying to improve the scrutiny, accountability and openness in the formal structure of NDPBs, it would be damaging if a separate set of bodies could come into the orbit of government without being subject even to the scrutiny that has been applied to the quango state up to now. The Government are, of course, keen to diminish the difficulties associated with the task forces by referring to them simply as a means of expanding sources of advice to Ministers. Expressed in those terms, why should Ministers not have the sources of advice that they want? But there are many underlying problems.

The first is that they are narrowly—not just politically—chosen. Of course Ministers must have a degree of freedom to choose advisers who have an understanding of the political perspective from which Ministers operate: but appointments are often more narrowly chosen than that. There is often partisan partiality. Secondly, the process is exclusive. Bringing people into task forces may expand the sources of advice, but the people on those bodies attain an exclusive position in providing advice to Ministers. By definition, influence accumulated by one group of people over policy decisions is to the detriment of another group.

What other groups are losing influence over the process? I fear that the representational bodies—those with a genuine and legitimate representational role as interest groups, pressure groups or elected people—are losing out in providing advice to Ministers. With representational bodies, the process is more open. More material is published as responses to White Papers, Green Papers and so forth than when the issues are taken up through advisory memorandums from task forces to Ministers.

Dr. Tony Wright: I was right to say that the hon. Gentleman would talk about task forces, but there is a problem with his argument. If he read the democratic audit report, which is the only comprehensive account of the full range of task forces, he would see that the initial criticism ended up as praise. It was seen as a far more open way for Governments to take advice than a closed policy process—precisely the opposite of what the hon. Gentleman said. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman should be arguing strongly to ensure the publication of the reports of task forces. The better regulation task force insisted on that from the beginning, which takes us back to transparency and accountability.

Mr. Lansley: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, but he will not be surprised that my purpose in paying tribute to the democratic audit report was not to endorse its arguments and conclusions. That work, most importantly, exposed the extent of the issue. I do not endorse the conclusions that were reached and I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman takes the line that he does. The merit of a task force does not lie in the fact that it is a better system than the private closed policy-making system, without reference to openness and scrutiny.

4 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

4.15 pm

On resuming—

Mr. Lansley: Before the Division, I was responding to the hon. Member for Cannock Chase about task forces and disputing whether they were desirable because they were more inclusive of external advice than a process that was entirely internal to Government Departments. However, we should test them not by that measure, but against their lack of openness and scrutiny because of the Government making so little information available, the potential for conflict of interest, the potential for partiality in appointments and the lack of scrutiny of those appointments under the Nolan rules. There are better ways in which to undertake such matters. Indeed, in some respects the conventional process by which Ministers seek advice from representational bodies in open consultation through Green Papers and White Papers is preferable to a system in which some decisions are not exposed to the same extent or are prejudiced in the policy-making process by the exclusive opportunities for people to act as advisers.

There is a potential accountability issue concerning Ministers relying on the advice of advisory bodies and distancing themselves from the consequences of the decisions. Accountability issues should track back simply and directly to elected persons. As for reaching different conclusions about what remedies should be used, illustrative of that argument is that the public regard the accountability with which they hold councillors as more simple and direct than that in respect of decisions made by NHS trusts, especially on closures. We all know that closure decisions are surrounded with mechanisms to try to make them accountable to the community, such as health councils, Ministers and so on, but that does not mean that they are undertstandable. The confusion and lack of transparency—admittedly, a jargon word—that suffuses the task forces and review bodies set up by the Government since 1997 is highly regrettable and I hope that the Government will move away from taking such action.

I refer now to the growth of the quango state since 1997. The numbers game is significant because, as the hon. Member for Cannock Chase said, we should not target it. There has been limited success in the past, in

that such targeting allowed some of the characteristics of the quango state to re-emerge in other ways and to reconstitute itself like a chameleon to avoid that. The underlying issues concern the extent to which executive or policy-making activities are required. One mechanism by which a quango state could be reduced would be to limit the extent to which it could execute, tax and spend. If we cut that back over time as a proportion of the total activity of our nation, we shall reduce the opportunities for the quango state to assert itself.

The second issue is whether the functions are conducted nationally or locally. There is a tension between the operation of quangos at local level, and local democracy. However, it is a somewhat creative tension. It is one of the things that best constrains quangos and drives us, if we are responsive, towards having fewer appointed bodies and being more responsive to elected bodies. If activity is undertaken at local rather than national level and if Ministers exercise powers and control more and local government control less, the temptation to use appointed bodies will grow. The temptation to use their regional and local offshoots will follow. Therefore, there is an underlying political debate, which was clearly in the minds of hon. Members who spoke earlier. If one goes down the path of devolving responsibilities to local government, rather than retaining them for central Government, one will, by extension, limit the opportunity for quangos to emerge.

Now we come to the third issue. If things are managed substantially by central Government or its agencies, or by quangos, how is the process to work better? My purpose is not so much to offer a series of solutions as to comment on those in the Committee's report, which helps us think about the problems.

At the risk of offending the Chairman of the Select Committee, I will start with some points with which I do not agree. First, I do not agree that regionalism and regional structures present a good mechanism for scrutinising quangos. I understand that the argument was that 410 local authorities would find it extraordinarily difficult to make each quango accountable to them. The response to that should not be, "Let's draw the responsibility for holding all those functions to account away from local authorities. Let's take away the responsiveness to local conditions. We shall not let people who understand what is going on apply that understanding to quangos. Let's do it all regionally." If one follows that path, one ends up with a regional tier of government with a more distant set of institutions, and local authorities that feel that they have not only a limited function, but virtually no control over many of the decisions being made.

A good example is planning legislation. It is important that the regional structures are created by local authorities and that those structures have a derivative function, rather than superseding the responsibilities of local authorities. Within planning policy making, we should devolve those responsibilities as far as possible to local authorities, so that they can make genuine decisions. In the final analysis, regional bodies, Government offices, planning inspectors and the Secretary of State are more likely than local authorities to make decisions. Without dwelling on individual planning decisions, it is only too obvious to most of us that that fact has made it increasingly easy for local authorities to play a political game in relation to planning decisions, rather than exercise the responsibility of deciding what developments should take place and where. It is damaging to local democracy that councillors feel that they are not taking the ultimate decisions, and that they are simply making a populist response locally, rather than balancing the long-term needs of their area. I am afraid that taking decisions away from local authorities and setting up regional structures will only exacerbate that undesirable trend.

The second respect in which I disagree with the Select Committee's report relates to joined-up government. That is not a term with which I am ever comfortable. In any case, I thought that it had been superseded. The hon. Member for Cannock Chase seemed to have a term, although I could not bring myself to use it. Was it "joined-up-ness"? I thought that, because the phrase "joined-up" did not work exactly, "wiring it up" had superseded it, and that the performance and innovation unit at the Cabinet Office had decided the time had come to tell people how to do it. As ever with the current Administration, if at first something does not succeed, give it a different name and try again. "Wiring it up" seems to be the thing.

In his evidence, Professor Marquand quite rightly pointed to the difficulties of trying to connect decisions inside Government if one disaggregates responsibilities out to quangos. The proper response to that is not necessarily to say that all these decisions should be held at the centre, but is to recognise how policy is interconnected. This brings one back to the issue of localisation, because at a local level the interaction of these decisions can be seen more readily.Therefore that points once again to trying to avoid wherever possible quangos having local arms that are not responsive to local needs.

Even at national level, the responsibility for connecting these policies together lies with Ministers. It does not lie with superseding the role of quangos. If a quango is established for a valid purpose—the hon. Gentleman set out what some of those purposes might be—the point of it is set against a specific framework of policy and, indeed, of supply for public expenditure purposes, for specific purposes. If those purposes do not connect or properly co-ordinate with other bodies, the fault lies not in the quangos or the structures themselves, but in the adequacy and understanding of Ministers of the policy and instructions—the executive responsibilities—that they give to those bodies. Too often one of the problems of quangos is that we tend to focus on their effectiveness or otherwise, in managerial terms. We focus too little on the underlying responsibility, which delegation to quangos does not absolve, of identifying what the purpose of a quango is, giving it policy, giving it supply and being accountable for the outcome of that activity.

Another point on which I do not agree, particularly with the hon. Member for Lewes, is the extent to which independent appointments should be made to quangos. Just as Ministers are fundamentally responsible for the policy and the public spending which flows into non-departmental public bodies, so Ministers are responsible for the quality of the appointments they make to deliver that in those bodies.

Mr. Baker: Would the hon. Gentlemen be in favour, then, at least in the interim period until it is revised, of

[Mr. Baker]

appointments to the House of Lords being made on the Prime Minister's recommendation or by an independent body?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Gwyneth Dunwoody): Order. Briefly.

Mr. Lansley: The hon. Gentleman tempts me.

For these purposes, I will simply make a distinction. It is not the responsibility of Ministers to determine the output of the House; it is the responsibility of Ministers to secure policy and effectiveness in public spending through non-departmental public bodies. Any view I might take about appointments in quangos is not transferable to a view about appointments in the House of Lords.

To revert to non-departmental public bodies and appointments, for that reason I would be very careful about the independent element in appointments. The independent element is about propriety and securing impartiality, not about securing the characteristics of a person who is appointed chairman, chief executive or board member of a quango. It is more important for Select Committees, if they are considering going down the path of confirmation hearings, as it were, for them genuinely to be confirmation hearings, involving confirmation of a decision made by a Minister, not necessarily when the Minister is minded to make it, but perhaps at the point at which the Minister has made a decision, and then perhaps scrutinising the Minister and the appointee to learn what are the instructions, the policy and the purposes for which the Minister has made this appointment. At a subsequent point, in terms of policy and outcome, intention can be compared against result, rather than going into the question of whether the Select Committee should have a role in second guessing the decision of a Minister on the personal characteristics of the person to be appointed.

Happily, that takes me through those things where I specifically want to disagree with the Select Committee. There are other points on which I agree. First, the hon. Gentleman made it clear that a map of Government as recommended is important to secure definitions and to understand and create, perhaps over time, consistency and coherence in the structure of quangos. That is highly desirable. Secondly, I endorse the Select Committee's view that the results of prior options reviews should be more accessible and that the review team should contain an independent element. I do not wish to speak at length on the third point, the parliamentary accountability of quangos, because a commission under the chairmanship of Lord Norton of Louth is considering that. However, I shall draw to the attention of my noble Friend the Select Committee report—which he will no doubt have seen—and our discussion today. I hope that that is another area in which he and his colleagues can make recommendations to Government for policy purposes—which I hope will, in turn, inform a wider debate on the strengthening of Parliament's role in scrutinising and holding the Executive to account.

Fourthly, the auditing of local spending bodies, on which the hon. Gentleman did not dwell—its technicality is beyond me—is important. It has arisen in regard to training and enterprise councils, for example, in a way that has left concern. It is important to understand why the audit trail is going into local spending bodies and how many bodies are asking local spending bodies to account for themselves and expose all their financial activity. If the reason for an audit is one of simple propriety, it is perfectly acceptable for the National Audit Office to undertake it. However, such audits need not occur routinely. They should occur for a specific reason, because of an allegation, for example, or on a more random basis to ensure that a body is not acting in a way that involves impropriety or financial loss. However, if the reason were one concerned with management, it is probably better for the Audit Commission to secure effectiveness. The relationship that the Audit Commission has with different local spending bodies, including local government and the national health service—which it has worked hard to achieve—might create mutual understanding.

One must bear in mind some of the problems that have occurred with quangos—I would include TECs in that—because of the degree to which interference, not so much in terms of audit as in terms of but of Treasury controls and, under the present Government, public service agreements and so on, second-guesses the objectives for which arm's-length distance from Ministers was created in the first place.

I made some general remarks about appointments to which I should like to add some specific points. There is a concern about appointments. In a sense, there is a discontinuity between our debate and the work of the Commissioner for Public Appointments because, as the hon. Gentleman made clear, the commissioner has another report to make. We must recognise that lack of confidence in Government and concerns about the lack of accountability of quangos are greatly increased if appointments to such bodies are seen as impartial, biased or ineffective.

Members of the Committee will be aware of the fourth report of the Commissioner for Public Appointments and the number of politically active appointments in the NHS to which it refers. The commissioner states in that report that the number of local councillors appointed has more than doubled and that Labour councillors represented 80 per cent. of the then most recent figure. He commented:

> This trend raises a concern that the emphasis on representation may lead to the bodies in question losing the wider management and professional skills and competencies which those holding office need to fulfil the responsibilities that they are required to discharge.

That highlights the issue. One may want the body to achieve local representation, in which case, as the hon. Member for Lewes would argue, responsibility should be with local rather than national Government. Alternatively, as was the case under the previous Administration, one can recognise that the purpose of appointments is to give NHS trusts and bodies—in this case—the skills that they need. If one no longer makes appointments on the basis of the skills that are required for the management of trusts and one includes skewed

local representation that does not evenly reflect the political balance of the area, one brings the entire process into disrepute.

Mr. Baker *rose—*

Mr. Lansley: I am about to conclude, but I will happily give way to the hon. Gentleman, so as not to frustrate his desire to intervene.

Mr. Baker: I am hoping to move the debate along. Does the hon. Gentleman not agree that there are local council specialists, for example, planning and environmental health officers, who have particular skills, but who are subject to decisions by elected councillors? Those councillors give them directions, but do not intrude on the exercise of their skills. In the same way, civil servants in each Department undertake valuable work that does not interfere with the political process. So it is possible to combine democratic accountability with individuals' skills.

Mr. Lansley: Transparently, it is possible to combine those things, but it is a question of what one sets out to do. In the context of the NHS, if one seeks to achieve a national service without postcode rationing, in which there is no local discretion about choices between priorities—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I know that the hon. Gentleman was tempted in that direction, but we should perhaps come back to the report. Postcode rationing is a tiny bit off the subject of quangos.

Mr. Lansley: I am grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker. You may know that I can resist almost anything except temptation.

If the structure is brought into disrepute, we end up with the situation that Martin McElwee graphically described in a report entitled "The Great and Good?". He said—unfortunately, it is true—that all Governments tend to give increasing numbers of appointments to their natural supporters and allow appointments to reflect their political priorities. He said that this Government were "quantitively different" from other recent Governments in the extent to which they had brought in their supporters to make a new political class. They have created that class not so much through election as through the exercise of appointments.

Although there may be advantages to managing government through appointed bodies, there is an inherent danger that that structure may not be based on openness and accountability. The structure must inspire confidence through its impartiality and by making appointments based on merit. That is the basis on which the Commissioner for Public Appointments will, rightly, examine the whole structure.

In conclusion, I commend the Committee for its report and for giving us the opportunity to have this debate. With the exceptions to which I have referred, the report helps us a great deal in trying to increase the transparency, openness and accountability of quangos. I hope that the Government will take it further by considering sympathetically some of the recommendations that have been made.

4.38 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Mr. Graham Stringer): First, like my hon. Friend the Member for Hemsworth (Mr. Trickett), I declare not a current interest, but a former activity—as a member of two quangos. I was a member of Central Manchester development corporation for seven years and a member of North Manchester health authority for one year, in the early 1980s. So I have experience of quangos and of local authorities, which I must say added to my interest in the Committee's report. I read not all, but most of the evidence in the two volumes. I, like everyone else in the debate, want to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright) on producing a comprehensive overview of quangos, non-departmental public bodies, local public bodies, advisory bodies, task forces and all the groups going under different names. My one disappointment today is that only five of us have participated in the debate, which relates to principles of accountability, public expenditure and democracy and many activities that affect our constituents. I am surprised that so few hon. Members have turned up.

The Government examined the report's recommendations carefully and broadly agreed with 12 of the 25. They disagreed with eight and are considering five more, which I shall come to shortly. I do not intend to dwell on those with which we agree. It is possible in debates such as this for the Minister to make a speech of the Government's position and read that out. I prefer to listen to the debate and respond to it on behalf of the Government. If I miss out answers to anything that hon. Members have asked, I shall answer in writing.

The eight recommendations with which the Government could not wholly agree were characterised by a search for consistency on the part of the Committee. It wanted consistency about how different public bodies should be accountable. The Government's response was that perfectly good structures exist and it is not necessary to alter them for the sake of consistency. Those are not the words that were used, but that is the essential response. I shall come back to two recommendations from the end of the report, about how appointments are made and the Select Committee's role.

The Committee took evidence from right and left-wing academics, local government, two Commissioners for Public Appointments, a Minister and several other experts, and it was striking that the debate that has been going on for a quarter of a century about whether quangos should exist has disappeared. There is complete consensus—but not on the exact size of, or methods of appointment to, quangos—that in a modern society there will always be groups of bodies that do not fit straight into national or local government. I do not know whether that development of consensus is the reason there are not more people here today. Of course, the witnesses differed in the emphasis that they placed on the need for change.

I shall begin by dealing with the last part of the debate—the end of the contribution of the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley). Quangos have had a bad name and change is happening now, not because people do not recognise that an expert panel or arm's-length organisation is sometimes needed, but largely because of what happened during 18 years of a Conservative Government, in which quangos were used

[Mr. Graham Stringer]

ruthlessly to give positions to active Conservatives as well as to ex-Members of Parliament and ex-Ministers. However, this debate has not been adversarial and I shall not list the 20 names to which my right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office, referred during a debate in the House on 18 January. He listed a considerable number of people who had been thrown out of government, had chaired Conservative associations or were married to active Conservatives or Conservative Ministers who had been given appointments. Such appointments undermined the confidence of the public and members of other parties in NDPBs. As elected local councillors in Manchester in the 1980s and 1990s, my colleagues and I got fed up with seeing the electorate throwing Conservative councillors out of office but then finding them being given increased responsibility running health authorities and trusts, as well as being appointed to residuary bodies, development corporations and other quangos. As I said, we were fed up with such appointments, which gave quangos a bad name.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the fourth report of the Nolan committee on the change in appointments to NHS bodies.

Mr. Lansley: Just for accuracy, I remind the Minister that I referred to the fourth report of the Commissioner for Public Appointments.

Mr. Stringer: I shall quote from a statement made in July 1999 by the chief executive of the NHS, when the debate was happening. He said:

"The new criteria that the Government have introduced to reflect more the interests of patients, people who use the service, carers and people from voluntary organisations are important. The make-up of boards has changed a little. Pre-1997, about 70 per cent. of people on boards had management experience in other organisations. That figure is now 50 per cent."

There has not been a huge change. In 1993, *The Observer* claimed that 40 per cent. of executive non-departmental bodies were in the control of known and explicit Conservative appointments and produced facts to show that that was the case.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) also changed the criteria so that local people were appointed to NHS bodies. That was an important change. Many people in different areas were extremely annoyed when they listened to consultations given by development corporations or health bodies in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as they often found people who had had to look at an A-to-Z guide to reach the location that they were going to administer. That was completely unsatisfactory and the Government have put it right. As I have said on a number of occasions, we have achieved that by changing the right of Ministers to appoint people but by accepting the recommendations of the first Nolan committee that people should be appointed on merit and through a clear and transparent process. We have supported that throughout.

As other hon. Members have mentioned, appointments continue to be a matter for debate and discussion. We look forward to the publication next Wednesday of the inquiry conducted by the Commissioner for Public Appointments into the NHS appointments process. We have debated who should be appointed to those positions and how, so I suggest that we spend a couple of minutes thinking about the Select Committee's recommendations on how people are appointed and the role of councillors. I shall do no more than go through the arguments and tell the Committee a little about the history of elected representatives on health authorities.

Prior to 1982, all health authorities assumed it to be a good thing that a third of an authority's membership should consist of local councillors appointed by the local authority. Between 1982 and 1992, that proportion changed to 25 per cent., and the right of local authorities was largely lost in 1992. After that, it became difficult for Liberal, Social Democrat or Labour councillors to be made members of an NHS body. The figures bear that out. Although there are three times as many Liberal, Social Democrat and Labour councillors combined as there are Conservative councillors, there were twice as many Conservatives on these bodies then.

As the rules of appointment have changed, that balance has changed. The Government are still committed to appointing on merit from the local community and, just as important, trying to improve the diversity of the people who serve on those bodies. At present, 50 per cent. of new appointments on NHS bodies are women. It will be some time before that is the complexion of all NHS bodies, because the membership changes only once every four years—or longer if people are reappointed. The same is true of the number of people from ethnic minorities—the number has doubled on those bodies. That is part of the Government's objective of improving the composition of those bodies.

All that is background to a debate that will take place next week. About 17 per cent. of elected councillors are members of NHS bodies.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The Minister is being very kind in giving us the background for next week's debate. Perhaps we can return to today's debate.

Mr. Stringer: I thank you for that advice, Madam Deputy Speaker. I shall bear it in mind. Appointments were mentioned in the report, but I appreciate that I went too far in the subject.

I move on to the points raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase. I agree with my hon. Friend that this is not a numbers game. Numbers have been mentioned, but the Government would not have failed even if the numbers had changed in the other direction. About 140 NDBPs have been abolished and about 70 new ones have been created. However, that is not the main question. Many of those NDBPs are there to deliver a service. It is important that they carry out their functions properly and that they do it in a transparent and accountable manner.

I know that the Select Committee and the Government more or less agree on the next point. The Committee wants more information, and we shall give it more information; we intend to be as transparent and open as possible. Public bodies will be the executive non-departmental bodies mentioned in the executive agency report. We are attempting to make things as clear as possible, leading to the production of a map of the public sector.

My hon. Friend then considered what should be an executive NDPB and what should be in the democratic sector. He mentioned a good academic study. It showed that appointed bodies, which do not have the confidence or arrogance of being elected, sometimes make the effort find out what people want. They can respond—I am mindful of the contribution made by my hon. Friend the Member for Hemsworth—better to public demand than locally elected bodies.

From the point of view of a modernising Government, the public want services to be available. The public can get more out of a harmonious partnership between an NDPB that produces a service and the local authority. Not many of us who were involved in local authorities 20 years ago would have thought that possible. It has happened, and we must respect it. Although we are rightly concerned about democracy—it is central to what we do—what many people want from a hospital or a housing service is good quality. Joined-up government is not about putting everything into one place or keeping everything separate, but about ensuring that people get the service that they want and recognising the best bodies to provide it.

My hon. Friend mentioned openness. It is difficult to make the case that the Freedom of Information Bill does not go far enough. His report acknowledges that the Government are more open with information on NDPB membership and their annual reports, objectives and business plans, and that the Bill will help. We are committed, as the White Paper "Quangos: Opening the doors" explained, to an open, accountable and effective public sector.

Dr. Tony Wright: I hope that I am not straying, but my hon. Friend has provoked me—and I was doing so well in agreeing with him. Had he read an earlier Select Committee report on the draft Freedom of Information Bill, he would have seen that it made a careful distinction between open government and freedom of information. Open government is a gift from Government. It reflects the Government's desire to be more open, and the Government have been admirably more open. Freedom of information is about the rights of citizens. They are two different concepts.

Mr. Stringer: I understand my hon. Friend's point. I was simply saying that we are improving the ability of members of the public to receive information, either by exercising their rights in the Freedom of Information Bill or as a result of the Government's decision to be more open. Given that, it is hard to criticise the Government further as we appear to share the same objectives on this issue.

The other principal difference the Government have with the report—in this respect, I agree with the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire—relates to the scrutiny of people who are about to become chairmen of executive non-departmental bodies. I understand the desire for more parliamentary scrutiny, but the course that is recommeded would lead to confusion and possibly ineffectiveness. Taking an example at random, imagine somebody whom the Government were minded to appoint to the Environment Agency for England and Wales appearing before the appropriate Select Committee, which decided that the person was not right for the job. The Committee might think that there was a mismatch between the person's skills and those required in the job description. I am a great respecter of Select Committees, but they can make mistakes as much as they can be right. The result would be a complete lack of public confidence in that person. The Select Committee would effectively have a veto, there would be a slowing down in the process and it may—I am speculating, but I think reasonably—lead to fewer people applying to become chairmen of the different executive non-departmental bodies.

Mr. Baker: I understand the Minister's point. However, if he takes the example of the Environment Agency, the previous Government appointed as the chairman a person who was a leading Conservative supporter and who lived in the constituency of Huntingdon. Surely there is a problem with the existing arrangements.

Mr. Stringer: I knew that if I mentioned a real example I would become involved in a debate on an appointment about which I know nothing in any detail. The Government's position on appointments is that the best person for the job should be appointed on merit. Clearly that was not always the position under the previous Government.

If a process is implemented whereby Select Committees can express a view on somebody the Minister is minded to approve, those Committees have a veto, undermining the appointment process. If that happens, applicants might dry up. There would be a blurring of the lines of responsibility because, although that person was appointed by the Minister, he would feel that he had needed the support of the Select Committee which considered the case. That is why the Government have rejected that proposal. I know that the Committee visited the United States and examined the process there. I am not going to go any further down this path, but the balance within the American constitution is very different from the balance within our constitution.

Dr. Tony Wright: I do not want to respond to points as the Minister makes them, but he is right in saying that this is important territory and that there is an issue of principle involved. I ask him to look carefully at the words that we use. We talk not about second guessing, but about a candidate elect being invited to appear before the Committee—if it chooses to do so—before an appointment is finally confirmed. Leaving aside individuals, the prospective chairman of the Strategic Rail Authority, for example, might be invited to come before the Transport Committee to discuss issues concerning the rail system. When a person is taken on, that is a normal requirement—I was about to say that it does not appear to be a huge disincentive to candidates, but I need to be careful in this context. The Select Committee would gainsay the decision only in the most exceptional circumstances. It is entirely normal for a prospective appointee to discuss his role within the Select Committee.

Mr. Stringer: I cannot believe that many prospective appointees in the transport industry genuinely look forward to being interrogated by the Transport Committee. I have participated in its interrogations, and I know that they are carried out thoroughly.

Although we are discussing one example, our conclusions could apply to any Select Committee. Select Committees are a question-and-answer forum and do not involve dialogue—that is not their nature. Committee members can be aggressive in their questioning and someone who appears before a Select Committee but who does not have answers to all the questions does not look too good on television. If he or she took up the appointment after such a performance, his or her position would be undermined. The Government rejected the proposal for that reason, among others. Of course, the day after his or her appointment, the new chair or chief executive of an important executive agency or non-departmental body could go along to a Select Committee and discuss what will be done. There is a fundamental disagreement about the responsibilities of Government and of Select Committees.

On ministerial responsibility for appointments, the hon. Members for Lewes (Mr. Baker) said that a Minister cannot know every person who is appointed, and that he or she should therefore appoint no one or very few people. That cuts the line of ministerial responsibility, but the hon. Gentleman's argument is worth examining. In business, local and central Government and other walks of life, chief executives, chairs of companies and Ministers cannot know every detail of the business or Department that they control. They rely on advice on numerous occasions, but that does not mean that when they take such advice, they are not responsible for it. The hon. Gentleman's logic was incomplete. The appointments process is no different from that which applies to many other executive decision-making processes. The process involves knowledge, advice and decision.

We should consider the alternative. I advise hon. Members to read a history of the appointments of the Doges in Venice. For some reason, politicians are not the flavour of the month—we are the second least popular group of people in the country after journalists. If we found someone else to take our responsibilities away from us, that would be an abdication of responsibility, and it would blur the lines. If we gave away responsibilities by creating committees, what basis would their decisions have? The Government have clearly accepted the first Nolan report, there is an independent external assessor and appointments are made on merit and can be challenged. However, the final decision rests with the Minister. What is the point of giving away responsibilities and setting up another committee to undertake such matters? We come back to the question of who appoints the committee. Indeed, to do that, another committee that is even more independent may be appointed, which results in the loss of a direct line of accountability.

Mr. Baker: I agree and am in favour of political accountability. However, the huge number of quangos and Ministers' many responsibilities mean that, with the best will in the world, Ministers cannot do the job to the degree that they would like. The alternative is a dramatic reduction in the number of quangos and, whenever possible, the return of duties to local government or even regional government, so that they become democratically accountable through elected local politicians.

Mr. Stringer: The hon. Gentleman made two separate points, one about local democracy—which I covered earlier—the other about ministerial responsibility for appointments. It would be wrong for a Minister to delegate or give responsibility for appointments to local bodies in cases in which national bodies exercise such a function.

I accept concerns about what should be considered in the local democratic process and what should be outside it. Indeed, I listened with interest and sympathy to the local experiences of the hon. Gentleman and my hon. Friend the Member for Hemsworth.

We are coming to the end of a full, if poorly attended, debate. We have touched on most of the issues at the heart of the excellent report. I have not really dealt with task forces, which were mentioned by the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire. The report entitled "Ruling by Task Force: Politico's Guide to Labour's New Elite", as well as "The Great and Good?", which deals with some of the people invited into government, put an emphasis on the matter that is different from that of the hon. Gentleman.

A new Government clearly need advice from new sources. However good the civil service, it is not the repository of all the wisdom in the world. Indeed, that is impossible. Pertinent to the appointment of task forces are remarks made by my noble Friend Lord Falconer of Thoroton in a debate in the House of Lords on 23 February. He said:

> What are the problems which need to be addressed? First, transparency. We should name the people on the task forces. We do. We should state their focus and remit. We do. We should keep that information up to date. We update it every six months. We should publish the reports of task forces. Twenty-one have already reported, and many others will be published or are in the process of being published. I cannot say that there will not be good reasons why advice should not be published.—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 23 February 2000; Vol. 609, c. 268.]

Some of those reasons are self-evident. The hon. Gentleman therefore overstated his case.

In conclusion, I thank the Select Committee members for producing such a good report. I should also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, West (Mr. Morgan), the previous Chairman of the Committee, as I understand that the report is not all the work of the current Chairman, my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at fourteen minutes past Five o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 21 March 2000

[MR. MICHAEL J. MARTIN *in the Chair*]

Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mr. Betts.*]

10 am

Mr. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): I welcome this opportunity to debate the United Kingdom's policies and positions for the 11th conference of the parties to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of wild flora and fauna—CITES—which opens in Nairobi in Kenya on 10 April. I am indebted to the Environmental Investigation Agency, and especially to Claire Perry, for supplying me with such a detailed—and damning—briefing on this subject.

CITES is intended to prevent the extinction of wildlife and plant species threatened by international trade. The parties to CITES, which now number around 150, can ban international trade in species threatened with extinction by listing them in appendix 1. Species threatened by international trade but not in imminent danger of extinction can be listed in appendix 2, which requires countries to issue export and import permits that can be used to monitor the volume of trade. The listing does not provide meaningful conservation protection to most species, especially heavily traded species, because there are usually no limits to such trade.

CITES addresses only international trade in wildlife and plants listed in its appendices. With the exception of rhino products, it has never sought to control domestic trade in wildlife products, nor to involve itself in the management of wildlife within a nation's borders.

When used properly, CITES is the most effective multilateral environmental agreement available to save endangered species threatened by international trade. It is often seriously undermined by poor enforcement, but, without it, endangered species such as tigers and rhinos could well have disappeared from the wild. The elephant would now be wiped out in most of its remaining habitats in Africa and Asia if CITES had not voted in 1989 to list the African elephant in appendix 1.

At the April meeting, the parties to CITES will vote on a wide range of measures relating to the trade in wildlife, and will discuss and vote on the conservation of elephants, whales, tigers and numerous other species. I am pleased that there are many hon. Members present who wish to speak. I shall therefore relate my comments mainly to elephants. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) wishes to refer to a number of other species.

The United Kingdom is presently the chair of the CITES standing committee—its governing body—which oversees the implementation of decisions taken by the parties. It is a crucial position. The Chamber should be in no doubt that the fate of the African elephant may rest on what the UK does at CITES.

The UK has played a critical role in decisions that CITES has taken on elephants, which, tragically, have not always been good for elephants. For instance, when the parties voted overwhelmingly at the 1989 meeting to protect African elephants, the UK Government took formally a reservation to the international ivory ban for six months to allow the Hong Kong ivory barons to sell off their vast stockpiles of poached ivory.

Historically, progress has been slow. In 1975, Ghana first proposed listing African elephants in appendix 1. The proposal failed and they were placed in appendix 2. The result was the mass slaughter of elephants by poachers over the following 14 years. CITES was repeatedly urged by pro-trade interests to continue to try to regulate rather than ban the international ivory trade. In the 1980s, poaching became more organised, thriving on conflict in Africa, where the easy availability of arms, marauding armies and their rebel opponents and corrupt Government officials made ivory a highly valued alternative hard currency on the African continent. Instead of poisoned spears, poachers used AK47s to bring down large numbers of elephants. Military helicopters and trucks moved ivory to government camps, where its trade was legalised by officials. South Africa's apartheid regime was notorious for laundering ivory proached from Angola and Mozambique.

The CITES-approved, legal international trade in ivory was as porous as a sieve, and laundering poached ivory for the legal marketplace by acquiring CITES permits was easy. Vast quantities of poached ivory were laundered in that way. The legal trade provided the cover for poached ivory, just as protected whale species are killed and laundered for the Japanese market by being mixed with whale meat produced by the notorious commercial operations that pose as scientific researchers.

In 1979, there were approximately 1.3 million elephants in Africa. By 1988, only 624,000 were believed to have survived. According to a widely accepted estimate, 94 per cent. of all ivory sold legally throughout the world with CITES permits originated from poached elephants. Across Africa, 70,000 elephants were poached each year to provide ivory for the international market, and the continental African elephant population declined by 10 per cent. a year. In short, listing African elephants in appendix 2 of CITES has failed.

The 1989 listing of African elephants in appendix 1 was probably the most successful conservation action taken by CITES, and the most effective elephant conservation measure in history. The international ban led to a virtual overnight collapse in demand for ivory. Prices plummeted and poaching declined dramatically across much of Africa. The ban was enforced in many parts of Africa, and many elephant populations stabilised. Parks and wildlife staff were motivated and empowered by the ban, which simplified enforcement. The public, who supported the ban, knew that ivory came from poached elephants because the sale of ivory was illegal.

However, a small number of countries—Zimbabwe, Botswana, Namibia and South Africa—opposed the ban. Poaching was not widespread in those countries,

[Mr. Tom Brake]

except Zimbabwe, where it is believed that military officials and parks staff became involved in poaching in areas such as the Gonarezhou park. Those countries led a determined campaign to overturn the international ivory ban, on the basis that their elephant populations were stable or abundant.

A week before the CITES meeting in Harare in June 1997, President Mugabe of Zimbabwe hosted a meeting of the Organisation of African Unity and was elected its chairman. He made an unsuccessful attempt to persuade the OAU to support a resumption in the ivory trade, but he succeeded in twisting the arms of other African presidents, who agreed to downlisting and muted their opposition to limited international ivory trade involving the southern African elephant.

After a week of secret ballots, intense pressure from the highest levels of southern African Governments, and manipulated proceedings in which many African state delegates were not allowed to speak, Zimbabwe, Namibia and Botswana secured an experimental export of some 50 tonnes of ivory to Japan, and their elephant populations were transferred to appendix 2. Many African states adamantly opposed the measure, and feared the impact that the resumption of international trade would have on their smaller, more vulnerable elephant populations.

For the sake of completeness, I have outlined some of the history of this subject and the attitude of various Governments, and I turn now to the attitude of the United Kingdom Government and the European Union. Before the general election, the Labour party election leaflet, entitled "New Labour—New Life for Animals", made an unequivocal pledge to

> oppose any resumption of the trade in ivory and elephant skins.

In fact, it was the European Union's decision to abstain on the key vote at the 1997 CITES meeting in Harare that allowed the international ivory and elephant skin trade to resume. The 14 EU member states that are parties to CITES seek to vote together as a block during conference, and many non-EU European states and other CITES parties follow the lead of the highly influential EU countries. It is therefore safe to say that Zimbabwe, Botswana and Namibia would not have been allowed to put their elephant populations on appendix 2 if the UK and the rest of the EU states opposed them.

Rigorous conditions were attached to the transfer of the elephant populations to appendix 2. The international sale of 50 tonnes of ivory was supposed to go ahead only if Japan, the only authorised ivory importing country, improved its domestic controls to prevent the on-going laundering of illegal ivory. A further three conditions were attached: that comprehensive international monitoring systems should be in place to establish a possible causal link between the sale of ivory to Japan and any detected increase in poaching levels or illegal ivory trade; that a mechanism should be established to allow the southern African elephant populations to be put back on appendix 1 immediately if poaching and illegal trade increased; and that Zimbabwe, Botswana and Namibia should join a multinational African enforcement body, such as the Lusaka agreement on co-operative wildlife enforcement, which can cross borders to investigate illegal wildlife trade and poaching.

It is worth noting that even the World Wildlife Fund, which believes that Zimbabwe, Botswana and Namibia deserve support and credit for conserving and managing their elephant populations, acccepts that the monitoring systems that I have just outlined are not in place. The UK had been elected chair of the powerful CITES standing committee, which was charged with deciding if those conditions were fulfilled before the ivory sale to Japan was allowed to go ahead. When the committee met in February 1999, the international system to monitor increased elephant poaching—MIKE—was not in place, and the £8 million to operate it for the first six years had not been found. Even worse, the system could not show causality between increased poaching and the ivory trade to Japan and it would take six years before useful data could be produced. None of the three southern African countries had joined the Lusaka agreement, nor had they produced a similar enforcement accord. Furthermore, despite some cosmetic changes, Japan had not enacted any meaningful enforcement measures to monitor trade in illegal ivory by the 50,000 or so shops that sell ivory hanko or name seals. In fact, there is virtually no domestic enforcement of ivory or other endangered species trade in Japan.

Seven African elephant range states appealed to the UK-chaired CITES standing committee to delay the ivory trade until the CITES-guaranteed safeguard of an international monitoring system was in place. The United States issued a similar caution. Will the Minister explain why the UK, as chair of the CITES standing committee, did not oppose the experimental international ivory sale, given that the critically important enforcement safeguards were not in place? That represents an early breaking of the pre-election pledge to

> oppose any resumption of the trade in ivory and elephant skins.

Regrettably, the sale of 50 tonnes of ivory to Japan went ahead in April 1999. Since then, many African and Asian elephant range states have reported a dramatic resurgence of elephant poaching. Kenya has reported a disturbing increase in such incidents, which the director of the Kenyan Wildlife Service, Nehemiah Rotich, attributes directly to the reopening of the ivory trade. Zimbabwe has provided the most dramatic evidence of the emergence of a massive increase in elephant poaching. Last November, a WWF survey estimated that 1,378 elephant carcases had been found along Zimbabwe's Zambezi valley. The carcases were between one and two years old, which shows that poaching erupted not long after the 1997 CITES decision to remove the appendix 1 protection from Zimbabwe's elephants. That was hardly an example of a country conserving and managing its elephant population.

Poaching continued in 1999. Between 300 and 400 elephants had been poached in Zimbabwe by August of that year alone, according to sources who have seen official poaching data. Numerous press reports have claimed that Government officials in national parks or the military are implicated in the poaching spree. One report states:

> Suspicions are growing that senior officials in the Zimbabwean government are involved in the recent upsurge of poaching.

Poachers have also been reported to be using radios identical to those used by wildlife scouts, probably obtainable only with the collusion of senior staff of the

national parks department. The Zimbabwean Government have admitted that there is an increase, but press reports quote a senior park official as saying:

> The Department is under-reporting case numbers because they fear the publicity will affect ivory trade.

In my view, such a cover-up qualifies as an abuse of the downlisting process, and the Zimbabwean elephants should immediately be put back in appendix 1. Perhaps the Minister will comment on that in due course.

In addition to an upsurge of poaching since the decision was made to allow the sales, numerous large seizures of illegal ivory have taken place, showing the revival of ivory smuggling networks. For example, in April 1998 ivory valued at $3 million was seized in Taiwan; in October 1998, 600 kg were seized in Paris; in China, 1.6 tonnes were seized in November 1998, and a further 2 tonnes in January 1999; 500 kg were seized in Moscow in April 1999; in Kenya, 350 kg were seized in July last year, and 700 kg in August. Seizures continue to be made in countries as diverse as Dubai, Portugal and China.

In a few weeks' time, the parties to CITES will vote on proposals by Zimbabwe, Botswana, Namibia and now South Africa to sell more ivory to Japan and other consuming countries. An alternative proposal from Kenya and India would, if accepted, return all elephants to appendix 1, totally banning international trade. At a recent meeting of 21 elephant range states in Africa, the Kenyan proposal received the backing of most countries present. South Africa, Namibia, Botswana and Zimbabwe declined to attend that meeting. The proposal is also supported by a broad coalition of most—but, I accept, not all—of the world's major conservation groups.

Last Thursday, a resolution was passed in the European Parliament with the backing of members of all the major political groups. It strongly urged all CITES parties to support Kenya and India's proposal to maximise international protection for elephants by putting them all back on appendix 1. In the United Kingdom yesterday, a MORI poll was released showing that 82 per cent. of the public believe that the UK Government should support the Kenyan proposal. More than 120 Members of Parliament have signed an early-day motion calling for a full ban on the international ivory trade, which can be achieved only by supporting the Kenyan proposal to protect all elephants by putting them back on appendix 1.

The current position is that the United Kingdom is calling for all proposals to be withdrawn. Let us be clear about what that would mean in practice. Poaching would continue and would be likely to intensify during the two or three years before the next CITES meeting. That would be unacceptable. The Government argue that, because the funds from these sales are, theoretically at least, going back into elephant conservation and community projects, they meet their objective to conserve elephants. However, receipts from experimental sales were less than $5 million, whereas the estimated cost of providing the monitoring systems is about $13 million. Many elephant range states argue that the money would be better spent on keeping elephants alive, rather than on counting them once they have been killed by poachers.

In *The Guardian* on 6 March 2000, an article entitled "Ivory Towers" stated:

> As elephant poaching rises again, Kenya fears that the UK will make things worse.

In the article, Nehemiah Rotich, director of the Kenya Wildlife Service, stated:

> We are very unhappy with the UK position on the ivory trade . . . It is a major point of concern for us. Britain has such a key presence in Kenya as a development partner that I would have expected them to better understand what opening up ivory trade would mean for us . . . The tourist industry which funds the wildlife service would be badly hit and we would risk a return to the poaching holocaust of the 1980s.

I understand that the Government have not yet decided how to vote, but if they openly oppose Kenya's proposal, they will give implicit support to the southern African position. Failure by the Government to back Kenya and India will horrify the 82 per cent. of the British public who support Kenya and India's proposal. There is a clear duty to ensure that a precautionary approach is taken and the only precautionary approach on the table is that proposed by Kenya and India.

The Government have said that they remain unconvinced that the recent ivory sales have had an impact on poaching or the illegal trade. Given that the 10 largest seizures of illegal ivory in a decade have occurred since the decision was taken to allow the sale of ivory to Japan, to what does the Minister attribute such a clear-cut sign of increased trade and poaching, if not to that decision? Do the Government accept that poaching has increased in Kenya, or do they think that the Kenya Wildlife Service is lying?

Will the Minister investigate the evidence of increased poaching in Zimbabwe and the alleged cover-up by Zimbabwean Government officials of such increased poaching? I remind the Minister of the near reign of terror that the Zimbabwean Government have effected on their citizens, many of whom are terrified to report increased elephant poaching.

Despite the overwhelmingly clear view of the British public, our Governments have not always been as proactive as they should have been in pursuing a global ban on the ivory trade. In the next couple of weeks, the Government will have the opportunity to honour their pledge and to use their influence in the European Union and internationally to push for a full ban on the international ivory trade, and I hope that they will do so. We cannot risk

> a return to the poaching holocaust of the 1980's.

10.21 am

Angela Smith (Basildon): I congratulate the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) on securing this debate on an issue about which many of us have strongly held views. Speaking in Westminster Hall has an added attraction to Labour Members: it is the only time that we can see Ministers' faces during debate—we normally sit behind Ministers in the Chamber. I hope that we shall see the Minister showing strong support for the issues that we are raising today.

As the hon. Gentleman has said, discussions at CITES are vital for a variety of wildlife, including turtles, sharks and whales, but given the limited time available and that several hon. Members wish to speak, like the hon. Gentleman I shall concentrate on elephants and the ivory trade. I confess that my interest in elephants goes back many years to my time at primary

[Angela Smith]

school. My primary school teacher was clearly responsible for my interest because he taught me how to tell the difference between an African elephant and an Indian elephant. I have not seen many African or Indian elephants in the flesh, not wanting to go to zoos to see them, but he told me that an African elephant's ears are the shape of Africa and an Indian elephant's ears are the shape of India. I do not know whether that is true, but it has stimulated my interest in elephants and their protection for many years.

I have asked several parliamentary questions about the ivory trade. I attended the International Fund for Animal Welfare press conference on the issue yesterday. The answers that I have received and that press conference have brought home to me how important it is that we take urgent action. In response to the questions that I asked on 10 February, the Paymaster General told me how much ivory had been seized in the United Kingdom. In 1998, Customs and Excise seized 387 items of ivory and a further 15 items were seized in the first nine months of 1999. Several of those seizures involved direct imports from central and southern African states and from India.

However, the problem with those figures is that, unlike other countries, the United Kingdom reports seizures not by weight but by the number of items, so the figures cannot be translated into how many elephants have been killed to produce that ivory because we do not know the weight of ivory involved. It would be helpful if the Minister would examine that matter and perhaps write to me. We should consider recording ivory seizures, as other countries do, by weight rather than by item, because worked ivory and carved ivory items can range from small, artistic, delicately carved pieces to large pieces, although those are less popular now because of problems with illegal trade. We must consider recording seizures not only by number, but by weight.

The importance of recording is shown by experience in France, where two major seizures of more than 1,000 kg were recorded in 1998 and 1999. In addition, about 1.5 tonnes have been seized in both India and Portugal. The worldwide total of seizures is horrific and shows the level of the problem.

I am grateful to have worked on campaigns with the Born Free Foundation in my constituency and nationally. Along with other organisations, it has expressed its wish for a positive outcome from the CITES talks. Born Free told me that only between five and 20 elephants, from an original estimate of 320, remain alive at a major national park in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In the area surrounding that park, up to 3,000 elephants are reported to have been killed. There lies one of our problems, and the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington touched on that. It is obvious that further relaxation in ivory trade laws will lead to an increase in poaching. If there is a legal trade in ivory, how can illegal trade be monitored? How can we tell the difference between the two? Enforcement is made extremely difficult.

The Kenyan Government have reported an increase in poaching, but in some war-torn areas of Africa, such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, we must establish scientifically that it is the change in the international trade laws that has led to an increase in poaching, rather than issues connected with war, natural disasters or the abject poverty facing people in those countries, all of which we have a duty to take action on. That challenge faces our Ministers at the CITES talks. It would be wrong for the countries pushing for relaxation in the laws to use their widespread problems as a cover or excuse to argue for measures that would lead to immeasurable suffering and the killing of elephants. I do not dismiss the problems of those countries, but there can be no argument about the fact that since CITES sanctioned the resumption of the legal ivory trade, seizures of illegal ivory items have increased. It is difficult to argue that there is no relationship of cause and effect between those two events.

Hon. Members attended the launch yesterday of the report entitled "The Ivory Markets of Africa" with representatives of the International Fund for Animal Welfare in the Jubilee Room, and that is reported on in *BBC Wildlife Magazine* this month. Those hon. Members will have heard of the continuing problem of this trade in death since the partial reopening of the ivory trade in 1997. The debate on what is responsible for its increase will continue, but we must make clear our views to the Minister this morning. We should listen to those who have exposed the effects of the relaxation in the ivory trade, on which the report is damning. We should also listen to the Kenyan Government, who are arguing for greater protection for the elephant, and to the 82 per cent. of British people who, in a MORI poll this week, urged the Government to support the Kenyan and Indian proposals. We should implement our pre-election promise to support protection for the African elephant and oppose any resumption of the trade in ivory and elephant skins.

Conservation and animal protection are international issues on which we need to take firm action, and I hope that the Government will help by persuading the European Union to use its block vote at the CITES talks. As a Labour MP, I am somewhat reluctant to get into the argument about the block vote and I use the term with caution. Rather than abstaining as it did in 1997, the EU should be persuaded to use its block vote for good and to take action for animal protection.

I want to make some strong representations on behalf of my constituents, who are concerned about the possible resumption of international trading in whale meat. I have received several letters on that subject, which I would like to be taken into account. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Cuba, I see no conflict in using my position to make strong representations to the Cuban Government against their proposal to reopen the trade in hawksbill turtle shells. Closer to home, there is a need for much greater protection of the basking shark. My hon. Friend the Member for North-West Leicestershire (Mr. Taylor) will speak about that. The basking shark is one of the most spectacular sights to be seen off the British coast. That species should be protected internationally, as action by just one Government will have little effect.

Now that we are in 2000, we should be moving forward on worldwide protection issues, not fighting a rearguard action to maintain protection for animals such as turtles and whales. I have strong hopes that representatives of our Government will be in the

forefront of positive moves at the CITES talks in Nairobi in April, and will recognise that any trade in ivory will lead to an increase in slaughter and the international trade. The internal trade is for countries to deal with themselves.

The debate about CITES and about trade and seizures is, in a sense, a sterile one, but we must recognise that this issue—and that of the suffering of animals, at home and abroad—raises great emotion and passion. There is nothing wrong with that, so long as it is not the only issue about which we feel passionately. It is right to be passionate about suffering, whether it happens at home or abroad, to people or to animals. While we talk dispassionately about illegal trade, customs, seizures and the tonnage of worked or raw ivory, elephants are being poached and killed. My attention was drawn this morning to a leaflet that I received from the Born Free Foundation, and I shall quote from it:

> Every hour of every day another elephant is illegally killed for its "bloody" ivory tusks.

There is a photograph of a female elephant killed in Kenya. Her ivory has been removed:

> She was a nursing female, and her orphaned calf has little chance of survival . . . The slaughter is horrifying, poachers are shooting elephants with automatic weapons and hacking off their tusks with axes and chainsaws.

None of us wants that to continue.

We have heard the argument that elephant numbers are very low. I am not motivated by the lowness of the numbers—in some ways, that is a red herring. What motivates me is the suffering of the elephants whose ivory is poached. Suffering and justice are crucial to the debate. The ivory trade is thousands of years old, but we know better today, and justice demands that we do much more.

10.32 am

Mr. David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire): I congratulate the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) on securing the debate at exactly the appropriate time: there are just weeks to go before the next CITES discussions in east Africa. He has painted a vivid picture of the background to the debate and the problems that confront the nations that will be represented at Nairobi.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon (Angela Smith), the hon. Gentleman concentrated on the plight of the African elephant. I turn to the plight of the Cetorhinus maximus, known to its friends—that incudes me, I hope— as the basking shark. I shall set out the facts that make that species vulnerable, before moving on briefly to the international position and the case for its inclusion in appendix 2. I am pleased and proud that our nation is proposing inclusion. The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington said that inclusion in appendix 2 was no guarantee that the species concerned would be strongly and successfully defended, but it is, at least, a first step.

Basking sharks are, without doubt, a vulnerable species and are recognised as such in the red list of threatened species drawn up by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, also known as the World Conservation Union. The sharks are protected in Great Britain, the Isle of Man, Guernsey, in the waters off New Zealand, in parts of the United States and in the Mediterranean sea. However, they migrate extensively and, although they may be protected in one country, are extremely vulnerable to unmanaged and unsustainable fisheries elsewhere.

Commercial fishing of fins and oil for international trade has seriously depleted shark stocks. Fins continue to increase in value as an ingredient in shark fin soup. Indeed, in China last year, one large fin was sold for the equivalent of £10,000, which suggests the economic value of the shark to those who prey on it. Sharks accidentally caught outside the limited protected waters that I mentioned earlier are much more likely to have their large fin removed than they are to be released because the fin is valued so highly. That damages the shark population and is immensely wasteful as killing sharks for fins results in meat being discarded in the ocean.

If unrestricted and unregulated fishing continues, basking shark numbers will probably decrease to a point at which local extinction is highly likely. Most documented basking shark fisheries have collapsed after relatively short periods of exploitation. Reports on the species show a consistent pattern of rapid decline followed by a long period of low population numbers in the past 50 years or so. Indeed, that phenomenon is observed in other large shark populations in many parts of the world, including Europe, north America, Japan and China.

Basking sharks are especially vulnerable to targeted fisheries because they grow slowly, mature late, and bear few young after a long gestation. Estimates show that, at best, the basking shark population may grow by 1 to 2 per cent. per annum. We should consider that carefully, as experience shows that some basking shark populations have not recovered decades after being exploitatively fished. I hope that the member nations of CITES in Nairobi will consider that carefully.

I am delighted that our Government have proposed that the basking shark be listed in appendix 2. Indeed, they have done some active lobbying and, with the support of the wildlife and countryside link, distributed leaflets to all CITES secretariats. I am sure that hon. Members will wish to join me in congratulating them on that.

The proposal is strong and environmentally attractive and undoubtedly appeals to us in the Chamber. However, those states that are adamantly against any form of marine fish listing are sure to oppose it in Nairobi, along with their camp followers. Those countries—in the main, Norway and Japan—will argue that no marine fish should be listed until all the marine fish listings have been reviewed by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and National Resources, CITES and the Food and Agriculture Organisation. They will argue that the FAO plan of action for shark conservation and management will give sharks sufficient protection.

Our Government are aware of that and the International Fund for Animal Welfare has discussed the issue with the Parliamentary Secretary at the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, who is extremely worried about the matter. My hon. Friend is not optimistic that the necessary two thirds majority for the proposal will be achieved. It will be a struggle; the Minister has a good understanding of related issues and

[Mr. David Taylor]

his colleague is especially well placed to handle the negotiations and campaigning on the issue. That is not intended as a criticism of the Minister who is responsible for aviation and countryside access and a rich, wide and astonishing variety of other matters. I hope that my hon. Friend the Fisheries Minister can be encouraged to attend the conference in a few weeks' time.

There are two ways to combat the argument that will be advanced by Norway and Japan, who will oppose the inclusion of the basking shark in appendix 2. They should be told, first, that sharks are not marine fish in the commonly understood definition of that species. A classic example is that of the cod, with its huge reproductive potential; there are other, similar species. The biology and life history of sharks have far more in common with cetaceans; shark populations are slower to recover from harvesting than whales and they are, therefore, much more vulnerable to unregulated exploitation. A significant drop in the numbers of sharks will always be worrying, whatever the outcome of criteria reviews.

Secondly—this matter should be tackled head on—it should be stated that the FAO international plan of action on sharks is a wholly voluntary and untried management tool. It will never carry as much weight as CITES, an established agreement on international trade in species, which is far more appropriate as the monitoring tool for the basking shark. How will the Government counter the arguments that Norway and Japan put before CITES? The nations in Nairobi next month should support the Government's proposal that basking sharks should meet the criteria listed in conference resolution 924, which states:

it is known, inferred and projected that harvesting of specimens from the wild for international trade has, or may have, a detrimental impact on the species by exceeding, over an extended period, the level that can be continued in perpetuity

Appendix 2 listing is necessary to ensure that the international trade in basking shark parts or derivatives is conducted in a sustainable manner and is not detrimental to the survival of the species. Inclusion in appendix 2 would encourage international co-operation, which is not always evident in matters of this kind, for the successful management of basking shark stocks. Sharks that are managed or protected in one country may continue to be highly vulnerable to unmanaged, unsustainable fisheries elsewhere in their range.

A CITES listing would help to monitor the numbers of sharks that are harvested after accidental capture and could help to regulate their significant and sad mortality. It would encourage the introduction of effective fisheries management and research to ensure that future catches are sustainable. Finally, it would help parties to meet the recommendations of the FAO's newly agreed plan of action for the conservation and management of sharks.

I am confident that a strong case can be made for the listing of the basking shark in appendix 2. I am even more confident that the Fisheries Minister should be encouraged to blank out three or four days of his diary, which is not insignificant for a busy Minister, for something that is crucial to the future of the basking shark. The mental image of a basking shark is of a Conservative Member bathing off the south coast of the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Mr. Lepper). Conservative Members are, of course, an endangered species, but the threat to the basking shark is much more serious. I urge the Minister to take these points on board, and discuss them with his hon. Friend the Fisheries Minister as quickly as possible and obtain tickets tomorrow for the flight to Nairobi.

10.45 am

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North): I am pleased to be able to contribute briefly. I congratulate the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) on securing the debate, during which he has eloquently and comprehensively outlined the predicament of elephants and the general issues relating to the CITES conference in Nairobi next month. The timing is appropriate, not only because of the imminence of the CITES conference—I believe that it is the 11th convention of the parties—but because of last night's Second Reading debate on the Countryside and Rights of Way Bill. This should tell us that, however admirable the attempts by Governments to secure protection for wildlife and conserve their natural resources, ultimately it remains a matter for international negotiation and agreement. The CITES conference is a classic example of the way in which Governments, if they have the political will, can work together to secure international agreement.

When something scandalous, disgraceful or disturbing happens in another country, for whatever reason, there is always a risk of our thinking that our Government should automatically respond. I am as conscious as any other hon. Member that there are limits to the powers of individual Governments. However, on the trade in ivory, the shells of hawksbill turtles or whale meat, our Government can make a difference, depending on the position that they adopt or persuade our European Union partners to adopt at the CITES conference. I want to put one or two powerful arguments for taking a strong line at the conference.

In recent years there has been a huge increase in public interest in matters of animal welfare, the conservation of natural resources and biodiversity. There are now more members of animal welfare and conservation groups than of all the political parties together. There are more members of conservation groups than of trade unions and certainly more than there are active churchgoers. The animal welfare conservation lobby is becoming increasingly powerful, and is especially influential among young people. I wish to draw attention to our on-going concerns about the involvement of young people in the political process, the apparently growing alienation of young people from the process and their cynicism about politics and what it can and cannot achieve. The Nairobi conference presents an ideal opportunity for the Government to reconnect with young voters and show them that they share an interest that is dear to their hearts by taking firm action on the international trade in animals.

The ban on, and close regulation of, this international trade is crucial for maintaining biodiversity. In last night's Second Reading debate on the Countryside and Rights of Way Bill, there was a brief but interesting reference to the status of the United Kingdom's biodiversity action plan and whether it should have full

legal status. CITES is an international convention that does have legal powers. It is critical that we use that status to maintain global biodiversity. I argue that on not only the abstract ground that it is important to maintain a wide variety of species, but because the maintenance of a wide variety of species is crucial to the fragile ecology on which we all depend. The environment that supports that wide variety of species is the same as that in which human beings exist.

I do not necessarily accept that western countries should tell people in other parts of the world how to conduct their business and trade. On some occasions, there is a tendency to a form of neo-imperialism; we can be accused of lecturing countries and peoples who have earned their living and constructed their economies for many years through the trade in animals. Nevertheless, we must engage in constructive argument with them. We must raise their awareness of the wider global implications of the threats to biodiversity posed by some of the traditional economic practices. I urge the Government to use their influence with the European Union to take a strong line on any attempts to downgrade particular animals from appendix 1 to appendix 2. I urge my hon. Friend the Minister to take on board very carefully the representations that have been made by all hon. Members.

10.51 am

Mr. David Lepper (Brighton, Pavilion): I congratulate the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) on securing the debate. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) on the early-day motion on the ivory trade, which has secured the support of a number of hon. Members across the parties. I hope also that my hon. Friend the Minister will take note of the number of Labour Members who want to take part in today's debate; it is a sign of our strong feeling, which is shared throughout the House. The information that has been provided by organisations such as the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society, the Environment Information Agency, the International Fund for Animal Welfare, Wildlife and Countryside Link and the Born Free Foundation has been of a high quality. It has ensured that we are all better informed about these vital issues.

I hope that the Ministers will take note of the comments that have been made about the importance of CITES for a number of species. I endorse the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for North-West Leicestershire (Mr. Taylor) about the importance of having a ministerial presence at CITES. I have already written to my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment, suggesting that he might find time to attend, but following the events yesterday, I suspect that he will be busy on more domestic matters over the next few weeks.

In view of the important role played by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food at the international whaling convention a year or so ago, perhaps he might find time to attend. I suggest that not for the reason that my hon. Friend the Member for North-West Leicestershire has given, but because if the vote goes the wrong way on certain proposals on whaling, it could severely affect the balance that exists between CITES and the international whaling convention. The internaitonal whaling convention is recognised as the governing body for whaling matters and some of the proposals from Japan and Norway could upset that balance. My hon. Friend the Fisheries Minister is well respected internationally and he would have a valuable contribution to make to those discussions.

A number of species have been referred to. With the exception of the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker), I am the only Member with a coastal constituency. I shall perhaps concentrate on Eretmochelys imbricata, the Cuban hawksbill turtle, which is not native to the Sussex coast, as far as we know. One of the problems with the proposal to downlist the Cuban hawksbill turtle to appendix 2 is that its migratory habits are not fully known. I do not think that it has been sighted off the coast of Newhaven or Brighton, but anything is possible. Doubts exist about its habits, which is one reason why it should not be downlisted as Cuba proposes.

Many of us are worried about the way in which alliances have been formed on a number of separate issues in the run-up to the talks. Clearly, Japan and Norway have used their influence in terms of trade agreements and support through aid to try to ensure that their proposals on whaling receive support. We do not know what discussions the Cuban Government may have had with those countries to stitch up a deal on whaling, which might include the downlisting of the hawksbill turtle.

Why is the hawksbill turtle so important? It is the smallest of the six species of marine turtles and is currently on the CITES appendix 1 listing. It is also listed as critically endangered on the red list of threatened animals. The threats to it include illegal trade in its shells, harvesting of eggs, loss of habitat and entanglement in nets. Globally, the species has declined by 80 per cent. in the past 60 years, and approximately half the nesting population is known or suspected to be in decline. The best estimate of the sexual maturity of hawksbills is 20 to 40 years. Only one egg in 500 to 1,000 is likely to survive to adulthood. The species suffers from high early mortality, and its delayed maturity requires large populations to maintain a small but stable adult population.

The danger of removing mature animals from a slowly declining population is severe, although the consequences may not be visible for decades. Decisions taken in a month's time—even though they can be reversed in three years at the next CITES conference—could have severe repercussions. The hawksbills play a critical role in coral reef conservation. Their diet of toxic and armoured sponges creates gaps for the settlement of reef-building species and provides foraging access for fish that cannot penetrate the sponge's armour. It is not only the turtles that are at risk but the ecological system in which they live.

I hope that the parties to the convention, and certainly the EU delegation, will be persuaded by a strong line taken by the United Kingdom Government and representatives on this issue. If the threat to the species were not enough to convince people of the need to retain the appendix 1 listing, the Chamber should be aware of the description given by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals of the method used to slaughter the hawksbill turtle. Turtles are difficult to kill humanely—certain drugs are recommended, but

[Mr. David Lepper]

even with the correct lethal dose and administration the animal can take many hours to die. That is especially true if pentobarbitone sodium is used. In practice, it is likely that the animals will have their shells ripped off while still alive—which I hope that all hon. Members would agree is totally unacceptable—or be decapitated. The only way in which that method can be slightly improved is by administering drugs beforehand and pithing the brain and the spinal cord after decapitation. It is doubted whether turtle poachers would take the time to use even this partly humane method.

There is a strong case for the standpoint of our delegation and the Government can influence it. If there were more time I would have argued the case for Tersiops truncatus ponticus—the Black sea bottlenose dolphin. My interest in dolphins dates back to when I worked with what became the Born Free Foundation to ensure the return to the wild of the dolphins that were once on display in the Brighton dolphinarium. Times have changed, I am pleased to say, and in this country we now think differently about those creatures. Perhaps other hon. Members will talk further about the risks to that species.

Thank you for calling me to speak in this debate, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am sure that the Minister will have much food for thought as a result of it.

11 am

Mrs. Helen Brinton (Peterborough): I also congratulate the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) on securing this important debate. I am grateful for the opportunity to add my voice to all those hon. Members who are attempting to influence the outcome of the CITES talks next month.

We have heard some effective and passionate speeches—for example, that of my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon (Angela Smith), whose interest in these matters was sparked off by a fascination for elephant ears when she was at school. I am sure that her teachers must feel proud of what she is doing now. We have also heard the passionate speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Mr. Lepper), whose work is well known. His description of the death of the turtle—I do not know the Latin name—should be enough to convince us, if we need any more convincing, that this terrible practice has to be stopped.

Labour Members are not criticising the United Kingdom Government staff, but seeking to strengthen commitments by a display of Back-Bencher opinion. I hope that the debate will be reported nationally and internationally. Only 11 hon. Members may be present today, but interest in this matter is increasing—both within and outside the House of Commons. A total of 125 Members from all parties have so far signed early-day motion 342, which relates to the ivory trade.

At the talks, the UK voice will be heard throughout the European Union, so it is vital that our representatives at Nairobi should ensure a united front in line with the best European Union traditions. In 1997, the EU regulations on wildlife trade were enthusiastically welcomed by key organisations such as the World Wide Fund for Nature. Unsurprisingly, implementation is much more difficult in certain member states.

This good and encouraging news is in complete contrast to the EU position adopted at the last conference of the parties to CITES, in which the EU disgraced itself by abstaining on a crucial vote, which would have transferred certain elephant populations from appendix 1, thereby allowing and promoting the sale of nearly 60 tonnes of raw ivory from elephant populations in Botswana, Namibia and, as we have heard today, Zimbabwe. South Africa has now joined those countries to propose yet further obscene sales of ivory, while Kenya and India propose a total ban by listing all elephant populations in appendix 1.

I am delighted to join my colleagues of all parties in urging the Minister to persuade the EU to support the Indian and Kenyan position. I hope that he will find time, notwithstanding his busy diary, to attend the conference for those four days, as he has been urged to do today. I understand that the Indian and Kenyan position was generally supported at a recent meeting of 21 elephant range states.

As we have heard, the other major proposed downlistings concern whales, and my hon. Friend the Member for Pavilion has talked passionately about the basking whale. Japan and Norway are behind the proposals to remove protected status from certain whale populations. Japan in particular has exploited legal exceptions to continue whaling for so-called scientific purposes. It also wants to sever the links between CITES and the International Whaling Commission, the recognised body for the conservation and management of whales stocks and the regulation of whaling activities. Even worse, Japan is in effect using aid to bribe smaller and developing countries to support its position at the talks. If those moves are successful, other countries, such as Russia and Iceland, are likely to resume whaling.

As time is tight and we are looking forward to hearing the Minister's response, I shall cut short my remarks and end on this point. We must use the instruments and organisations that we have to tackle the most pressing issues. The preservation of whales and elephants is just such an issue, and I urge the Minister to give it his most forceful consideration.

11.5 am

Mr. Damian Green (Ashford): I add my congratulations to the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) not just, in conventional terms, on securing the debate but also on what he said. He not only gave us a fascinating and important history of the operation of CITES since its formation and of other protection measures, but gave a compelling analysis of the problems that the Government face and, in particular, revealed that they are in the throes of betraying their pre-election promise, which he read out.

I hope that the multi-portfolioed and multi-talented Minister, as we have discovered him to be in the past 24 hours or so, will be able to explain what the Government's position will be and how that squares with what they promised before the election. He will recognise the importance not only of the intrinsic issues but of the tone that the Government adopt.

I agree with the hon. Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor), who used the phrase "neo-imperialism". There are two great dangers in the debate. The first is that the House thinks that it should urge the

Government to find a solution to problems that essentially belong to other countries; the second, more serious, danger is that this country will adopt a tone of imperialism or moral superiority. The Government should avoid such a tone, simply because it will be less effective in the long run in obtaining the animal and species protection that Members on both sides of the House want.

I hope that the Government will continue many of the CITES policies that the UK has adopted for a number of years. The Minister will be aware that at the 1992 CITES conference the previous Government were instrumental in persuading many other countries to maintain the ban on the sale of ivory. There was then, as there is today, a group of countries that wished to change the situation and the UK was successful in persuading them not to do so. Similarly, under the previous Government the UK supported the decision to stamp out the illegal trade in rhino horn and tiger parts. We welcome the Government's recent initiatives to give the remaining tiger population extra protection. To revert to the subject that has dominated most of our debate this morning—the protection of elephants—the previous Government contributed considerable sums of taxpayers' money to elephant conservation projects.

Clearly, what is of most interest today is the forthcoming Nairobi conference. There is a great disparity between what, on paper, appears to be a good and efficient regime and what is actually happening, so how does the Minister propose to help CITES enforce its own rules? Even if Kenya and India are successful in their bid to maintain the bans on trade in appendix 1, countries can seek a reservation allowing them to continue with ivory sales. Under existing CITES rules, proceeds from ivory sales must be spent on elephant conservation. For countries such as Zimbabwe, which faces a worrying political position and considerable economic hardship, funding for such essential conservation work is not easily come by. None of us would want the position on conservation to become even worse than it is. I therefore accept that the Minister's position is not easy.

The most worrying aspect of the debate about the sale of ivory concerns its direct effect on the level of illegal poaching. The position was rather bad in the 1970s, became extremely bad in the 1980s and improved slightly after international limits were imposed, but the thrust of evidence shows that it is now worsening again. We can only conclude that the new monitoring system—the MIKE system mentioned by the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington—and the related elephant trade information system are not yet effective. Until they are effective and generate information leading to enforcement, parties to CITES will not be able to take appropriate remedial action.

The interim system is not adequate to perform the systematic role that the long-term monitoring system is expected to have and which was proposed by the 10th conference of parties to CITES. Indeed, the parties have not yet agreed the thresholds and precautionary criteria needed to trigger remedial action. So the Minister, along with fellow Ministers attending the Nairobi meeting, is in a rather dangerous position. I echo suggestions that having a ministerial presence in Nairobi would be symbolically significant for this country, but I accept that the Minister and I will discuss wildlife protection in a more domestic forum during the period in which the conference takes place. However, I accept what hon. Members on all sides of the House have said about the expertise in such matters demonstrated by the Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food.

Long-term enforcement is the key to a return to a gradual improvement in the condition of elephants and an increase in the number that can thrive and survive in the wild. Clearly, that will be one of the most important issues to be considered at Nairobi. However, as hon. Members have said, the elephant will not be the only species to be affected by ministerial decisions at Nairobi.

The whale population is another matter of deep concern; the World Wide Fund for Nature regards the position on whaling as the most important decision to be taken at Nairobi. I have some sympathy with that view. We know how strongly Norway and Japan feel about the matter and that they are trying to assemble a coalition to relax the proposals on whaling. That would be damaging and I urge the Government to stand firm. No country should move back to damaging large-scale commercial whaling and countries that follow the lead of Norway and Japan are likely to have even fewer domestic controls than those two countries, so the situation may become worse than it was before.

The World Wide Fund for Nature rightly said that there is no information on proposals for domestic controls in any other potential whaling nations. Any country that started taking whales in international waters, whether or not that country was a member of the IWC, could issue itself with an introduction from the sea certificate, or a state ship could transport its catch directly to an importing country under such a certificate and bypass the international security arrangements currently in place. That would be an extremely dangerous development that would make the position more damaging than it was before. Any attempt to introduce annotations to the proposals, such as zero quota for commercial whaling purposes, would create a major loophole because, under the CITES terms, a party that is also a party to the international convention on the regulation of whaling, which includes Norway and Japan, would be exempt from CITES restrictions for whale species listed in appendix 2; thus, a zero quota would be inoperative, and there would not be an adequate safeguard. As in so many international agreements on whaling, the devil may be in the detail and I urge the Government to stand firm on the issue.

The Government will also have to answer to the House and to CITES on our domestic record. Last October it was reported that the Government were permitting illegal wildlife trade in some of our overseas territories in the Caribbean. I should be grateful if the Minister would tell the Chamber what action the Government have taken since then.

On a final note of optimism in a debate that, rightly, has mostly been pessimistic, it is a pleasure to read newspaper headlines such as "Tigers surge back from the brink", showing that the action taken on tigers in the past few years is working. I hope that the Minister will take that as inspiration. Some international agreements

[Mr. Damian Green]

can achieve their objectives. Positions are not irreversible and any decent action that he can take will be worth while.

11.19 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Chris Mullin): The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) made a powerful speech and asked some sensible questions. I say to him, gently, that it would be helpful to know in advance what is on his mind. My office attempted to contact him last Thursday, again on Friday and again yesterday, but we succeeded in establishing contact only when I passed him a note during the debate on the Countryside and Rights of Way Bill yesterday. The title of his debate is wide-ranging, but his speech was specific. If detailed answers are required, it helps to give as much notice as possible.

Mr. Brake: I apologise for not giving the Minister more advance notice. It was not intentional; I am not trying to catch him out in any way. I would welcome a written response from the Minister in the near future.

Mr. Mullin: I am grateful. I shall certainly follow up in writing any outstanding matters from today's debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) said that we had to be wary of becoming neo-imperialists lecturing poor countries on animal welfare issues when there is sometimes a mote in our own eye. His point was taken up by the hon. Member for Ashford (Mr. Green). I agree: there are some motes in our own eye. I am a member of Compassion in World Farming, which takes an interest in factory farming in this country. Many questions certainly need to be answered about the way in which we treat animals. However, a debate about that is for another day, and perhaps another Minister.

The CITES conference in April will consider more than 100 proposals, ranging from technical issues such as how the convention should treat operations that ranch and harvest animals, to high-profile proposals involving elephants, whales, turtles and sharks. I shall not go into great detail, but we shall be majoring on three issues: the listing of the basking shark; a paper on bush meat; and, together with colleagues in Germany and Switzerland, a proposal on DNA, which will help to preserve biodiversity sources by speeding up the diagnosis and treatment of wildlife disease.

Let me first deal with elephants, which the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington spoke about in his opening speech. He asked why the UK and other EU states abstained in the 1997 vote. We did so after securing significant safeguards, including the new monitoring system and agreement on a mechanism, however inadequate, to return elephants to appendix I if there were signs of increased poaching. The system now in place in Japan to monitor trade in ivory is, I am advised, the most comprehensive in the world. I will, however, reflect further on the hon. Gentleman's points about it.

We shall oppose all proposals to open up the trade in ivory, and will continue to do so until the monitoring system, which we worked so hard to achieve, provides proper results. I acknowledge the hon. Gentleman's points but, as I said, the monitoring system is the most extensive and comprehensive ever developed and should continue to be supported.

The hon. Gentleman also asked whether we accepted that elephant poaching in Kenya had risen. We accept that there has been a small increase in poaching incidents this year. The figures are lower than in 1993—but only just—and are a long way short of the terrible situation in the 1980s. We also accept the view of the CITES secretariat that the increase is not statistically significant, and that there is no evidence to link it to the experimental one-off sale in ivory. Our knowledge of poaching in Kenya is based on information supplied to CITES by the Kenya Wildlife Service. To put the figures in context, the 1999 elephant population in Kenya was approximately 28,000. In the 1980s, about 2,000 a year were killed. According to figures given to us, 57 have been killed so far this year.

My hon. Friend the Member for Basildon (Angela Smith) quoted the Born Free Foundation. I understand that the CITES secretariat has written to complain about the statistics quoted on the Born Free website. Members of the secretariat reviewed all available information and visited Kenya to follow up reports of increased poaching, and they consider the figures to be a gross distortion of the true picture. The Save the Elephants report stresses the importance of not exaggerating the amount of poaching that is taking place because doing so can help to fuel demand.

The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington referred to what he called the terror in Zimbabwe. I cannot quite subscribe to that because one must be careful about commenting on another country's internal political situation. However, the vigorous political debate that is taking place in that country recently resulted in its Government losing in a referendum, so all the signs are that freedom of speech and thought are still alive and well in Zimbabwe, whatever other problems it faces.

I was asked whether we shall send a Minister to the CITES conference. I do not think that there were any votes for my attending. For reasons that I understand perfectly, my hon. Friend the Fisheries Minister has been mentioned frequently. As far as I know, there are no plans for a Minister to attend the conference: Ministers do not usually attend CITES conferences. However, strong representations have been made and I shall draw them to my hon. Friend's attention.

Mr. Norman Baker (Lewes): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Mullin: No. I have only four minutes left and I want to comment on a couple of other subjects.

My hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Mr. Lepper) referred to turtles. We have already made clear our objection to the Cuban proposal to harvest hawksbill turtles for Japan. However, there are mixed views within the EU on a secondary proposal to allow a one-off sale of stockpiled shells. Cuba devotes significant resources to managing its fishery. Its protection of nesting sites and breeding areas has resulted in increases in the local hawksbill population. However, although we are

supportive of Cuban efforts to improve the conservation status of the species, we are aware that their biology remains complex. They range widely, and Cuba has yet to produce convincing evidence that its proposals will not have an impact on turtle populations elsewhere in the Caribbean. Our feeling is that there should be no international trade in hawksbill products other than as part of a wider initiative, possibly under the convention on migratory species, to protect nesting sites and breeding areas and to tackle accidental by-catch.

My hon. Friends the Members for Basildon and for Peterborough (Mrs. Brinton) spoke about whales. There is agreement among EU countries to oppose Norwegian and Japanese proposals to allow international trade in minke and grey whales. We also oppose proposals to change the existing relationship between the CITES convention and the International Whaling Commission. Under agreements that they have backed since the early days, CITES parties have accepted that the IWC should be the lead body in determining issues relating to whaling. CITES has long respected the moratorium on catching whales by putting great whales in appendix 1 of the convention, thereby preventing international trade in whales and their products. We see no reason to change that, and we shall continue to work hard to persuade the CITES parties that are unfamiliar with the IWC that opposition to the proposals is the only way of preventing an upsurge in commercial whaling.

My hon. Friend the Member for North-West Leicestershire (Mr. Taylor) mentioned basking sharks. He will be glad to hear that the United Kingdom has proposed to list the basking shark in appendix 2, which would regulate the worldwide trade in the sharks.

I have only one minute left before I turn into the Minister responsible for aviation but, before doing so, I will say something about elephants. We and other EU states are disappointed that several African countries submitted proposals that may have a further impact on the conservation status of elephants. We have urged those countries to withdraw their proposals until monitoring and control systems have had time to bed down and produce meaningful results. There are encouraging signs that some countries are preparing to withdraw their proposals.

Aircraft Emissions

11.30 am

Mr. Tony Colman (Putney): I am grateful to Madam Speaker for agreeing to this Adjournment debate on aircraft emissions and the Kyoto protocol. I am not sure whether my hon. Friend the Minister is as pleased as I am; he is dealing with at least three Adjournment debates, following the work that he did in winding up the debate on the Countryside and Rights of Way Bill last night. I am pleased that he is here as the Aviation Minister.

The recently pubished draft United Kingdom programme for dealing with climate change has a thermometer on the front cover, with the red of the mercury going up to, but not reaching, a pictogram of an aircraft, clearly depicting that as yet the Government have a limited programme for dealing with aircraft emissions, as shown on pages 91 and 92. Furthermore, we are still waiting for the civil aviation daughter paper to the main White Paper on integrated transport, published by the Government in early 1999. The purpose of this debate is to ask the Government to flesh out the options for action.

The Minister will know of the Adjournment debate that I secured on the need to remove all night flights from Heathrow, the need for strict controls on noise and the lack of a need for terminal 5. Those concerns form the backdrop to this debate.

The intergovernmental panel on climate change in 1999 estimated that aircraft might be responsible for 5 to 6 per cent. of the warming caused by greenhouse gases. However, some of the study's authors believe that the figure could be 10 per cent. or more—that is, amounting to more than half the global warming potential emissions from road transport. Emissions from aircraft are alleged to be doubling every 10 years. The Kyoto protocol excludes aircraft because the negotiators could not agree on how to allocate responsibility for emissions made during international flights.

The International Civil Aviation Organisation prepared its own special report on aviation and the global atmosphere, in which it confirmed those figures. The Kyoto negotiators at last put aircraft emissions back on the agenda at the fifth conference of the parties—COP5—in Bonn last October. However, emission reductions of 60 to 80 per cent. on 1990 levels by 2050 are needed to stabilise the earth's climate systems, according to the IPCC. Clearly, a world agreement is needed and I look forward to the Government taking a strong line at COP6 in the Netherlands this autumn.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer on his successful advocacy earlier this month to his European Union colleagues, securing agreement to the basis for an aircraft fuel kerosene tax. The discussions now move to the ICAO meeting next week. It is important that a worldwide agreement is reached. If such a tax were imposed only in the EU, avoidance tactics might be used elsewhere. I should like a commitment that the proceeds of such a tax will be used to commence work on the zero-emission engines and aircraft that will be needed in the next 50 years; only a zero-emission aircraft requirement will ensure that the availability of flying to the people of the world is not restricted.

[Mr. Tony Colman]

At an excellent display in the mind zone of the dome, the audience is asked questions on the impact of emissions from aircraft, and it is stated that 99 per cent. of the people of the world have never flown and should do so only if their flying does not harm the atmosphere. Furthermore, such an expansion in the availability of flights requires an airports policy for the 21st century, with new airports well away from conurbations with high-speed train links. Terminal 5, with its supposed 8 per cent. ceiling on more flights, and no second runway at Heathrow, of which we are assured, will not provide the answer.

I have mentioned EU agreement on aviation fuel taxation. The EU research programmes on such matters are accelerating and, as with the auto-oil proposals, the European Parliament is likely to force changes in aircraft design and acceptability before 2010. The United Kingdom should not wait for Europe or the ICAO to agree a regional or world way forward; we have shown leadership in such matters and we should do so again. Voluntary agreements are being reached, industry by industry, to reduce carbon dioxide and greenhouse gas emissions in the United Kingdom, and there are reductions in the climate change levy for industries that do so. The airline industry has an equivalent to a climate change levy in its consumer tax—air passenger duty, which could be significantly reduced, perhaps by 50 to 80 per cent.

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North): On air passenger duty, does my hon. Friend agree with the chief executive of easyJet, who said that the existing air passenger duty structure is unfair and simplistic? It penalises passengers who take short-haul flights, but fails to levy an appropriate charge on intercontinental flights, which by and large are made by affluent individuals and those on corporate business. Does he think that there is scope for a fairer structure?

Mr. Colman: I thank my hon. Friend for that interesting intervention. Certainly, my speech is about equity and enabling people to fly, but my concern is that easyJet's aircraft should have low or zero emissions. We must recognise that short-haul journeys are often better made on high-speed train links such as Eurostar than on flights. Having said that, I admire the attempt to lower the cost of flying for the people of Europe. In introducing air passenger duty, Nigel Lawson described it as a replacement for tax on air fuel, and we regard it in the same way as climate change levies. As I have said, a significant reduction in air passenger duty—50 per cent. to 80 per cent., say—will be available to airlines that commit to stretching targets for emissions reduction. As the APD reduction could be made in lieu of compliance costs associated with stretching fuel efficiency targets in other ways, the scheme should not distort competition.

The Association of European Airlines has, I am told, secured agreement from its members to an efficiency improvement target of 22.4 per cent. for 1990–2012. Of that figure, 14.1 per cent. resulted from fleet renewal and an improvement in load factor and the remaining 8.3 per cent. is predicated on fleet replacement. I am pleased to say that British Airways has committed to a 30 per cent. improvement on its 1990 fuel efficiency figures by 2010. However, those are assertions; there is no formal check. The Minister should make, if you like, binding agreements, so that UK and, if you like, European regulations can nail down the voluntary arrangements.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. John McWilliam): Order. Whether I like binding agreements or European regulations has nothing to do with the debate. The hon. Gentleman should remember that, in using the word "you", he is referring to me and no one else.

Mr. Colman: I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

The airline industry also claims that a further 10 per cent. saving could be made if the Government agree to operational efficiency in air traffic control and air traffic management. I am sure that the matter will arise again in discussions on public-private partnership and National Air Traffic Services. Will the proposals, which would make a start on taking aircraft emissions seriously, be taken up by the Government and discussed at next week's meeting of the International Civil Aviation Organisation?

I have five key questions for the Government. First, do they support the inclusion of aviation emissions in their national greenhouse gas inventories in time for this year's climate change treaty conference of the parties? Secondly, will they make the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions an explicit objective of the new White Paper on airports? Thirdly, in developing that White Paper, will they introduce explicit demand management measures in respect of airports if there is no way forward for zero-emission aircraft? Fourthly, do they support measures for a Europewide charge on aircraft emissions to help to reduce the contribution of aviation to climate change? Fifthly, will they enter into an agreement—as they have done elsewhere—with the airline industry and use the air passenger duties as an equivalent to the climate change levy to negotiate binding agreements in the UK?

In addition to those questions, I should like to take up the cause of manufacturing industry, which has been much in the news in the past two weeks. Earlier this month, everyone was delighted to hear the announcement of the £500 million Government loan guarantee to BAE Systems to enable it to start work on the wings for the new Airbus A3XX, which was dubbed the "green giant" by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. He said that it will use

20 per cent. less fuel per passenger

and will be

quieter and cleaner than comparable planes.

Clearly, airframe improvements can deliver fuel efficiencies, but the key to lower aircraft emissions is the motor power source—the engines. Where was an announcement about support to Rolls-Royce for the development of a new generation of zero-emission non-fossil-fuel engines—the sort of quantum leap that the RB211, which was supported by the previous Labour Government, represented in the 1970s?

I am told that current technology on hydrogen and fuel cells is not practical at present—hydrogen is bulky to transport and fuel cells are not light enough for air travel. Similar objections were recently made about the feasibility of land-based transport using that

technology, but those were overcome. I was disappointed to discover that none of the current foresight panels is working on that. Other programmes are going ahead. The work on "Air Travel—Greener by Design" by the Society of British Aerospace Companies seems to take a more general approach. The foresight link award for the work on fuel control sensors to help reduce aircraft pollution that is being carried out by Cranfield university, the university of Sheffield, Rolls-Royce and Lucas Aerospace sounds promising, and I hope that it will be incorporated in the A3XX. Proper enforcement of the Kyoto protocol should mean more jobs and prosperity for the new technological industries, and new aircraft design is part of that change.

In addition to a response to those points, I hope to hear from my hon. Friend and his colleagues at the Department of Trade and Industry about the good news for manufacturing industry at Rolls-Royce in the midlands and Scotland.

Aircraft emissions are not on the agenda for the subsidiary body for implementation, which is meeting in Bonn on 12 to 16 June, prior to the sixth conference of the parties. Yesterday, I spent two hours ploughing through 44 pages of text on the internet to discover that. I look forward to faster engines in those systems as well. The UK must be proactive—there is still time before June. That proactivity is needed to establish solutions, some of which I have suggested in my speech. The key must be to ensure that everyone on earth who could fly, can. Without new technology, they will not be able to do so, and without control on aircraft emissions, the advent of global warming will inevitably accelerate.

Last month, Michael Zammit Cutajar, the executive secretary-general of the United Nations framework convention on climate change, said at the 10th UN conference on trade and development:

> The ultimate objective of the strategy is to halt the build-up of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere before it becomes dangerous. Efficiency in limiting further emissions of these gases is vital for success. Equity in distributing responsibility for these limitations is vital for political engagements. Visions of the economic opportunities of a climate-friendly future would transform the language of negotiation from "burden sharing" to "win-win".
>
> It is this linkage with the economy that relates the climate change scenario to that of globalisation. Climate change is a by-product of two centuries of economic growth, so action to address it must pass through the economy of the 21st century. Greater efficiency and cleaner technologies are needed in the energy, transport and industrial sectors, among others. This can be a driver of technological change, "green jobs" and "green profits". The international response can also generate a new push in favour of the transfer of technology and know-how to developing countries and capacity building.

Aircraft building and design is a perfect example of the clean development mechanism—the CDM. The UK leads the world in that, and it could be our gift to the world to solve the problem of aircraft emissions and lead to effective implementation of the Kyoto protocol, which is not happening at present.

11.43 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Chris Mullin): My hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Mr. Colman) has raised an important issue, which I know is of great interest to him and his constituents, who have many noisy planes flying over them. He asked me several detailed questions.

Mr. Colman: It is not only the problem of aircraft noise that I am concerned about, but that of the pollution and emissions coming from those aeroplanes.

Mr. Mullin: Indeed. Those emissions are the main subject of our discussions today. No doubt we shall discuss noise another day.

My hon. Friend asked me a number of detailed questions. May I gently say to him what I said to the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake)—that it is helpful to have advance notice of such questions? I shall do my best to answer them, but if I do so inadequately we shall follow up the matter with correspondence.

The International Civil Aviation Organisation meeting next week will be a working group that the United Kingdom and the United States will chair jointly. The decisions will be made at the ICAO assembly in September and October 2001. My hon. Friend the Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor), who is no longer in the Chamber, made a point about air passenger duty, which is a matter for my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer. I have noted the point and will draw it to the Chancellor's attention.

My hon. Friend the Member for Putney asked a question about the inclusion of international emissions. I am advised that that is a matter for discussion at the conference of the parties, not for the ICAO. The agenda for the working party has not yet been settled, but all the options will be considered. Demand measures are unlikely to be one of the Government's objectives.

The use of air passenger duty to negotiate binding agreements is only one option. The Association of European Airlines efficiency targets are proposals for voluntary agreements, and the ICAO is considering a range of market-based options.

The United Kingdom played a key part in negotiating the Kyoto protocol, in which developed countries agreed to cut their combined emissions of greenhouse gases by an average of 5.2 per cent. between 2008 and 2012. The European Community agreed a larger reduction of 8 per cent. and that target was subsequently shared out, with the UK agreeing to a 12.5 per cent. cut. We are developing our programme to deliver that target and to meet our domestic goal of a 20 per cent. cut in carbon dioxide emissions by 2010.

On 9 March, the Government published their draft UK climate change programme. This will form the basis for action to fulfil our obligations. The final UK programme will be prepared by the autumn, and the UK will then be in a position to rafity the Kyoto protocol. Many issues remain to be settled and we are working closely with our European partners and other countries to ensure that the protocol comes into force as soon as possible. In November, the sixth conference of the parties will be held in The Hague and countries will need to reach agreement on a range of outstanding issues.

Aviation is an important issue in relation to the Kyoto protocol and plays an important part in our lives. It is vital for trade and makes a significant contribution to our economy. It is a major growth industry and air

[Mr. Mullin]

traffic is forecast to double in the next 15 years. However, that growth will not be without problems of both noise and emissions. Aviation contributes to climate change with worldwide emissions constituting some 2 per cent. of all man-made carbon dioxide. Aviation also produces other emissions, many of them going directly into the sensitive upper atmosphere. They include oxides of nitrogen—which lead to the formation of ozone—particulates and water vapour, which lead to the formation of contrails. There are uncertainties about their exact effects of climate change, but they could be as great as those of carbon dioxide alone.

Globally, aviation emissions are expected to increase from 115 million tonnes of carbon in 1992 to between 245 and 265 million tonnes in 2015. Of those emissions, international aviation accounts for approximately half. Emissions from domestic aviation are already included in the Kyoto targets and United Kingdom domestic aviation accounts for only about 10 per cent. of the 9 million tonnes of aviation fuel sold annually. The remainder is international. Emissions from international aviation are not included in the targets agreed by Kyoto.

Mr. Colman: My hon. Friend seemed to imply that while international aviation emissions are not within the Kyoto targets, domestic aviation emissions are. Will he confirm that that is so and that they will be included in the final proposals on climate change, because they are not included in the draft document?

Mr. Mullin: I said that emissions from domestic aviation are already included and that emissions from international aviation are not, which also applies to international shipping. To date, there has been no agreement on how or whether to allocate them to individual countries—the subject is very complex. Instead, the Kyoto protocol requires developed countries to limit or reduce emissions by working through the ICAO.

In 1996, the ICAO invited the intergovernmental panel on climate change to prepare a report on the effects of aviation and the steps needed to be taken to address them. The result was the special report on aviation and the global atmosphere published last June. It was the first panel report on a single sector and represents an authoritative and policy-neutral assessment of the science and technology of the effects of aviation on the atmosphere and the measures that have been taken and need to be taken to mitigate them.

The ICAO is also working, through its committee on aviation environmental protection, to develop policies and measures to encourage development of aircraft and engine technology so that it is less polluting. In the United Kingdom, Rolls-Royce and the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency are at the forefront of research into improved engine technology. The Department of Trade and Industry is also sponsoring research on how the environmental impact of air travel can be reduced. The Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions works closely with my Department on that research.

The ICAO is also considering how market-based options such as an aviation fuel tax, emissions trading or voluntary agreements might be developed. They could provide fiscal incentives to use and develop more efficient aircraft. It is considering how aircraft could be flown on more direct routes and how less fuel might be wasted, for example, in holding stacks of aircraft waiting to land. In Europe, Eurocontrol is also involved. On 28 January this year, European Ministers issued a statement identifying the need to take account of environmental impact in future strategy.

Improved aircraft and engine design is leading to reductions in emissions and improvements are constantly being researched, but it should be recognised that it is unlikely that the industry will ever reach a point at which aircraft emit no noxious gases or water vapour. Even hydrogen would produce water vapour. That does not mean that no improvement can be made and, in the light of our goals under the Kyoto protocol, emissions reduction will remain very much on our agenda.

The committee on aviation environmental protection has been asked to report to the next ICAO assembly, which will be held in September next year, and the United Kingdom is playing a leading role in developing policy options ahead of the assembly.

Action is also being taken in the European Union. The Commission published a communication on air transport and the environment, which suggested a coherent strategy within the EU. In particular, it addressed how the EU could maximise its influence at the ICAO assembly, where the United Kingdom is one of the key players. Ministers will consider their response at the Transport Council on 28 March, but we expect it to be supportive.

The EU published a communication on its policies and measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. It also published a document on the environmental, economic and legal implications of taxing aviation fuel. It recommends that the EU allows member states to impose taxes on aviation fuel domestically and permits bilateral agreements to tax fuel. However, it notes that for environmental and economic reasons it would not be practicable or desirable for the Community as a whole to introduce taxation targeting only intra-Community services. I am sure that my hon. Friend understands the logic of that. One concern is that fuel would be tankered in by airlines to avoid high taxes, leading to a net increase in fuel emissions.

My hon. Friend raised an important issue that will undoubtedly occupy everyone concerned with the aviation industry for years to come. It is also important in dealing with the survival of the planet and reducing overall levels of pollution. I am grateful to him for raising the subject and I hope that he is reassured that we are at least on the case, even if we do not have all the solutions.

11.56 am

Sitting suspended.

Housing (Hampshire)

12 noon

Mr. Andrew Hunter (Basingstoke): I welcome this short debate on the implications for Hampshire of the Government's housing policies. I also welcome the presence of my right hon. Friends the Members for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) and for Fareham (Sir P. Lloyd), my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Mr. Viggers) and the hon. Member for Winchester (Mr. Oaten). During nearly 17 years as a Hampshire Member, no other issue has so consistently generated so much concern among my constituents as new house building. We acknowledge that there are legitimate pressures for new housing, but not to the extent accepted by the Government. We also know that the vibrant economy demands a vibrant work force, but we do not accept the reasons that have so far been given for the urbanisation of so much of our countryside.

I am concerned about the number of houses to be built up to 2016. The south-east regional planning committee—Serplan—originally envisaged an annual average of 5,212 new houses in the county. The Crow report proposed a preposterous 8,450 houses each year. Subject to five-year monitoring, and based on previously proposed distribution, the Government now appear to be thinking in terms of approximately 6,500 new houses each year. It is not surprising that the county council dismissed that proposal as unjustified in a recent brief for Members of Parliament.

The situation is even worse in the north of the county. On 7 March, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) sought an assurance from the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions that Berkshire would be able to say no to any new settlement south of the M4. In Basingstoke, we have nightmares about what we have dubbed "Readingstoke"—urban development devouring much of the remaining countryside between Basingstoke and Reading. My right hon. Friend was given no assurance, so we fear the worst.

The Secretary of State claims to have abandoned what he calls the old predict and provide system. In reality, he has done no such thing. He pretends, and asks us to accept, that he has introduced a new approach—plan, monitor and manage. There is no significant difference whatever between the two approaches. The planning process cannot be other than a combination of predicting, planning, monitoring and managing.

The Government have introduced a change that undermines strategic planning. On 7 March, the Secretary of State told the House:

> Local authorities should plan to provide 43,000 additional dwellings a year outside London, subject to regular review . . . every five years.—[*Official Report*, 7 March 2000; Vol. 345, c. 865.]

However, the services that accompany housing development—education, health care, transport and roads—cannot be planned effectively and efficiently on the basis of a succession of five-year reviews, each of which is itself subject to review.

The planning of key infrastructure services requires greater certainty over a longer time span than five years. Five-year monitoring, of which the Government boast, is a fundamental flaw in their housing policy, from which Hampshire and other counties will inevitably suffer.

The Secretary of State told the House that the Government have

> set a national target that 60 per cent. of new homes should use recycled land or buildings.

He added:

> planning authorities must in future give preference to recycling previously developed sites and empty properties—brownfield first, greenfield last.—[*Official Report*, 7 March 2000; Vol. 345, c. 863-64.]

I fear, and I believe that my right hon. and hon. Friends will agree with me, that the Secretary of State's words are virtually meaningless for Hampshire and are certainly meaningless for the borough of Basingstoke and Deane.

The overwhelming consensus of informed opinion maintains that 60 per cent. of the likely new housing requirement cannot be achieved in the county by previously developed sites and empty premises. The cities of Southampton and Portsmouth are the only parts of the county where that figure could remotely be achieved. The paradox is that that is not where the bulk of the county's development is likely to take place.

In the parliamentary constituency of Basingstoke and the borough of Basingstoke and Deane, which is partly in my constituency and partly in that of my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire, we expect an absolute minimum of 7,500 houses over the next few years. The land has already been earmarked; some of it is being prepared for development. It is not being alarmist to say that that number of new starts could easily rise to more than 10,000 and the environmental implications of that are horrendous.

Local planners tell me that, with the currently agreed density of about 16 to 18 houses per acre, only 20 per cent. of the required new homes will be constructed on brownfield sites. If one reverses that, 80 per cent. of the house building requirement in the borough of Basingstoke and Deane has to take place on greenfield sites. Even with the higher density, to which the Government are so far only paying lip service, it is impossible to see how anything approaching their 60 per cent. target of brownfield new housing can be achieved. Even if it could be, the implications from such a concentration of habitation for the provision of health care, education, transport and roads are so enormous that there would be public consternation.

Mr. Peter Viggers (Gosport): Is my hon. Friend aware that if the available brownfield sites in locations such as Gosport were to be developed, the road infrastructure and the other matters to which he has referred simply could not cope with the additional population?

Mr. Hunter: My hon. Friend reinforces my point. I do not know his constituency as well as I know my part of the county, but what he says about it marries with our interpretation and our concerns in the north of the county, so I thank him for that contribution.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. John McWilliam): Order. I ask all hon. Members to address the Chair when they speak, not because I feel touchy about it, but because it means that the *Hansard* transcribers can hear what is being said and report it accurately.

Mr. Hunter: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I apologise. I shall enjoy addressing you from now on.

[Mr. Hunter]

In addition to the problems that my hon. Friend mentioned, there would have to be a total rethink of the provision of all service infrastructure if the Government's required housing density were to be achieved.

Derelict brownfield sites do not exist in the greater part of Hampshire, where new housing development is effectively synonymous with greenfield development. The emphasis of the Government's policy is wrong. With regard to the regeneration and investment that is associated with housebuilding, the needs of other parts of the United Kingdom are greater than those in Hampshire. We also need to consider the scandalous fact that there are 700,000 empty houses in Britain. The Chancellor could start putting things right today by reducing VAT on refurbishing empty buildings—the rate is currently 17.5 per cent. but it should be changed to the 5 per cent. rate that is charged on new house construction.

Mr. Mark Oates (Winchester): Does the hon Gentleman agree that the Chancellor could also introduce a greenfield levy, which would dissuade builders from building on greenfield sites? That positive step would help, especially in Hampshire.

Mr. Hunter: I do not know—or care very much—whether we should introduce deterrents in relation to greenfield sites or offer incentives in relation to brownfield sites, but we need a fiscal balance to tempt developers into the urban environment.

The Environment Committee recommended two years ago that the 60 per cent. figure for brownfield development should be a requirement, not a guideline or an aspiraton. That figure would determine the amount of development in each planning authority. My hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen) is introducing a private Member's Bill that would require local authorities to undertake urban capacity studies and to publish audits of derelict, vacant or underused sites.

When the Secretary of State made his statement on 7 March, he sought to reassure, but he failed to do so in relation to Hampshire. He gave the figure of 43,000 houses a year in the south-east outside London. Previously proposed distribution means that the associated provisions will increase the requirement for Hampshire by more than 1,200 houses a year, compared with the original Serplan proposals. The Secretary of State's plan, monitor and manage concept is nothing new and his five-year strategy will undermine the planning and development of key service infrastructure. From Hampshire's point of view, his objective of 60 per cent. brownfield site development is a confidence trick. It is small wonder that the people of Hampshire are angry and disillusioned with the Government.

12.13 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Beverley Hughes): I am hesitating because the hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mr. Hunter) informed me before this debate that two other hon. Members wanted to speak, but that does not appear to be the case. No matter.

I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. He raised an important subject that is of concern to the Government and to local people, wherever they live. Housing provision in structure plans is always likely to be contentious with regard to the amount of provision to be made and to the location of new houses. Those who seek to ensure that housing needs can be met—the Government and those at local level—and those who live in areas where future development may take place usually have competing views.

The hon. Gentleman outlined some of his constituents' anxieties, which arise predominantly in relation to the proposals in the review of the county structure plan, which is due to be adopted later this month. The document identifies four major development areas. The proposal is that they will be the principal locations for new housing development in the period up to 2011. One of those areas, as he acknowledges, is Basingstoke.

I know that progress on the review plan has not been straightforward. It was introduced by the county council in 1996 and initially made some progress through the early stages, including its examination in public that year. The panel report followed in 1997, when two new authorities were created in Hampshire, as a result of which the review plan became the joint responsibility of Portsmouth and Southampton councils, together with the county council.

The authorities reached substantial agreement early on how they might deal with the recommendations made by the examination in public panel. However, as I said, the conclusions on housing provision provoked contention between the authorities, and there followed a long period during which they failed to reach agreement on the overall level of housing provision. I mention that because there is a history of contention at local level about some of the issues covered in the plan. Later, I shall challenge the hon. Gentleman's assertion that the issues faced by his constituents in Basingstoke are solely the result of a top-down approach by the Government to what the response to housing need in his county should be—they are not.

Central to consideration of the plan is the extent to which it conforms to regional planning guidance, as outlined in RPG9. The current guidance, which the review plan must take into account, was published in 1994. It covers the period from 1991 to 2006 and sets out indicative figures for housing provision for the region, down to county level. The housing requirement for Hampshire is given as 6,133 new homes a year over that period.

At the outset, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State lodged an objection to the review plan. He considered that the proposed provision, which was substantially below that suggested in the regional guidance, needed full justification. The first modifications introduced by the three structure plan authorities in May 1999 proposed a base-line figure of 80,290 dwellings for the plan period from 1996 to 2011. Those were to be distributed among the districts, including the major development areas. A reserve figure of 10,000 dwellings was also proposed for land that would be released, if needed. My right hon. Friend objected to the proposals because he considered that the arguments put by the authorities were not sufficiently strong to justify a level of provision that was 14,000

dwellings lower than that indicated by the regional guidance. He also objected to the fact that the reserve provision of 10,000, which should have been allocated on an indicative basis, had not been allocated on that basis in the development plans.

The structure plan authorities responded positively to the objection and produced further modifications in October 1999. Those modifications proposed an overall provision of 94,290 dwellings and, within that, a reserve provision of 14,000 dwellings distributed around the districts, as required by the guidance. My right hon. Friend considered that that met his earlier objection and did not oppose the new policy, which was designed to allow the release of the reserve provision. I emphasise that use of the reserve would be justified only when there was a compelling argument for it. In other words, it is headroom and not necessarily part of the core provision.

The distribution of the reserve allocation has meant that some authorities in Hampshire now have an additional requirement that was not present when the structure plan authorities produced their first modifications in May 1999; Basingstoke is one such authority. Within its allocation of 12,060 dwellings for the period from April 1996 to March 2011, provision is made for a major development area of 4,000 dwellings in the period from 2001 to 2011.

In welcoming the further modifications by the structure plan authorities, my right hon. Friend made it clear that he did not oppose the objective of the new reserve allocations policy; he did not comment either way on the distribution proposed. It is for the structure plan authorities, with their local knowledge, to distribute structure plan provisions in the district, and they are best placed to undertake the task. They must take into account the principles of sustainable development as set out in the policy guidance and consider where major development is to be located in relation to existing or proposed public transport infrastructure, so as to minimise reliance on the car.

In future, development plans will be reviewed in the light of the new regional planning guidance, which the Secretary of State will issue for consultation. It was announced that the proposed annual rate of new dwellings in the south-east outside London will be 43,000 houses a year. Better use of land and better layout will reduce the land take so that new allocations of land will not be needed. It will be for the authorities, supported by their new powers, to plan the mix and location of housing to meet the need for a wider variety of dwellings and to reduce land take at the same time. I hope that Opposition Members will support the authorities in that task and not propose a return to past policies.

The hon. Member for Basingstoke made some political points about the expected regional planning guidance and the 43,000 houses. As he knows, the regional planning guidance process is expected to lead to an agreed regional target for net additional dwellings, subject to review. The Serplan estimate was discussed in examination in public, but in the panel's view it was an underestimate of need and capacity. We agreed, but not to the extent that the panel suggested.

I reject the hon. Gentleman's contention that plan, monitor and manage is not new or that it is a subterfuge. It is a fundamentally new approach and, in implementing it, we propose a rate of growth for the south-east outside London of the rate to which he alluded. It is an on-going rate of development and it will be reviewed every five years.

I take issue, too, with the hon. Gentleman's contention that incorporating a review process creates uncertainty. It does not; it means that we can respond flexibly to the real world. We can say not that we must have X number of houses, come what may, by 2016, but that at present our assessment of local need and of the gap between need and provision is that 43,000 dwellings a year for the first five years will meet the need but circumstances may change and we will review the situation. That is planning with flexibility, not with uncertainty.

I want to dispel the myth that we are planning only for the next five years and abandoning any responsibility for the longer term. The regional planning guidance will not be a five-year plan; it will show the rate of building to be applied through the plan period, which will be reviewed at least every five years and sooner if circumstances warrant it. The annual rate represents a benchmark that is monitored continuously and reviewed every five years. It is regrettable that the Opposition cannot accommodate an approach that, on account of its potential for flexibility and responsiveness on the part of the Government and local planning authorities, deals with a big issue—a situation of genuine need. Opposition Members appear to want a completely rigid approach.

Let us consider the Opposition's approach. It does not seem to admit that X number of houses will be needed by 2016. It is an approach that says, "We do not want any more housing in our area. Let parochial interests alone determine the amount of provision." They claim that it is a more responsive, bottom-up process, but in practice it is little more than a NIMBYists' charter. It battens down the hatches, saying, "Sorry, we are full up in Hampshire. We do not want to recognise the needs of local people."

Mr. Hunter: The Minister has entirely misunderstood the point that I made. The service infrastructure has to be planned in advance and I point no further than to the provision of primary schools. The problem in Hampshire is that planning and delivering a new primary school takes a number of years and I dare say that that applies all over the country. If a local education authority does not know what the demand for primary school places will be, how can it decide in advance to invest the money in building primary schools?

Ms Hughes: The recently published planning policy guidance PPG3 makes clear the extent to which the infrastructure of all kinds that will be needed to support further housing development in all parts of the country must be a material consideration at all levels of the development planning process. We recognise that, but the fact that the infrastructure does not exist to such an extent at present does not mean that our response should be not to plan for more housing. Instead, we must consider how to accommodate those difficult issues and competing imperatives, and consider ways to plan flexibly and responsively for housing need and the need for consequential planning.

Mr. Viggers: The Government came to power prating about integrated transport. The Minister's speech

[Mr. Viggers]

would have carried more conviction if she had mentioned the contribution that integrated transport could make to ameliorating the housing situation in Hampshire.

Ms Hughes: That is an extremely important issue, which the Government have pressed strongly. It is dealt with in PPG3 and has been anticipated by the planning authorities. They have tried to accommodate it in the plans that we are discussing. They propose that 30 per cent. of the anticipated housing need be met mainly around the four areas designated for major development. They are located on major transport modal corridors and were selected precisely because they reduce travel by private transport and maximise the potential for using the existing transport infrastructure.

On the brownfield issue, when the proposed changes to Serplan's draft regional planning guidance are published next week, it will be seen that areas such as the Thames gateway and other areas for economic regeneration will be given priority. That will apply in Hampshire, too. There is also the unrealised potential for Hampshire to reconsider the designation of land in its current plan and further to increase the provision for housing on previously used land. The 60 per cent. brownfield target is a national target. We have always acknowledged that the figure will not necessarily be achieved in every county and perhaps not in every region. It is a national target and there will be local variants in the extent to which the contribution to that national target is reached. These are complex issues, but unlike the previous Government we are not ducking them. We are proposing a thorough, robust but flexible approach to some of the most difficult problems that face people in the hon. Gentleman's area and nationally in the next 10 to 15 years.

Parish and Town Councils

12.30 pm

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): I am delighted to have a second opportunity to talk about the future of parish and town councils following a debate that I initiated just over a year ago. I shall not speak for long because I know that my hon. Friend the Member for North-West Leicestershire (Mr. Taylor) would also like to speak. We should like to respond to a campaign launched by the official Opposition to say that the Government are attempting to abolish parish and town councils. As we are both councillors, we hope to put across the authentic voice of local councillors today. I should also like to put a positive slant on what these councils do and can do.

It first came to my notice some weeks ago that it was being suggested that the Government were considering abolishing these councils. That came as a shock to me as someone who continues to sit on Stonehouse town council in my constituency. The Stroud Conservative association has organised a conference this weekend to consider local government and the environment. I have no problem with that, but it has sent out a letter, which starts:

> Government Threat to Abolish Parish Councils and Town Councils
>
> As you may know the Government is currently considering whether to abolish Parish Councils. It has been suggested that 'neighbourhood forums' will replace them.
>
> 'Neighbourhood forums' are meetings where any resident can attend to talk about local issues and make comments and suggestions about any council service. This would be the end of representative democracy and accountability at this most local level. Furthermore, too many—indeed most—might not feel able or willing to attend such meetings and they would therefore lose their democratic voice.

That is an example of some of the nonsense that is being put abroad. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister can confirm that that is not the case and that we can look forward to enhanced powers at this, the first, not the lowest, level of democracy.

The campaign may emanate from some of the press coverage given to the comments of my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment at the last Labour party conference. I went to all the conference gatherings that he attended and he made three speeches that related to this area. Unless I was at different meetings, on no occasion did I hear him talk about abolishing parish councils. He talked about some of the problems, such as getting people to stand and to take their due responsibility and the ways in which parish councils could be more effective by working together. That is something with which I would totally concur. On no occasion did I hear him say, "We intend to abolish parish councils." Again, I wonder where the idea came from.

I am not against the idea of neighbourhood forums as they may have their place. In urban areas, where there is under-representation because of the lack of local councils, it may be a way forward, but I see this as an enhancement, not a denigration, of local councils. Everyone from the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister downwards has said that there is no truth in the story. I know that my hon. Friend the Minister has commented on the Government's views on

local councils and I am sure that she will speak for herself later. I am using this Adjournment debate to set the record straight and to look positively at the issue.

For good or ill, the Government have created an additional 50 parish councils since coming to power in 1997, which demonstrates their interest in this area and suggests that they want to increase the number rather than reduce it. I will now deal with the positive agenda. During my 13 years as a parish councillor, I have realised that parish councils can be a source of considerable local activity and continual local good. We await the rural White Paper, which I hope will cover local government in rural areas—not only parish councils, but representation in general. It would be good if the Minister could tease out some of the themes that will be in the White Paper.

In my previous Adjournment debate on this topic, we discussed planning and village blueprints as ways for local people to take responsibility for how their communities evolve. There is no better way to achieve that than through the operation of local councils. I am eternally grateful to my good friend Stephen Wright, from the Gloucestershire rural community council, who has frequently suggested countryside stewardship to me as a way of examining how parish councils can enhance their powers and integrate their activities. By providing a parish blueprint, councils can ensure that they maximise their powers. In my previous speech, I made the argument—in which I still strongly believe—that parish councils often do not appreciate the full value of the powers available to them, whether through section 137 and the so-called penny rate or through training and education, by means of which they can lead their communities. Countryside stewardship has now been taken up by the Countryside Agency, so I flag it up as relevant.

It is important to consider enhancing the roles of clerks and councillors to ensure that they can perform the full range of tasks available to them. I wholeheartedly congratulate the Cheltenham and Gloucester college of higher education on its courses for new parish clerks and councillors, which inform them of the opportunities of which they may take advantage. Perhaps my hon. Friend the Minister can set out additional ways in which we can offer training to new and existing parish clerks and councillors, so that they can tackle the challenges that face them.

I would like to identify the relationship between neighbourhood forums and parish councils, because it is clear that those are different bodies and not alternatives. It would be good to know what ideas the Government have for neighbourhood forums and how they may further enhance the first rung of local democracy. I do not see those bodies as a challenge, because they could work in some places by helping parish councils to operate in an integrated manner.

Problems clearly affect this local rung of democracy. I have mentioned that there may be unwillingness to use the powers that exist in statute, and that using such powers should perhaps be encouraged or made the subject of review. I have talked about auditing arrangements at length and my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Planning has responded. They are still a cause for concern, but I gather that there has been some progress. The same applies to best value and how it is bedding down in this first rung of democracy.

There is a debate about how we should situate parish and town councils in the wider reform of local government. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will mention that and that the Government will state categorically that they see an important role for those councils, as those of us who are involved in them do. The more that can be done to make that view apparent, the better.

I should like to put on record how important I found my involvement with local councils. All Labour Members have always welcomed the opportunity to talk to parish councils and many of us who represent constituencies with many such councils try to get out and about to do so. I commend Stroud town council for the work that it has done on its local plan analysis, which has been important in drafting the district's overall local plan, and Dursley town council for the work that it has done in setting up its town centre partnership. Those are examples of the good work that town councils can do. Leonard Stanley parish council has led the attempts to reopen the village post office. I could cite many other similar examples.

I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will clarify the position and confirm that parish councils have not only a past and a present but a strong future and that they will be developed in many different ways.

12.40 pm

Mr. David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire): I congratulate my hon. Friend—and fellow parish councillor—the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew), who was elected on the same day as me in May 1997, on securing this debate. I am immensely encouraged because my hon. Friend the Minister has replied positively to the questions on the future of parish and town councils that I have asked her, and now is the appropriate time to underline the current position.

I was lucky enough to catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, during the first of this morning's debates on protecting endangered species. I believe that there is no link between that debate and this one, because parish councils still have much to offer.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. John McWilliam): Order. I hope that the hon. Gentleman is not implying that I am the link.

Mr. Taylor: There is no link between the two debates, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

My fact-finding visits to all but two of the 25 parish councils in North-West Leicestershire have convinced me that, as my hon. Friend has said, they are not the lowest tier of democracy; they are its front line in rural areas. At their best, they can respond quickly, as they have done in rundown mining areas, where they have initiated economic regeneration and environmental restoration projects and tackled problems of social cohesion.

Parish councils can do an awful lot and have much to offer. They are the starting point for citizenship and political inclusion in areas that sometimes feel remote from the county halls or the local council offices of this world. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will tell us, and that the rural White Paper will make it clear, that community councils will not become mere consultative

[Mr. Taylor]

groups. I welcome the possibility of creating rural forums, but they should be complementary to parish councils, which should continue to be independent and elected and have real powers. I suggest an additional power: a right of appeal against certain contentious planning permissions granted by planning authorities. Such a power is long overdue.

I share the view expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud that it is a great pity that the countryside lobby has attempted to hijack parish councils; it has falsely claimed that our policies threaten parish councils. It is not Panglossian to suggest that most parish councils do an exceptionally good job and are responsible, accountable and efficient. There are problems, but we can tackle them and revive democracy in those areas where it has perhaps lapsed in recent times. At their best, parish councils are active and self-confident community leaders. Their role and influence could, and should, be extended.

I am sufficiently confident about the Government's priorities in such matters to expect a positive view of the role of parish councils in my hon. Friend the Minister's reply and in the rural White Paper. The Government have ideas about how parish councils' powers might be extended and how to transfer best practice to other parts of the country. I am proud to be a parish councillor and hope that I shall long have that role, perhaps in parallel with my role as a Member of Parliament—but that remains to be seen. Parish councillors such as my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud and I, as well as others who are interested in the Minister's comments, look forward to some reassurance. I hope that we can lay to rest the canard that has sprung up—if that is not mixing three metaphors.

12.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Beverley Hughes): In replying to an Adjournment debate, it is customary to thank the hon. Member who secured it. I always give such thanks sincerely, but on this occasion I do so with particular sincerity because my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) has not only enabled this important issue to be aired but, in the light of certain press reports and the use in recent months of parish councils as a political football by various bodies, including the Conservative party, enabled us to make clear our record on and proposals for parish and town councils and scotch completely the wholly unfounded rumours that have been circulated for political ends.

I am particularly grateful to my hon. Friend for his comments on speeches made by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment at various fringe meetings. My hon. Friend was in attendance and can testify that subsequent press reports were inaccurate, to say the least. That is extremely helpful and reflects my right hon. Friend's repeated comments on what was said at those meetings.

In some ways, I am a little surprised that the media and various lobbies continue to suggest that the Government are planning to abolish parish councils. As my hon. Friends have noted, my colleagues and I have stated in Parliament and in numerous items of ministerial correspondence that the Government have no plans to abolish town and parish councils. My right hon. Friend has made the same point in the national press. I hesitate to say, "Read my lips", although I could, because the statement is absolutely true. My hon. Friends speak from considerable personal experience, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud is a parish councillor and vice-president of the National Association of Local Councils, an organisation with which the Government have a good relationship, and my hon. Friend the Member for North-West Leicestershire (Mr. Taylor) is also a parish councillor of long standing.

Our policy on parish and town councils was set out in the White Paper "Modern Local Government: In Touch With the People". It stated that parish councils are

an essential part of the structure of local democracy in this country

and

will continue to play a key role in many of our towns and villages.

That is our policy.

In setting the record straight on that policy, we should explain our record and our intentions. Our commitment to the parish tier of local government is demonstrated by the creation of 62 parish councils since we came to power. In the past nine months, it has been my pleasure to sign many orders that created those parish councils. Moreover, we propose to create a further 22 parishes in the next few months. In the first three years of this Government, we expect to have created between 80 and 85 new parish councils. That record speaks for itself, in terms of our commitment to existing parish councils and the future of parish and town councils. I should make it clear that, as far as the Government are concerned, dynamic parish and town councils have a key role in the democratic constitution of this country.

My hon. Friends raised our local government modernisation agenda and I shall make a few comments on how parish councils will fit into that. They represent the tier of government closest to the citizen. They are in touch with people and with how they live their lives. I take the point that this is not an issue for rural areas only. There is a town council in my very metropolitan urban constituency in Manchester.

However, the pattern of life in rural areas is changing rapidly and parish councils must be flexible to cope with that change. They must be free of old-fashioned, rigid working practices; they must put people first. They have many strengths and traditional values on which we need to build, but there is scope for development. There is no room for complacency at any level of local government. Too many local councillors are elected unopposed and too few people vote in local elections.

Our response is not that we see no future role for parish and town councils but that their role will be very important. We need to develop and strengthen their potential because of their position in the democratic structure as a voice for local people. We must strengthen the democratic link between parish councillors and the people who elect them. That is why the White Paper on local government is so relevant to town and parish councils.

Many other provisions that we have introduced, as well as those in proposed new legislation, are relevant to parish councils. The duty of best value will apply only to the larger parish and town councils, but we want all councils to adopt its spirit because they also play an important role in delivering local services. That spirit is

embodied in the drive for continual improvement in local services and is a way in which councils at all levels—especially parish councils—can demonstrate to local people their ability to provide services and to strengthen that democratic link.

There are provisions in the new Local Government Bill for a new ethical framework for parish councils. We have listened carefully to parish councils while drawing up those provisions. The councils will be subject to a uniform national code of conduct that all councillors must endorse. That will not demand more, unnecessarily, from parish councillors, but will tell them that they are as important as the other elements of the democratic local government structure. The issues about transparency and demonstrating ethical standards must therefore apply equally to them. We want parish councils to embrace those new ethical standards.

My hon. Friends wanted me to comment on neighbourhood forums, because of the way in which the possibility of their introduction has been used to argue that the Government intend to abolish parish councils. We have no such intention. We are keen to increase community participation in decision making at all levels. That is the core of our aim in strengthening local democracy. Neighbourhood forums may be a way of achieving that in some areas, but we do not intend them to take the place of parish councils.

Parish councils should be at the forefront of identifying their local community's needs and priorities, working in partnership with other bodies in helping to implement innovative, locally determined solutions to local problems. A parish council that is modern in outlook, involving local people, will be impossible to ignore. Modern district and county councils need to work with modern partners. Neighbourhood forums may be an option for areas that do not have that layer of local governance. However, in areas that have parish and town councils, those councils fulfil that function more than satisfactorily.

It is not our policy to bring in something new to replace parish councils. Rather, we are considering whether a different forum might provide people living in areas that do not have that level of governance with what those with parish councils already have. It is an addition, an extension, an enhancement, not a replacement.

My hon. Friends particularly wanted me to comment on the rural White Paper. We have consulted widely with parish councils and their representatives on how parish councils can be a focus, particularly for rural communities, and play their part in every aspect of rural governance.

We want the preparation of the rural White Paper to be an inclusive process. In February 1999, we issued a consultation document on rural England, which posed questions on a wide range of rural issues. More than 100 parishes or parish associations responded to that document, and many other responses referred to the role of parish and town councils in developing our policy. It was a consistent view that local people should be consulted on policy development and be more closely involved in decision making and in implementing decisions. Many saw parish councils as a neglected resource and felt that they could play a bigger part in representing local interests. They also thought that there was scope for councils to work more closely with other bodies, to take on more service delivery and to have greater powers and bigger budgets.

Concerns were expressed about the accountability of parish councils. This goes back to my point about bringing all parish councils up to the standard of the best to strengthen local democracy. There were also queries about the competence of parish councils and to what extent they were representative of their communities. Some of the responses touched on the issues raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud about the need for training and development for councillors, as well as for clerks and other officers.

We are considering the responses. In preparing the rural White Paper, we are actively considering how we can build into those proposals not only the issues raised during the consultation exercise but the enhanced role that parish councils can play in meeting the White Paper's overall objectives—rural regeneration and improving the quality of life.

I was interested in my hon. Friend's concept of community stewardship, which is something that we are considering and trying to unpack. However, we believe that parishes have now, and will have, a key role to play in many towns and villages as part of the framework to improve the quality of life and achieve regeneration, together with other agents and councils.

An important strength of parish councils is their ability to be a voice for local people. As I have said, this issue runs through the foundation of our modernisation agenda for local government and will be a theme of the rural and urban White Papers. They will set out the building blocks that local areas will need to develop their own priorities and regeneration plans, starting with local views on the problems in their areas and carrying through to implementing the solutions to those problems.

I hope that I have satisfactorily addressed the core issue of this debate, which has clarified the Government's long-stated and often-repeated commitment to the future of parish town councils. We see them as not only playing a general role in future but as a key agent in implementing some of the changes that the Government are trying to introduce to strengthen local governance and to regenerate rural and urban areas. The content of the rural White Paper will become clearer in the summer. I cannot give my hon. Friends detailed proposals on the roles for town and parish councils or other councils, but they are under active consideration and the White Paper will deal with them in detail.

Again, I am grateful to my hon. Friends for providing the opportunity to debate this matter. I hope that I have reassured them and the wider audience of our commitment to parish and town councils.

It being One o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the sitting lapsed, without Question put.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 22 March 2000

[SIR ALAN HASELHURST *in the Chair*]

East Midlands Economy

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.— [*Mr. Touhig.*]

9.30 am

Gillian Merron (Lincoln): I am delighted to have secured this Adjournment debate. It is about putting the east midlands on the map. I have the honour of chairing the east midlands group of Labour Members of Parliament, a group that is 30-strong and far from silent. Its voice comes from Back Benchers and Cabinet Ministers, and among its notable members are, on the Back Benches, my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn), and in the Cabinet, my right hon. Friends the Members for Derby, South (Mrs. Beckett) and for Ashfield (Mr. Hoon). The span of Government is well and truly covered.

I am delighted that those of my hon. Friends who represent seats in each of the five counties of the east midlands are here today. They all have a special contribution to make. The east midlands group of Labour MPs recognises the region's need for a clear, positive and memorable image. The east midlands should have a regional identity to help persuade firms to remain in the area and to promote the region to outside investors, and we believe that it is important to secure parliamentary time to help us achieve that aim.

The day after the Budget is an opportune day for such a debate. The east midlands has much to celebrate; 11,000 families can welcome the increase in the working families tax credit; 480,000 families will receive the record increase in child benefit; 580,000 pensioner households will see the winter fuel payment increased to £150; and 9,000 of the poorest pensioners in the east midlands who have worked hard and have modest savings, will now be able to claim more money to support their daily lives. The 50,000 businesses in the east midlands will welcome the tax cuts that will encourage long-term investment. Another positive announcement by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor was the £70 million of funding for early stage investment through the creation of regional capital funds.

The location and form of our diverse region remains a well-hidden secret and, as I said, this debate is part of our attempt to change that. Lest there be any doubt, the east midlands comprises Lincolnshire, Northamptonshire, Derbyshire, Leicestershire and Nottinghamshire. It is in the centre of the country, which adds spice to the debate on the north-south divide. Indeed, that debate can rage quite happily within our region, because it contains so many comparisons and contrasts. For example, the east midlands runs from High Peak to Northampton; and it stretches from the north-west at one extreme to the south-east at the other.

By and large, people who live and work in the east midlands do not have a strong regional identity. That situation is further confused by the range of television stations that serve the region. For instance, in my constituency we can watch BBC East Midlands, Look North, Central and Yorkshire television stations—in that sense, we can face in many directions at the same time.

There is no doubt that the diversity of the east midlands is not simply its character; it is also its strength. It has a diversity of landscape, population and economic activity, which offers tremendous potential and a positive future in Britain's heartland. The Labour Members in the east midlands are determined that the region should be on course to becoming one of Europe's top 20 regions by the end of the decade. It is one of the few regions in Britain with a growing working population.

The diversity of the east midlands is entrenched in not only the contrast between large-scale agricultural production in areas such as Lincolnshire and industrially based cities such as Derby, but in the nature of the economy from coalfield areas in the north to Formula 1 motor sport specialism in the south. The growth areas are information technology, finance, insurance and distribution. In addition, call centres are finding the east midlands an ever-attractive location. My constituency will welcome British Telecom when it locates its new call centre in Lincoln, bringing 900 jobs to the city.

In the past 20 years, the east midlands economy has grown faster than the United Kingdom average. Interestingly, we can look forward to an above average growth in employment which, unusually in this country, is predominantly in full-time jobs. However, there is significant deprivation within areas of prosperity. We need to be able to fine-tune the targeting of financial support and resources, whether that is single regeneration budget moneys, objective 2 status or any other means of support, to areas that need it.

The 1998 index of deprivation draws attention to some of the issues by ranking the most deprived local authority districts in England. It takes into account a number of factors—crime, housing, unemployment and health. It is important to understand that deprivation cannot be judged on just one factor. In the east midlands, Nottingham ranks 16th, Leicester is 32nd and Lincoln is 46th. The picture will be chequered in any local authority. The problem is being able to get the support to where it is needed, no matter where that may be. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will respond to that.

The report "Sharing the Nation's Prosperity", which was compiled for the Prime Minister at the end of last year, said:

> some parts of the UK continue to suffer from the economic problems of the decline in traditional employment, most notably in mining, steel and manufacturing.

The east midlands can lay claim to all those industries, and that is one of our many concerns. Rural areas, which are a fundamental part of our region, form the backdrop to those industries. Almost half the population in the east midlands live in rural areas, which is well above the national average. Average earnings of those who live and work in the region's rural areas are lower than the regional and national averages. We know that poor public transport and inadequate road and rail links are major problems and a significant disadvantage.

[Gillian Merron]

We look forward to the east midlands receiving its share of the £280 million, pledged by my right hon. Friend in the Budget yesterday, which is earmarked to remove some of the disadvantage experienced in rural areas. My county of Lincolnshire is an interesting case in point. The disadvantaged areas are concentrated on the coast, in parts of Lincoln and in isolated rural areas. They are brought together by the need for investment in transport and other infrastructure that will support business and communities. We find that problem in all our counties.

What are the main features of the east midlands? Let me give some of the main headlines: gross domestic product is just below the national average; levels of manufacturing productivity are lower, but there are signs of improvement; relatively low earnings—

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): On the GDP, the hon. Lady may know that the East Midlands development agency's economic strategy document stated:

> There is a wide diversity of GDP patterns within the region.

She has plucked out the figure for the region as a whole, which is listed in Government documents, but we do not recognise that figure in Leicestershire.

Gillian Merron: I said that the region is diverse; indeed, that is the point I am trying to make.

Let me return to the headlines. I am sure that the hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan) will be interested in the immense local variation in earnings. For example, average earnings are greater in Northamptonshire, south Derbyshire and Leicestershire, while Lincolnshire and north Nottinghamshire have seen the strongest growth in earnings. You will understand, Mr. Deputy Speaker, why Labour Members acknowledge the value of the national minimum wage in regions such as the east midlands. It enables the range of earnings in our region to be brought closer together.

The east midlands region is increasingly able to create jobs. Interestingly, one third of all new jobs are in manufacturing, and half of those involve chemicals and man-made fibres. The regional picture on decreasing unemployment is very good: it is 2 per cent. better than the national average. Between 1997 and 1999, the number of unemployed people in our region decreased by 23,000. In the same two-year period, an extra 36,000 were finding work. The picture is looking good in the east midlands, but it is important to unpick those figures. For example, the January 2000 figures for our parliamentary constituencies show that, while the average unemployment rate in the region was 3.9 per cent., it ranged from 1.7 per cent. in Daventry to 10.8 per cent. in Nottingham, North.

Such variations must be attended to, but we also have regional achievements of which to be proud. Since 1997, the east midlands has seen a reduction of 65 per cent. in long-term unemployment and a reduction of 72 per cent. in the number of young unemployed people. The new deal has been a raging success and some 43,000 people have benefited from it. My constituency has seen a 9 per cent. decrease in unemployment in the past year, which is well ahead of the regional figure. Diversity and variation are key characteristics within the east midlands and we want to level up the situation.

There are many key players in the east midlands region. The east midlands group of Labour MPs has worked to develop positive relationships, as we believe that that is the best way to achieve the best for our constituencies. I shall mention a few examples. The Government office of the east midlands works tirelessly on behalf of the region. I am pleased that it is currently working closely with the engineering industry to examine the strengths and weaknesses of engineering in the region. It has identified high-growth areas such as Toyota, the aerospace industry, Rolls-Royce energy equipment, ABB Alstom in Lincoln and railway equipment as provided by Adtranz in Derby. The Government office of the east midlands is making a good attempt to find the strengths and weaknesses of one of the key industries within our region, as well as working to promote the link between engineering and education. Those are all positive ways forward.

In May last year, the East Midlands Assembly was formally recognised by the Deputy Prime Minister in a statement made in Parliament. That recognition came before it was given to most other English regions. The regional assembly is a vehicle that brings together a range of partners who believe in and are actively prepared to work to improve the quality of life in our region. They bring a fresh perspective, commitment and a willingness to think in new ways and to find innovative solutions to some deeply entrenched problems. The regional assembly is a key body for assisting in regional thinking. It provides guidance and support as well as democratic scrutiny for the regional development agency.

The regional assembly should be particularly complimented on producing the interim regional transport strategy for the east midlands. Transport is a matter of concern in the whole area. Connections to and within the eastern sub-area and to the east coast ports in particular are poor. The main north-south road routes are increasingly congested. We have some very good public transport links, but those are particularly good at peak hours in urban areas. In rural areas or when trying to cross the region, life is more difficult. East Midlands airport provides an excellent international link and recently obtained approval for a runway extension that will open it to longer-distance flights. Many people find day-to-day travel in the east midlands extremely difficult, which is also problematic for economic development.

I pay tribute to the East Midlands development agency, which has clearly set out its strategy in the document "Prosperity through people". My Labour colleagues and I welcome and support the document, but what really matters is what it produces. It correctly states that there is a need in the east midlands for people to have the right skills and knowledge, and for businesses to be equipped to compete in the increasingly competitive global marketplace. Also, the region needs to be positioned to make the most of opportunities coming from the information and communications technology revolution. We need, too, the right climate for investment as well as strong local communities. No one could disagree with any of that and I hope that there will be support to make it happen.

We should particularly welcome some of the practical steps taken by the regional development agency—notably the east midlands planning charter, which is

practical and honest in acknowledging difficulties. As we know, planning permission is an important stage in any job-generating development and delays and misunderstandings from any source can cost jobs. That is a cost we cannot afford. The charter recognises that an efficient planning process is a major factor in improving the economic competitiveness of the east midlands. It states:

> Quick but good-quality decisions demand a two-way process. Developers need to understand what information the local authority needs and why. If developers provide that information, they are entitled to expect a prompt, efficient and transparent response.

That is the basis of the charter and I hope that it will be welcomed as an example of the ways in which the regional development agency will be able to make progress.

I pay tribute also to the midlands Trades Union Congress, which is the voice of the working people in the region. People are our key resource. The TUC is very much a partner with the other relevant groups, although I wondered if it was taking partnership a little too far when I read an article that stated that

> Christine Wood, emda board member for cities, who is regional TUC secretary, was hoisted to the top of a former knitwear factory in Leicester as a tradition dating back to medieval times was performed by a vicar.
>
> "Topping-out" ceremonies on buildings were designed to ward of evil spirits hundreds of years ago.
>
> In a throw-back to a time when people worried about ghosts, ghouls and witches, the Reverend Philip Watson blessed a jumping cat weathervane at the Benjamin Russell building, which has been turned into a student residence, shops and pub.

The serious point is that a major regeneration project has brought together private and public partners to the benefit of the local community.

The Confederation of British Industry is also an important partner in the east midlands and it makes interesting points in its regional trends survey. It says that business confidence has risen, although there is a marginal decline in manufacturers' optimism about export prospects. Clearly, we must attend to that. It also talks about stability and the deterioration in plant and machinery investment. I hope that the CBI and all businesses will welcome measures announced in yesterday's Budget, such as the extension of first-year capital allowances. I hope that that will assist in putting right some of the difficulties raised by the CBI.

Credit must also go to local authorities in the east midlands and to the east midlands regional local government association—their commitment to public services is always to the fore, serving our region well. The training and enterprise councils, schools, colleges and universities provide education and training, which means that our economy can move into the future with confidence, skill and stability.

Where do we go next as a region? We have several needs that must be addressed and we can do that by working with partners and the Government. We must have improved access to investment finance. We must keep up with technical innovation. We must ensure an adequate transport and communication system, especially in a county such as Lincolnshire. We must have an adequate skills supply—there is a great need for continued training due to replacement demand in declining employment sectors, such as engineering and textiles. We must keep highly skilled individuals in our region. We must address the inadequate supply of land for new developments and further develop an inward investment strategy to attract new firms.

There is a great need to target support on sectors with potential. The region has comparative advantages, notably in advance manufacturing, high-value engineering and aerospace, distribution, technology and research and development, especially in biotechnology, computer software and services. We must recognise that, although employment in sectors such as textiles and clothing is forecast to decline, there are still high-performing firms with real growth prospects that also need support and services.

As I said in my opening comments, we must develop a positive and memorable image and regional identity to help retain existing firms and to promote the region among outside investors. We may do that only by working in partnership and by being honest about the strengths and weaknesses of our region and the diversity within it. The east midlands has much going for it. It has a positive future and a tremendous strength in its diversity. It is important that we play to those strengths.

9.53 am

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): I took part in a debate in the Chamber last week and was much reminded of 1 Corinthians 13, which refers to a sounding brass, tinkling cymbal and talking shop. For the benefit of those not well read in the Bible, the chapter also includes the bit about "through a glass darkly" and "childish things"—the hon. Member for North-West Leicestershire (Mr. Taylor) will know that. I am afraid that debates in this Chamber are a talking shop. That is shown by the fact that Ministers occasionally fail to turn up.

Nevertheless, I congratulate the hon. Member for Lincoln (Gillian Merron) on securing the debate and on her speech. She made a good fist of defending the east midlands as an entity. I suspect that the genesis of the debate might not be a million miles from the Government Whips office—many Labour Members are here to support the debate.

Mr. Andrew Reed (Loughborough): For information, those of us here have a genuine interest in the east midlands economy and in promoting the region to ensure future prosperity. That is why many Labour Members but, unfortunately, not many Conservative Members, who represent east midlands constituencies have attended the debate.

Mr. Robathan: I am delighted by that intervention because I notice that the hon. Member for Loughborough (Mr. Reed) did not deny that the Labour Whips might have had a hand initiating the debate.

What is the east midlands? It is an artificial creation for administrative convenience. I have no problem with that, but in travelling around my constituency—I have been a Member of Parliament for eight years, which is not as long as one or two people in the Chamber have been Members but longer than many—no one has ever said to me, "I am an east midlander and I am really looking forward to there being an east midlands

[Mr. Robathan]

regional assembly." My constituents say that they come from Blaby, Lutterworth, Croft or from Leicestershire in England—admittedly, that is in the eastern bit of the midlands, but the people of Blaby do not look to Brackley in Northamptonshire, Boston in Lincolnshire or Buxton in Derbyshire. People in Lutterworth will be delighted to hear from the hon. Member for Lincoln about job creation and investment in Lincoln, but they will not feel personally concerned because they do not see themselves as east midlanders.

As I have said, the east midlands is an artificial creation, as is the East Midlands development agency. The hon. Lady mentioned the regional assembly, but has anyone other than those who are closely involved with it ever told her that they are in favour of a regional assembly or that an assembly would have democratic legitimacy or accountability?

Gillian Merron: The hon. Gentleman seems to be somewhat confused about the means and the end. The purpose of the debate, initiated by the east midlands group of Labour MPs, is to promote the east midlands and to further employment prospects and prosperity in the area. We will achieve those ends by working with groups such as the regional assembly, the regional development agency, the Confederation of British Industry, the Trades Union Congress and others. I hope that the hon. Gentleman supports our aims.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady is making an intervention, not a second speech.

Mr. Robathan: I am grateful to the hon. Lady because she did not say that lots of people were flocking to her surgery to say how much they want an East Midlands development agency or an East Midlands regional assembly, because they do not. Indeed, only six or nine months ago, the *Leicester Mercury* carried out a survey of businesses in Leicestershire, which found that more than 50 per cent. of businesses had never heard of the East Midlands development agency—so it is obviously doing a good job.

What is the purpose of the debate? Where should the region go next? Of course, I want the whole region to flourish. I hope that Lincolnshire, Derbyshire, Northamptonshire and Nottinghamshire do well, as I hope that the rest of England does well. I hope that Birmingham, Longbridge, Leicestershire and Herefordshire also do well, but that does not detract from the fact that the east midlands, the East Midlands development agency and the East Midlands regional assembly are entirely artificial creations. The east midlands may be used for administrative convenience but for nothing more.

Mr. John Heppell (Nottingham East): Every region is an artificial creation in some respect. People in the north-east do not say, "I come from the north-east"; they say, "I come from Newcastle" or "I come from Sunderland." People in the north-west do not say, "I come from the north-west"; they say, "I come from Liverpool" or "I come from Manchester", so the hon. Gentleman's arguments about regional identity are spurious.

Mr. Robathan: I am not the one who is arguing for undemocratically formed regional development agencies, such as the East Midlands regional assembly, a Liverpool regional assembly or a north-east regional assembly. It is the Government who are arguing that, so the hon. Gentleman has made my point for me.

There are many concerns in my constituency about the economy, but my constituents look to Birmingham and to the west midlands. Indeed, the East Midlands development agency—that great standard bearer of this regional government that we must apparently have—said, that the key regional characteristic was diversity, something that the hon. Member for Lincoln noticed. However, when the agency's representatives go abroad to attract inward investment, they find that people do not respond to the term "east midlands". The economic strategy document—

Mr. Reed *rose—*

Mr. Robathan: I will let the hon. Gentleman speak in a minute.

The agency's representatives team up with the west midlands, because people understand about the west midlands but have never heard of the east midlands. They understand that there is a country with lands in the middle, and so the areas are put together and sold as "the midlands". That is eminently sensible, but torpedoes the idea of having an artificially created east midlands region.

Mr. Reed: The hon. Gentleman is making the same point as Labour Members. The east midlands does not have an identity, which is why it has been held back for years in terms of inward investment. The point of a regional development agency for the east midlands is to create an identity so that we can build a strong and prosperous future for all the people of the region. Does the hon. Gentleman agree with that?

Mr. Robathan: The hon. Gentleman again makes my point. I want to see a strong economy and prosperity for the whole of England and the United Kingdom, not for only some narrow region of the east midlands. My constituency is on the border of the east midlands, between Northamptonshire and Leicestershire. I live four or five miles from Warwickshire. People in Warwickshire should do as well as people in Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire and Northamptonshire.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): Surely the hon. Member for Loughborough (Mr. Reed) misses the point. The east midlands has been successful at attracting inward investment. Under the previous Government, it attracted the largest single investment ever made in this country, which was a Toyota plant. Inward investment is not confined to what the regional development agency can do.

Mr. Robathan: My hon. Friend makes an argument to which I would have come. Governments should create

frameworks and economic conditions in which investment can flourish, as I think that even new Labour now believes. Investment has flourished, which is why unemployment in Leicestershire has decreased rapidly since about 1993. I am delighted that it continued to fall until last month, when it went up slightly. I shall not blame the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Government for that. I blame the Chancellor for economic trends and conditions that he may create, but he is not responsible for slight dips or rises in unemployment, any more than he is responsible and should take the praise for the descending unemployment figures since 1993. They have come down because the economic conditions that he inherited were put in place by his Conservative predecessor.

Unemployment in my constituency fluctuates around 2 per cent. That was the case before the general election; it might have been about 2.5 per cent. in 1997. That is excellent for my constituents. I am delighted that we have inward investment in Lincoln, Derbyshire and elsewhere, but my constituents are more concerned about the economy of the whole United Kingdom. Their area is not confined to the Leicestershire boundary a mile from where many of them live.

The economy is diverse, as the hon. Member for Lincoln said, so why is she trying to place the east midlands into the straitjacket of a regional development agency and—for heaven's sake—a regional assembly? She talked about wanting a memorable image and regional identity for the east midlands, because it is a well-hidden secret. That is not true for the people who live there, although they may not say, "We are east midlanders." I wonder how many hon. Members in the Chamber would stand up and proudly say that. They know what happens in their region, their county and their country—[*Interruption.*] I am afraid that I missed that sedentary intervention. Perhaps the hon. Member for Nottingham, East (Mr. Heppell) wanted to say that he was an east midlander. The east midlands exists as an administratively convenient region, and its people do not want artificial boundaries foisted on them, as a survey in the *Leicester Mercury* pointed out last year.

About a week ago, there was a piece in the *Leicester Mercury* by the chief executive of the Leicestershire chamber of commerce and industry. I notice that two of my colleagues who represent Leicestershire constituencies are present. It states that the

> Euro would only add to the burden on business . . . I believe that the business community faces too many government-imposed burdens at the present time.

It goes on to discuss the single currency further.

Mr. Reed: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Robathan: I am always happy to give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Reed: Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that the writer of that column supports the East Midlands regional development agency?

Mr. Robathan: Well—

Mr. Reed: Yes will do.

Mr. Robathan: As it happens, I have no idea, but I doubt it, because the members—

Mr. Reed: Yes.

Mr. Robathan: I have never asked. The hon. Gentleman may say "yes", but I doubt it, because the members of the Leicestershire chamber of commerce and industry whom I meet every week in my constituency do not, and the gentleman in question is their paid representative.

Deloitte and Touche in Leicester asked companies in Leicestershire whether they though that the Government were pro-business. The company maintains a sceptical stance. It said:

> Last year 29 per cent. of respondents said Yes. This year the percentage is down to 26 per cent.

I am sure that someone will leap up in a moment and say, "But after the Budget, my goodness, they will all say that the Government have changed." I doubt it.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Lincoln on having made a good fist of the subject, but few people in the east midlands regard themselves as east midlanders or see a connection between the economies of Derbyshire and Leicestershire. The area is an artificial creation, and we should look to enhancing the economy and prosperity of the entire United Kingdom, including England and our counties and constituencies, rather than buy the Government line of important regions with undemocratic regional assemblies.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Frank Cook): Order. I must advise the Chamber that I have quite a list of hon. Members who want to speak. Hon. Members will realise from the number of Members standing how many are involved. Our time is limited. The convention is to hand over to the Front-Bench speakers at 10.30 am. Thanks to the Liberal Democrat spokesman, we shall have a couple of minutes more, but I appeal to the hon. Member to make their contributions concise, clear, to the point and less repetitive than they have been until now.

10.7 am

Mr. David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire): Following my brief contribution, I must leave to attend a Standing Committee, for which I apologise.

I draw to my hon. Friend the Minister's attention the need for considerable work to be done on the regional infrastructure in the east midlands to enable continued, sustainable economic growth. Our transport systems are inadequate and impede the movement of people and goods, and our problems have an adverse impact on the quality of life of scores of communities that lie close to the pressure points. One example is, as my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Gillian Merron) said, that the main north-south routes are congested. Plans to widen the M1 and A1 are, quite rightly, on hold to allow analysis of more multi-modal solutions. The economic boom that the so-called M1 corridor is experiencing is generating considerable increases in road freight movement and private car usage, despite the great potential for public transport links, which are currently starved of investment.

The east midlands lies in the centre of the country, as the hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan) reminded us with such insight. Right at the centre of the east

[Mr. David Taylor]

midlands is north-west Leicestershire, straddling the main transport infrastructure—the M1, the midlands main line and East Midlands airport, to the north of the area. The area's problems are typical of the region. North-west Leicestershire has no connections to the main rail network, which is a major obstacle to the creation of the multi-modal transport system that is so urgently needed.

The return of passenger services to the Ivanhoe railway line is crucial. I was astonished by the recent decision of the Liberal Democrat and Conservative group that controls Leicestershire county council to abandon the planned route of the Ivanhoe line in favour of linking Loughborough to Leicester and to Nuneaton in the west midlands.

The original route from Leicester through north-west Leicestershire to Burton and beyond has considerable economic and tourism potential. It would serve most of the National Forest towns and give people, particularly those without cars and those in rural areas, access to employment and training opportunities. It could be the first step towards an integrated transport plan being developed for a wider section of the east midlands.

I shall move on swiftly from the need for an improved rail network to the need for an improved road network. The recently announced bypass around my home town of Ashby-de-la-Zouch is most welcome, but one key project remains outstanding. There are real problems around junction 24 of the M1 because of serious, chronic congestion. I cannot overstress the urgency of completing the Government's multi-modal strategy in that area. Until the matter is dealt with, the local area will remain in a vacuum, awaiting urgently needed road investment such as the A6 bypass around the village of Kegworth.

Mr. Phil Sawford (Kettering): Given that my hon. Friend is referring to bypasses, it would be remiss of me not to mention the Rothwell-Desborough A6 bypass. It is scheduled for the year 2001–02, but does he agree that an early announcement about a definite start date on such projects, which we welcome, would be an advantage to the local economy?

Mr. Taylor: I certainly agree. It is on the A6 trunk road, 35 miles to the south, that similar problems are being experienced in my hon. Friend's constituency. One way in which to control the growth in transport in the interests of the environment, but without damaging the economy, is to encourage more appropriate employment to be generated in, or close to, important towns in the region, such as Ashby and Coalville in my constituency. Such towns fall through so many funding nets, even though they often have similar problems to the major cities.

I welcome the East Midlands development agency placing more emphasis on market towns and their rural hinterland. Its initial approval of the SRB6 bid for Ashby, Swadlincote in south Derbyshire and Coalville is the first step towards redressing the imbalance, but more is needed. We need encouragement of new direct economic activity and we need to ease the flow of workers into and out of the existing centres of employment.

As for other aspects of the infrastructure, more support is needed for micro businesses and business innovation. Yesterday's Budget was excellent in that respect. [*Interruption.*] I am pleased that the hon. Member for Blaby echoes that sentiment. The Government's new enterprise grant, for which significant parts of my constituency will be eligible, is welcomed most warmly. Greater support for and investment in the National Forest is required if the organisation is to realise its full potential as a provider of economic opportunity. There has already been substantial growth attached to the forestry and land use aspect of the forest, but more needs to be done if the tourism potential is to be fully developed. The benefits that we have reaped so far in the former Leicestershire and south Derbyshire coalfields from the restoration of land, the revival of dozens of communities and the regeneration of the economy has been most significant. I emphasise to the Minister that the main constraint in north-west Leicestershire and in the east midlands to current and future economic growth is infrastructure, infrastructure, infrastructure.

10.14 am

Liz Blackman (Erewash): It will come as no surprise that I am about to speak about my constituency because there are lessons to be learnt in regard to the east midlands. Erewash is between Derby and Nottingham. Significantly, it does not have the critical mass of some of the major towns in the east midlands. Ilkeston and Long Eaton are two principal towns, with smaller settlements in between. Like many areas in the east midlands, Erewash was founded on traditional industries such as coal mining—of which none remains—engineering and textiles, essentially lace. Employment is below the national average and has been for a very long time and there are significant pockets of high unemployment. A few years ago, the local enterprise agency, Erewash Partnerships, did a skills audit of the constituency and found that a high percentage of the work force were skilled or semi-skilled. Very few fell into the managerial and professional classes. Wages were lower than in the surrounding urban areas. The audit concluded that the area needed a learning community because education and improved skills were essential for sustainable growth and prosperity.

On the education agenda—I am an ex-teacher—there has been significant progress in my constituency over the past couple of years, with class sizes being brought right down. Derbyshire had some of the largest classes when we took control in 1997. Literacy and numeracy are progressing well. Local alliances have done some superb work, targeting areas with significant deprivation and concentrating on the early years and parental learning, which they see as critical to creating the virtuous cycle. The single regeneration budget in one area concentrates on training, and the local further education college has been innovative in expanding education, particularly for adult learners. The new deal has cut youth unemployment by 65 per cent. and long-term unemployment by the same amount. The learning and skills councils should, when up and running, provide a coherent framework for the provision of skills and training.

My constituency is characterised by small and medium enterprises, many of which are incredibly enterprising. Drawing on the traditional skills that they acquired when working for the traditional firms of the area, such as Rolls-Royce, they have branched out into specialist areas to cover a niche in the market. Atlas Composites in Ilkestone is such a firm, which specialises in carbon fibre components for the aerospace industry and Formula 1. I shall give a brief potted history of the firm—we have much to learn about SMEs in the region and beyond. Two men with traditional engineering backgrounds and skills saw a niche, bought second-hand machinery, found a suitable building, invested everything that they had earned back into the business, outsourced the design element, recruited locally and linked with the local college to develop the appropriate NVQ to support the business. They designed their own course and had it verified by the college and the training board.

There are many examples of such businesses in my constituency, which have taken advantage of the capital allowances and lower corporation tax offered by the Government. We need to understand much more about what makes a successful business. What are its roots, what are its ingredients, what develops it? The RDA and the small business service have the strategic task of continuing to develop that understanding and strategies to support businesses with so much potential.

I also see a role for venture capital and for banks. I am pleased that banking services to the SMEs have been referred to the Competition Commission.

Ms Sally Keeble (Northampton, North): My county of Northamptonshire, which is also represented by my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr. Sawford), is similar to Erewash in having many SMEs. Does my hon. Friend agree that development agencies are vital engineers of growth, precisely because of the need to foster the innovation to which she referred? Such firms are the engine room of the economy; they do not somehow float about by themselves, but need an appropriate level of government?

Liz Blackman: I could not put it any better than that. My hon. Friend sums up my point succinctly. The traditional sector that is not doing well is the textile industry, although even that industry has its exceptions. Firms that have invested, found a niche in the market and kept their skill base up to speed have done extremely well. I welcome the Government's textile strategy, which is currently out for consultation. The RDAs could have a strategic role in the industry to ensure that firms receive the support that they need in training, marketing and exporting.

I will talk briefly about transport and communication, which echo the theme taken up by my hon. Friend the Member for North-West Leicestershire (Mr. Taylor). Transport links in the area are not good. There is significant scope for improvement, especially in Ilkeston, which is land-locked and has waited many years for a final link to the M1. The absence of such a link has caused congestion, which is constricting development. The town has no railway station, and it used to have four, although we are making progress on that. The integrated transport strategy must move ahead more quickly than it has done.

Nevertheless, the skill base, the education base and the potential for growth have all improved. I have used the debate merely to highlight further developments that could take place.

10.22 am

Mr. Vernon Coaker (Gedling): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Gillian Merron) on securing the debate, which is important to us all. I will make a couple of key points about problems that affect the region and my constituency.

The east midlands is sharing the boom in economic prosperity that the Government have brought about since the 1997 election. Problems in the region should not disguise the fact that unemployment has plummeted. Long-term unemployment has been halved, and youth unemployment has been cut by two thirds. A measure of the success of an economic policy is whether it can move people who are out of work back into work. If we are to tackle poverty and social exclusion, people must be in work. All over the east midlands, the Government are trying to meet problems head on; they are not ignoring them. That is especially true in parts of Nottingham where there are some of the worst unemployment black spots and the greatest difficulties in getting people back into work. The Government are giving people hope, the desire to work, and opportunities. That sets the scene for my next remarks.

Some areas have high unemployment. The Minister knows—I have written and spoken to her several times—that there are small pockets of deprivation in areas of general affluence. Could she give further thought to the problem faced by Netherfield, which has tried for years to obtain help so that it can support people who need retraining, better housing and education? It has never received that help because it does not fit in with the way in which Government statistics—or perhaps regional or European statistics—are calculated. All hon. Members who represent parts of the east midlands can pick out small pockets in their constituencies in which the general policy does not apply.

Clearly, difficult restructuring is taking place in the east midlands. The textiles industry is affected—Courtaulds recently announced the loss of many jobs in my constituency and in that of my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, East (Mr. Heppell). The coal industry continues to decline, and we should make no mistake about the fact that in the east midlands, and especially parts of Nottinghamshire, that industry has gone. In Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire, communities that depended on the coal industry are still trying to come to term with its collapse. We must remember that problems have been caused by the closure of coal mines not only now, but five, 10 and 15 years ago. At last, an attempt is being made to deal with those problems. The Government's retraining packages and the new deal for communities are important, because they try to support restructuring and ensure that new growth industries are located so as to be accessible to those communities.

I disagree profoundly with the hon. Member for the east midlands—[*Interruption.*]—I mean the hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan). I wish that I had meant that joke. I disagree with him, because those

[Mr. Vernon Coaker]

problems cannot be considered in isolation. The areas are interdependent, so the Government are right to focus on the whole region. To tackle the problems, it is no good treating a small village in Leicestershire, or even Leicester itself, in isolation. It is important to support people by retraining them and helping to restructure their industries and communities.

I have some quick points to make on transport. My hon. Friends the Members for Erewash (Liz Blackman) and for North-West Leicestershire (Mr. Taylor) raised some serious issues, and I do not want to repeat what was said about the access problems between Nottingham and the M1. However, they did not mention the fact that, although the east coast line and the west coast line are electrified, the midlands main line to St. Pancras, which serves Nottingham, is not. It should be electrified, and the track should be improved. In a couple of weeks' time, some hon. Members and I will meet representatives from Railtrack, and I will suggest those improvements. New services have been introduced, but the track needs to be improved so that the trains run faster and provide speedier connections between the region and London.

We also need to preserve existing pit lines and improve the local rail network so that it interconnects more easily with other transport systems. The greater Nottingham area rail development strategy co-ordinates the lines coming into Nottingham from all over Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire, and also, I believe, from Leicestershire, yet we do not relate that scheme to other transport schemes. Roads can block up, and they often have railway lines next to them. If we could have more local rail services on those lines, connected to the existing pit lines, we would make more progress.

10.29 am

Mr. Andrew Reed (Loughborough): I will keep my remarks brief, although I have several points to make. I wish that the hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan) was still here to listen to the arguments about the need for a regional identity, and that the hon. Member for West Derbyshire (Mr. McLoughlin) was here, because he talked about inward investment. The east midlands has always attracted proportionally lower inward investment than other regions, partly because it has no regional identity.

One of the reasons for the debate, which I am grateful that my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Gillian Merron) secured, is to ensure that parts of the region work together to promote the area not only in the UK, but in Europe and other parts of the world. Most inward investment comes from places such as Japan and the United States and it is difficult to sell the east midlands because it does not have an identity. We can do that only by working together.

I will deal with the Leicestershire part of the east midlands economy because I recognise that there are sub-regions within the region, which do not always naturally match county boundaries. We use travel-to-work area statistics for a good reason: not all workplaces and travel-to-work patterns match county boundaries. People travel from Leicestershire to the west midlands and vice versa. Therefore, it is important that we have a regional perspective, while recognising those sub-regions. We must also build on points made by hon. Members this morning by recognising the difficulties and differences that exist even within constituencies.

I have always been interested in economic development and I want to ensure that my constituency benefits from the great advances made since 1997. I accept that unemployment was falling before the general election. Since December 1996, unemployment in my constituency has fallen by more than 30 per cent., while youth unemployment has been reduced by 76 per cent. and long-term unemployment by 65 per cent. I have always felt passionately that getting people back to work is a key priority, so we have a good story to tell.

Over the past six months, I have been really annoyed by the so-called great north-south divide debate. We in the east midlands and in the midlands as a whole are extremely frustrated that the concentration seems to be on the debate between the north and the south. We exist and we experience many of the problems found in the north. Leicestershire also has many of the problems suffered by the south. For example, there are development problems and pressure from population movements. Leicestershire is an attractive place for people to relocate to; it is a great place to be. That is why we suffer and seem to get missed out of the debate. One reason for raising the east midlands's profile is to make sure that we have a proper voice in the debate so that it is not only the north and the south who are involved in the argument.

In some ways, Leicestershire, particularly the Loughborough constituency, is a microcosm of not only the region, but the whole country. I will skip over the history of my constituency and the rest of Leicestershire, but there are factors that make them unique.

First, there is the dependence on the manufacturing sector, of which textiles form a large part. In Leicestershire, 29 per cent. of GDP is still based on manufacturing, which, as hon. Members know, is far higher than in other parts of the region. However, there are difficulties, especially in the textiles sector. In Leicestershire alone, 26,500 jobs depend on textiles, and all the forecasts that we have seen from Leicestershire TEC and the other bodies that work in the county show that that number is likely to decline for the next 10 years at least. We need to make sure that we tackle that problem together.

Judy Mallaber (Amber Valley): Will my hon. Friend accept that, although there are continuing problems in the textiles industry, it is important not to write it off as an industry in inevitable final decline: Will he also welcome the report recently produced by both sides of the industry with help from the Department of Trade and Industry? It considers how the textile industry can develop, based on innovation and new lines, so that it can compete in the world market.

Mr. Reed: I agree entirely with that sentiment, and I will deal with that issue when I speak about the five or six things that we need from the Government to ensure that areas in difficulty start to prosper. That will be achieved through innovation, technology and using our expertise.

Leicestershire is also unique in that it has three universities—Loughborough, Leicester and De Montfort. I declare an interest as a former student of De Montfort and a big fan of the other two. Most counties of Leicestershire's size would not have such expertise on their doorstep, and innovation and technology are crucial to the future of places such as Loughborough and Leicestershire. The Loughborough advanced technology initiative is a key example of what we can do by bringing companies together and working with the East Midlands regional development agency to create a technology cluster. Loughborough university is world famous for its links with Ford, British Aerospace and others, as well as for its sporting prowess. It is imporant to build on that. Many local companies that I have visited and to which I have spoken, such as Deltanet, I2R and Datalink, came out of Loughborough university several years ago. They are engineering companies of the highest order, which are growing in Europe, despite the high value of the pound, and creating jobs in the town. As I said, we have suffered from the decline in the traditional manufacturing sector and in textiles. Brush, which is one of our greatest manufacturers of locomotives, suffered a great decline during the early 1990s. It used to employ 6,500 people, but now appears, with only 900 staff, on lists of the biggest employers in Leicestershire. Such large numbers of job losses during that period represent a great decline, which we need to tackle.

I will skip over many of the things that I wanted to say. However, there are five key things that we need from my hon. Friend the Minister to ensure that we move forward in Leicestershire and the rest of the east midlands.

We need to consider the strength of the pound and interest rates. They have a large impact on manufacturing—I think that all hon. Members accept that. The single regeneration budget needs to be targeted at local areas, and I hope that Loughborough's bid will be successful. The local plan needs to be completed as quickly as possible to allow development of brownfield sites, particularly in the town. Innovation and technology grants need to come through as quickly as possible because future growth will come from them. Training and lifelong learning are key elements, which will ensure that we meet our skill shortages.

In conclusion, things are looking extremely rosy in Loughborough. There are still problems that we need to tackle, and I have described five elements that I think will make a big difference. I hope that the Minister will respond to what I have said.

10.35 am

Mr. Paul Keetch (Hereford): This has been a useful and entertaining debate, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Lincoln (Gillian Merron) on securing it. She mentioned the diversity and disadvantages of the east midlands. In one way, the region is indeed disadvantaged in the House: sadly, it is the only region that does not have a Liberal Democrat Member of Parliament, but I assure the House that that will change soon. From the other side of the midlands, I say to the hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan), "Ich bin ein Midlander."

The hon. Member for Lincoln mentioned several issues, and I will contrast what she said with what the Chancellor said—or did not say—in his Budget speech yesterday. I will deal with two specific matters, and I hope that the Minister will respond. First, the hon. Lady said that rural areas were fundamental, and she is right. Rural areas in the east and west midlands and across the United Kingdom are fundamental, and the crisis in agriculture that is affecting them is deep and real. It affects not only those directly employed in the industry, but the wider rural economy. However, in his speech yesterday, the Chancellor did not mention the word "agriculture" once. He totally ignored the issue, as if it did not exist. The Chancellor and Labour Back Benchers may deny it, but the Government consistently ignore rural areas. There are pigs sitting in Parliament square, and dairy farmers have to pour their milk away, but the Government consistently ignore such issues. I hope that the Minister will tell us what the Government intend to do about those matters. Why will they not match the agriculture compensation funds from Europe and put more money into our rural areas? As the hon. Member for Lincoln rightly says, that is fundamental.

The hon. Lady also mentioned the manufacturing industry, as did the hon. Members for Gelding—[*Laughter.*] I apologise. I should have said the hon. Member for Gedling (Mr. Coaker), but I was still thinking about agriculture—and for Loughborough (Mr. Reed).

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. It is customary to address the Chair, not some nebulous audience.

Mr. Keetch: I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Manufacturing industry is vital to the economies of the east and west midlands. What did the Chancellor say about manufacturing yesterday? He said nothing and mentioned the word only once. There was no mention of the strength of the pound or, incredibly, of Rover and the effect that that crisis will have on the economy of the entire midlands. I hope that the Minister will deal with those matters when she replies to the debate.

Agriculture and manufacturing are vital to the east and west midlands and to other rural economies across our nation. I am surprised that we do not have a Treasury Minister here today. However, we have a very capable Minister from the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and I hope that she will tell us what the Government will do about the crisis in agriculture and the strength of the pound.

10.39 am

Mr. Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Lincoln (Gillian Merron) on securing the debate, and on the presence of so many of her colleagues, who have made interesting contributions. As the hon. Member for Hereford (Mr. Keetch) said, the most curious aspect of this debate is that a Minister from the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions is responding, not a Treasury Minister. In a debate on the economy, we would normally expect a response from a Treasury Minister. The fact that the Minister's colleagues from the Treasury are nowhere to be seen is perhaps due to the complete lack of support for east midlands's manufacturing industry in yesterday's Budget speech. Is it because of the view of the regions held by those at the DETR? The hon. Member for Lincoln mentioned the

[Mr. Tim Loughton]

role of the RDAs, which featured low down on the priorities list. They certainly featured below regional assemblies and the Government office. As she said, this debate has shown the lack of cohesion within the east midlands. It is a region that, like many others, is in search of an identity.

Mr. Bob Laxton (Derby, North): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Loughton: If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I will not give way—I have little time in which to speak.

As the hon. Member for Lincoln suggested, having a television station that covers the region is one panacea for the problem of regional identity. The hon. Member for Loughborough (Mr. Reed) made the extraordinary suggestion that inward investment is somehow dependent on a strong regional identity. He cannot possibly be suggesting that Toyota came to Derbyshire because people from that company thought, "Ah, the east midlands has strong regional cohesion, let's go there." Similarly, people at Daewoo, one of the largest employers in my constituency, certainly did not say to one another, "Let's go to the south-east because it has a strong regional identity and regional development agency, and it may have a strong regional chamber as well." It is complete nonsense to suggest that.

The hon. Member for Lincoln began by emphasising the diversity of the regions and it is the diversity within regions that makes the east midlands, in particular, a wholly artificial creation. In the five counties of the east midlands the size of the rural economy is above average, but nothing was done for that economy in yesterday's Budget. The gross domestic product per head is below average for the United Kingdom, as are the skills level and manufacturing productivity. The region features 40th out of the 77 regions of Europe, and there are big disparities in its GDP patterns. As my hon. Friend the Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan) asked, what have Brackley, Boston and Buxton got in common? That same question was raised by Derek Mapp, the chairman of the East Midlands development agency. He was quoted last year as saying that the region had a reputation as one of the most divided in the United Kingdom.

The regional development strategy is laid out by the EMDA in the "Pathfinders to Prosperity" document. The document alludes to groups that were formed to identify solutions to business problems and which consisted of "energetic business leaders". Various sectors were mentioned in that context, including communications, construction and development, fashion and design, financial and professional services, the food chain, health care, high-growth engineering, the learning industry, retail and tourism, and cultural and creative industries. That is what the RDA, or part of it, has to say. Notable by its omission, however, is the textiles industry, which is the biggest sector in the east midlands and the one with the most problems. Is the EMDA abandoning that industry, which provides so many jobs? The Minister may like to comment on that. Is textiles manufacturing simply not new Labour enough? Similarly, the farming sector is completely ignored in the document, despite the high profile of agriculture in the region.

The EMDA trumpets its success before it has even started by saying that the integrated approach to strategic planning, based on a very close working relationship between the regional assembly and the EMDA, gives the east midlands a competitive advantage. Exactly how does that give the east midlands an advantage? Perhaps the Minister can elaborate. The strategy in the document contains 27 100-day targets which involve producing or checking eight plans, establishing six partnerships, commissioning four pieces of research, setting four targets and setting up an office in the USA. The targets include identifying a piece of land for redevelopment.

It is notable that hon. Members who have talked about the RDA—particularly the hon. Member for Lincoln—did not mention practical solutions or specific projects. The hon. Lady mentioned a document called "Prosperity through people" and a planning charter. There was an awful lot of talking, an awful lot about meetings and discussions, but no practical action.

The textiles industry in Leicester has specific problems. Figures produced in the *Leicester Mercury* show that unemployment rose in Leicester last month, bucking the downward national trend, with 8,226 people claiming benefit. The figure for the east midlands showed that unemployment had risen from 118,000 to 121,000, which is 5.5 per cent. of the population, again bucking the national trend. Nationally, the number of people claiming benefit fell. In the three months to January, the number of jobs in the manufacturing sector in the east midlands fell by 122,000 to just over four million, which is the lowest total since December 1994. Manufacturing employment has suffered disproportionately; the biggest falls have been in the textile and leather industries, which have lost 34,000 jobs in the past year—10 per cent. of the total. We have heard precious little about that this morning.

A survey on business in the region, which PricewaterhouseCoopers conducted last summer, makes for worrying reading, particularly for those in the manufacturing industry. The preceding six months were described as bad overall, especially for textiles. There is a general belief among business leaders that things will get worse over the next six months. Greater European integration is not seen as a factor that would make a substantial difference to business in the region. Thirty-two per cent. of businesses reported decreasing sales, and textile companies had a very bad six months, with 41 per cent. reporting a fall in sales of more than 5 per cent.

Only last week, Coats Viyella, a firm based in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan), closed with the loss of 200 jobs. What was there in yesterday's Budget to help the textiles industry, and manufacturing in general? We heard an awful lot about high-tech industries, and there were an awful lot of tax incentives to help internet millionaires, but there was precious little to help traditional businesses, such as textiles and chemicals, which feature heavily in the region. There was also nothing to help agriculture.

The energy tax, another feature of yesterday's Budget, will hit the chemicals industry in particular. Even an 80 per cent. rebate, targeted on industry groups that come under the integrated pollution prevention and control directive, will not help the electricity-intensive

industries in the region compete against Europe and the far east. Many jobs will suffer because of the Government's blind insistence on going ahead with an energy tax despite the fact that the Environmental Audit Committee described it as a damp squib.

The west midlands has been getting the headlines because of Rover, but there will be a big spill-over into the east midlands because jobs there depend on that company, too. The big job losses in textiles will continue, but they do not make the headlines. We have heard that a textile industry study is looming—to use a pun—and we have heard about Coats Viyella, but what in yesterday's Budget will help the industry in the region? Absolutely nothing. It is a shame that no Treasury Minister is here to respond to that question. Over the past few years, stealth taxes have affected the east midlands as much as they have affected any place. It has been calculated that stealth tax rises imposed in the three Budgets before yesterday have cost the region £2.7 billion.

It is difficult to see how regional development agencies will help. Will the Minister confirm that 85 per cent. of the RDA budget in the east midlands has already been allocated to projects that existed before RDAs were created? Will she confirm, too, that more than £1 million is spent on unelected regional politicians—RDA board members, in other words—most of whom are expected to work only two days a month? What is the added value that RDAs will supposedly bring to regions such as the east midlands? What will they do cost effectively that was not previously done by Government regional offices, or could not be done by county councils or unitary authorities? What accountability will there be on the part of the EDMA and the regional assembly, and what interaction will there be between those two bodies?

I congratulate the hon. Member for Lincoln again, because she rightly raises many of the problems in her region. There are two real problems. First, nothing that the RDAs have to offer seems to address the difficulties that I have mentioned. Secondly, even if a sense of identity united the five counties, it would have no greater impact on attracting investment from outside than what could be achieved by counties individually, or by unitary authorities working in partnership with one another or with the Government.

The hon. Member for Lincoln may want to create a regional identity—I congratulate her on her wish to do that—but is this the right way to go about it? She said that one of the strengths of the west midlands was diversity. Long live diversity, but let us not stifle it, or stifle enterprise, by imposing a costly and bureaucratic regional development agency that has produced no solutions, so far, to many of the problems of the east midlands region that have been mentioned today. Yesterday's Budget merely compounded the problems of manufacturing in the east midlands and the rest of the country.

10.50 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Beverley Hughes): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Gillian Merron) on securing what has been an interesting and important debate. We have had the opportunity to challenge the rhetoric of Opposition Members and to make clear to the people of the east midlands, who are at the core of the debate, what their local Members—their local Labour Members, at any rate—and the Government are doing to secure their future prosperity and ensure that they share in rising national prosperity.

We have had an interesting and illuminating debate, including some very knowledgeable and analytical contributions, for which I thank my hon. Friends. I commend their efforts to put the east midlands on the map: representing their region is a legitimate and important role for Members of Parliament. Obviously, the Opposition did not consider that to be a task worth undertaking. Labour Members' contributions were in stark contrast to the sole contribution by a Conservative Member from the region, the hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan). He feels so little concern about the issue that he could not stay in the Chamber for the full debate.

Mr. Robathan: The Minister, of course, does not come from the east midlands. As she is aware, this is just a talking-shop debate, the purpose of which is to get coverage in the local newspapers. It is a load of nonsense. I care very much about my constituency, my county and my country, but not about some artificial creation such as the east midlands.

Ms Hughes: The hon. Member for Blaby quoted the Bible. As I listened to him then—and again now—it was a quotation from Shakespeare that came to my mind:

... full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

His contribution showed little concern for the east midlands economy. He referred to the narrow region of the east midlands. People in the east midlands will be very interested in that, and in the fact that the only Opposition representative of the region who spoke had nothing to say about the local economy.

Mr. Robathan: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Hughes: No, I shall not give way again. I want to make progress.

I want to draw hon. Members' attention to the obvious difficulty that Opposition Members had in understanding the Government's strategy, which my hon. Friends supported, for addressing—

Mr. Robathan: Regional assemblies.

Ms Hughes: No—economic development.

We take a dual approach. As yesterday's Budget showed, we are exercised about the issue of raising general levels of prosperity throughout the United Kingdom. We also want to assist the regions to deal with inequalities between them, and diversity and inequality within them. Those two political objectives are not mutually exclusive, as the Opposition seem to think. The Opposition have difficulty understanding that broader concept, and how those important political objectives for the national and regional economies can be—indeed, must be—fused. It is the Government's job to put in place the mechanism to achieve that.

[Ms Hughes]

As the speeches by the two Conservative Members clearly demonstrated, the debate has been about regional economies and regional economics and regional economic development, with a focus on the east midlands. That is why I am here, speaking for the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. We will not have any nonsense about needing a Treasury Minister. Hon. Members should be perfectly satisfied with me—I am very competent, and I will speak strongly on the subject.

It is important that the contributions made by my hon. Friends acknowledged that the east midlands has a great deal going for it. The region has a varied and resilient industrial base and a strong tradition in many manufacturing industries, and there is growth in many high-tech industries. There is a great deal of potential. There are centres of excellence in learning and research, and the region is an important part of the total United Kingdom economy.

As my hon. Friends said, however, there are wide disparities in prosperity between different parts of the region, with some areas suffering from deprivation and decline, including parts of the four main cities, and the former coalfields. There are signs that business confidence is increasing; high value added manufacturing is performing well, as are services and construction. However, some of the sectors that have fared less well nationally, such as textiles, clothing and footwear, are heavily represented in the region. That is having an impact on the economy, as is the fact that industries that are doing well nationally are less well represented. My hon. Friends the Members for North-West Leicestershire (Mr. Taylor) and for Loughborough (Mr. Reed) emphasised the need for infrastructure, and I accept the analysis by my hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough of the issues that should be addressed.

A core issue in the debate was our focus on the regions, in the context of economic development, and in particular the role of regional development agencies in helping regions to drive up their performance, and in targeting resources and solutions on the areas in which they are needed most. We had a clear demonstration of the corner into which the Conservative party has put itself. The Opposition have been hung by their own petard. Their knee-jerk reaction at the start of the Parliament, when they said that they would abolish the regional development agencies if they ever had the chance—which, of course, they will not—means that they have to defend that position in the face of the obvious success of the agencies and the associated chambers of commerce in beginning to mobilise the regional partnerships that are so essential to the achievement of the economic development that we want to see.

Contributions were made by my hon. Friends the Members for Erewash (Liz Blackman) and for Northampton, North (Ms Keeble)—[*Interruption.*] I apologise for mispronouncing Erewash; it must by my north-west dialect. As the hon. Member for Blaby has said, I am not from the east midlands. My two hon. Friends made it clear how important it is to have a mechanism at regional level for delivering the means and resources to those who need them, particularly the small and medium enterprises, enabling them to drive up their performance and contribute to economic activity. That cannot be done at national level. It is surprising that the party that claimed for so many years that it had exclusive expertise in business and was the friend of business, should show itself to be completely unable to understand the important role that business-led organisations will play in developing enterprises, especially small and medium enterprises in the regions. That says much about the Conservative party's complete lack of understanding of the needs of businesses in the east midlands.

In conclusion, I draw hon. Members' attention to the subject of our debate. [*Laughter.*] We can all use technical terms such as economic development, gross domestic product and RDAs, but, as my hon. Friends have demonstrated, what really matters is the people of the east midlands. My hon. Friends' interests are clearly different from those of Conservative Members—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We now move on to our next debate, which is about the future of the Commonwealth. Will hon. Members who want to leave the Chamber please do so quickly and quietly?

The Commonwealth

11 am

Mrs. Jacqui Lait (Beckenham): It is a pleasure to speak in this Chamber, whose layout I saw for the first time today. I am glad that adversarial politics is not dead, despite the hemicycle layout of the Chamber. I also welcome the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Mr. Jones) back to the Palace—it is a great pleasure to see him here.

It is a pleasure and a privilege to introduce this brief debate on the future of the Commonwealth, which played an important part in most of our lives while we were growing up. It was created 50 years ago, in 1949, and it is currently in a period of transition. The current Secretary-General, Chief Anyaoku, is about to retire, to acclaim from everyone who worked with him, and the new Secretary-General will take over on 1 April. Our debate could not be more timely.

It is only a couple of weeks since Commonwealth day, which falls on the second Tuesday of March. It would be interesting to take a straw poll of the number of people who knew that 13 March was Commonwealth day. [*Interruption.*] I am glad that my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells) knew that. Although the Commonwealth has been part of our lives for more than 50 years, few of us knew that 13 March was Commonwealth day.

The Commonwealth is widely known and respected and it is regarded with great affection, but its history and purpose are not as well known as they should be. I spent several years as a governor of Archbishop Tenison's school, which is located just over the river opposite the Oval cricket ground. Although 90 per cent. of its boys had west African or West Indian backgrounds, I wonder how much of their curriculum was devoted to the Commonwealth's history. Are we bringing up a generation who do not share our knowledge of the way in which, uniquely, the United Kingdom gave up its empire relatively peacefully and created the Commonwealth? If so, we should fear for its future as an organisation that serves anyone other than Heads of Government.

I welcome the fact that last November's Heads of Government meeting agreed to set up a working party to review the Commonwealth's future. Although our country is a member of that review team, it is sad that our Prime Minister left the Heads of Government meeting early. I hope that that does not reveal the importance that the Government place on the Commonweatlth. One of its strengths is its sheer variety—the number of countries that belong to it means that in world councils it punches above its weight.

Mr. Stephen Day (Cheadle): Is it not encouraging for the Commonwealth—and, therefore, for the world—that a former Portuguese and a former French colony have seen fit to join what had been a gathering of ex-British colonies? That is reassuring for the cohesion of the world and for the success of the existing Commonwealth.

Mrs. Lait: Indeed. I agree with my hon. Friend that it is good that countries from different traditions of empire feel strongly enough to join the Commonwealth.

The strength of the Commonwealth, and the subtle relationships between the countries concerned, were probably helpful during the recent floods in Mozambique. Those countries were able quickly to help a nation in deep distress that was, hearteningly, returning to democracy and improving its economic structure. That development has been affected by the floods, and we hope that the people of Mozambique will not lose heart in relation to that regeneration. The Commonwealth has a role to play in ensuring that Mozambique recovers as quickly as possible, both democractically and economically.

The Commonwealth is not an economic grouping. However, the Commonwealth Business Council has a major role to play in developing its lobbying to help developing countries to benefit from global trading. I understand that the council was actively lobbying at the World Trade Organisation conference in Seattle. Perhaps if it had been allowed to get on with that, undisturbed by people who thought that they had a greater interest in the economic development of developing countries, something more postitive might have emerged from Seattle. We hope that the business council will build its lobbying power to improve global trading to a greater extent than it has done so far.

The Commonwealth is, if anything, a political grouping of countries held together by the experience of empire. It is impressive that those countries still wish to work together. However, if the Commonwealth is to increase in strength and power over the years, it must ensure that it has the internal strength to do so. I shall outline some of the problems that it has faced, and continues to face. It would be helpful if the review group were to take them into account when considering the future development of the Commonwealth.

In the early 1990s, I chaired the Conservative west Africa committee, in which people with an interest in Nigeria played a substantial part. At meeting after meeting, we watched Nigeria descend into endemic corruption. Despite the elections, we are only now witnessing some control over foreign bank accounts being taken back, and some of the knock-on effects of the corruption being remedied. The Commonwealth was active at that time: Nigeria was excluded from the councils of the Commonwealth for some time. However, it could have been more proactive in trying to get Nigeria back on the straight and narrow earlier.

Zimbabwe is a current case that represents the need for the Commonwealth to be much more proactive in trying to impose common discipline on its members. Those of us who have watched the development of Africa since many of its countries have become independent recognise that what is happening in Zimbabwe is similar to what has happened in many other African states—that is, the emergence of a tyrant or dictator and the impoverishment of the people. Africa often provides wonderful examples of the positive force that democracy can represent in the world, but unfortunately Zimbabwe appears to be experiencing the last throes of the African dictators.

However, Zimbabwe is still part of the Commonwealth. Given the arguments—which I shall not go into today—about the role of the white farmers, the evidence that Mugabe is raping the country of most of its income and the general poverty to which the country has been reduced, the Commonwealth has been

[Mrs. Lait]

very slow in taking positive action to try to enforce the rule of law and democracy in Zimbabwe. I hope that it will soon consider explusion. After all, it acted quickly on Pakistan.

Mr. Bowen Wells (Hertford and Stortford): Will my hon. Friend reflect on the fact that, despite Zimbabwe's serious difficulties—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Frank Cook): Order. The convention is to address the Chair, as I am sure that the hon. Gentleman, as a senior Chairman, is well aware.

Mr. Wells: I am aware of that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I apologise. On the other hand, I do not like to turn my back on a lady, and shall therefore have to stand half way between the two positions.

I was asking my hon. Friend to consider the point that, despite the fact that Zimbabwe has serious difficulties because of the leadership of President Mugabe, an organised Opposition is acting democratically to try to bring to the attention of Zimbabweans—and the world—the need for proper, accountable democracy to be established once more.

Mrs. Lait: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I have no objections to looking at his back; it is a very attractive back. I accept his point about the Opposition in Zimbabwe, and we must hope that it wins the forthcoming election. My point was that it has been clear for some time that President Mugabe is debasing Zimbabwe's democracy, and the Commonwealth has not been as proactive as it could have been in imposing collective discipline.

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): I am afraid that I have no compunctions about my back.

Does my hon. Friend agree that some disturbing developments have taken place since the court's judgment on Friday about the eviction of squatters from farms that have been occupied? There is every indication that the authorities in Zimbabwe are ignoring the judgment, and that the number of properties that are being invaded is increasing as we speak.

Mrs. Lait: I entirely agree. The sooner that the election takes place, the better. Without wishing to interfere in Zimbabwe's internal affairs, we must hope that the Opposition win. The Commonwealth should have been much more proactive at a much earlier stage in trying to ensure that President Mugabe could not behave as he has.

Before my hon. Friends kindly gave me more information, I was about to move on to the speed with which the Commonwealth reacted to the military takeover in Pakistan. Many of us would not wish to see a military dictatorship in that or any other country, and instant action—in so far as any international action can be instant—was taken. I wonder whether, in excluding Pakistan, we may have undermined influence that we might otherwise have had over the current conflict in Kashmir between India and Pakistan. By expelling Pakistan, the Commonwealth's good offices may have been lessened. Can the Minister give some reassurance on that?

Events in Kashmir may well reflect what was known in Victorian times as the great game, although the players may no longer be Britain and Russia, as they were in Kipling's day, but America and China. As I understand it, the stated intention of President Clinton, who is currently visiting India, is to try to improve the situation in Kashmir. India and Pakistan were both members of the Commonwealth, but now only one is, and the Commonwealth could perhaps have played a more helpful role had Pakistan not been excluded. I am grateful that Pakistan appears to want to rejoin as soon as possible.

I am also concerned about the Commonwealth's potential role in the fight against drugs, as, I expect, are all hon. Members. Unfortunately, many farmers in a number of Commonwealth countries are involved in the drugs trade. One of the bases of reducing the worldwide supply of addictive drugs such as heroin and cocaine is the replacement of the poppy and coca plant with a more productive crop. The Commonwealth Development Corporation appears now to be managed properly and will be under the discipline of a decent capital return. Various attempts have been made throughout the world to find such a crop, and it is perhaps fanciful to say that the CDC should become involved in finding alternative crops for farmers.

However, fair trade goods have proved successful and are increasingly to be found in shops. Indeed, a constitutent of mine lobbied me, saying, "Why can't we have fair trade coffee and tea in the House of Commons?" I was initially informed that those brands did not have the same back-up as their more commercial counterparts, but was subsequently told that the House does indeed now stock fair trade coffee and tea. In the light of the increasingly commerciality of fair trade goods, the Commonwealth could do a great deal more to promote replacing the very profitable crops of poppies and coca—I do not blame the farmers, who must make a living—with crops that are profitable but considerably less damaging to health.

Mrs. Gillan: Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government should investigate the use of pyrethrum, which grows in similar conditions and is much in demand as a natural herbal pesticide? It would be helpful if the Minister could say whether pyrethrum could replace the poppy.

Mrs. Lait: Indeed. However, although I accept my hon. Friend's point, I do not want to divert hon. Members down the horticultural route; one could speculate on the use of willow and yew in cancer drugs, and so on.

In summing up this brief overview, I should say that the evolution of the British empire into a Commonwealth that is attractive to countries with different heritages is a huge achievement. I am sure that there is no desire for the Commonwealth to break up and I recommend that the review group works more towards developing links and becoming more effective in world councils, so that the basic philsophy behind the Commonwealth becomes more deeply entrenched throughout the world.

The high-level group that has been set up to examine the Commonwealth should set out long-term objectives, one of which must be that the Commonwealth's own back yard is fully open to the scrutiny and standards demanded of others. Whether I believe in the Government's foreign policy philosophy is immaterial, but if the Government believe in it, they should participate wholeheartedly in discussions on the development of the Commonwealth's future role. The Prime Minister should be as deeply involved in those discussions as befits our role in the Commonwealth and I hope that he will not again leave them early, as he did a few months ago.

11.21 am

Mr. Stephen Day (Cheadle): It is a great joy to be able to participate in this debate on the future of the Commonwealth. I have enjoyed and am proud of my links with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association.

The Commonwealth is a gathering of friends and many believe that it is not politically effective, but it is successful because it is not primarily a political or economic alliance. It is a gathering of friends from many different cultures throughout the world. They speak many different tongues, some of which are spoken in only one country, but, to Britain's advantage, it is still essentially an English-speaking union. English is the language of government in many Commonwealth countries without a common national language.

There is much for Britain to be proud of in the concept of the Commonwealth and other members can take great pride in the fact that all of them have shaped the Commonwealth as we know it today. It is a very different animal from the one that was created when it was based on what were known as the white dominions. It has been changed into a multicultural, multinational organisation. Countries such as Cameroon and Mozambique, which, tragically, has been much in the news recently, can be proud of their part in the development of the Commonwealth because they introduced a new dimension that is a key to its future. It is, yet again, going through a transitional stage. It may become a more effective group of friends, crossing even more cultural barriers, and may even become more effective than the United Nations often is.

The United Nations is based on great ideals, but, tragically—hopefully, only for the time being—is not always as effective as we all want it to be. Mozambique has benefited during its tragic current circumstances from its links and friendship with the Commonwealth. It is a genuine friendship because Mozambique has a different historical tradition. I am proud, and I am sure that the Commonwealth is proud, that such a country should wish to be among our number. It shows that the Commonwealth has a great future.

On the future direction of the Commonwealth, we need to consider the standards employed within it. In almost every case, its members are either fully fledged democracies or, in Africa and other parts of the world, struggling towards a more open and democratic society. Many are not perfect, but which democracy is? Although our democracy is long-standing—of which we are most proud—none of us would claim that it is perfect. No democratic system can be perfect, as it relies on human beings, who, as we all know, are far from perfect. Democracy is imperfect by nature. Many countries in the Commonwealth are slowly developing towards the kind of democracy that is understood in this country and throughout western Europe. We must tolerate countries whose circumstances sometimes do not permit them, for practical reasons, to base their system of democratic parliamentary government on exactly the model that we understand. That is part of the strength of the Commonwealth, and I hope that it will continue.

However, certain Commonwealth members do not in any way live up to the expectations of fellow members, at whatever stage they have reached in the development of their democracy. The Commonwealth was right to take action against Pakistan at the time of the military coup. The Minister will correct me if I am wrong, but my understanding is that, in the case of Pakistan, the Commonwealth was able to take action because of the military nature of the takeover. Zimbabwe has suffered massively from the misrule of Mr. Mugabe, who has milked the country for his and his cronies' benefit. The people of that country have suffered hugely at the hands of a former terrorist, who is essentially still a terrorist in government. The Commonwealth should be able to take action in such cases. The Government of Zimbabwe should not be allowed to behave in such a manner, especially when its own people, whom they are supposed to protect and succour, are the victims. I hope that the British Government will take a lead within the Commonwealth on that.

Britain has a strong connection with many African countries and Commonwealth members, which still regard Britain with great affection. I have had the privilege of visiting a number of African Commonwealth countries. It is out duty to take action. We hear a great deal about the moral dimension of Government policy; I would like to see it in relation to Zimbabwe.

11.28 am

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait) on securing the debate, and join her in welcoming the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Mr. Jones) back to this Chamber. I believe that this will be his first debate since he returned, and it is good to see him back.

I also welcome the Minister, although I am disappointed that once again he has been lumbered with a debate that is not strictly in his area. His hon. Friend the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Member for Neath (Mr. Hain), who describes himself as a son of Africa and who should be fielding this debate, is out of the country. It is sad to see that there is not one Labour Member in this Chamber to support the Minister. It is a crying shame that, in a debate on the Commonwealth, only one Liberal Democrat Member is present, but at least a good group of Conservative Members is present.

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. John Battle): I should like to put it on the record that my hon. Friend the Minister of State, whose responsibilities cover Africa, is at an international

[Mr. John Battle]

conference in Geneva working on human rights. He is representing the Government and ensuring that our voice is heard on the matters that the hon. Lady and her colleagues are raising.

Mrs. Gillan: I am delighted to hear that robust response but, nevertheless, the poor Minister is lumbered again, for which he has my sympathy. I hope that he will convey the Opposition's strong message to his hon. Friend.

In the early 1960s, Sundays were special days in my house. My family regularly entertained a group of guests who would bring to our home in Norfolk a wealth of tradition, experience and friendship. Sunday was the day that we were visited by members of the Victoria League who, as citizens of Commonwealth countries, were in this country to help it. They included many of the nurses who put their efforts into our health service. That was my first experience of the Commonwealth. There was always a riot of colourful costumes and a true wealth of talent and friendship. It created a special impression, and the bond between this country and other countries has left its mark on me. Those early days formed my deep affection and respect for the Commonwealth.

When I came into the House, I was proud to be a member of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and I am delighted to have the opportunity to serve on its executive. I want to put on record my thanks, and those of other Opposition Members, to the staff who serve in our branch offices and the CPA headquarters, which is based in London. I join my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham in paying tribute to the outgoing Commonwealth Secretary-General, his excellency Chief Anyaoku. I am looking forward to attending Madam Speaker's special reception for him this evening. He has served the Commonwealth in that role for 10 years, following 34 years of sterling Commonwealth service.

Don McKinnon will take office on 1 April. As New Zealand's Foreign Minister, he will make a fine Secretary-General. I am sure that he will draw on his undoubted skills to guide the Commonwealth through an increasingly challenging period. I have seen Don in action, and we all look forward to working with him, not least at the annual CPA conference, which this year will take place in London and Edinburgh. We will welcome to this country representatives of more than 50 countries to take part in our proceedings in Westminster and Scotland.

When I first became a Member of Parliament, I turned to the CPA for education on foreign affairs and contact with other countries. Those people who argue that the Commonwealth is on the downturn should consider the countries that are interested in joining it. They include countries that one would not connect with the Commonwealth, such as Yemen, Jordan and Rwanda, which have occasionally murmured an interest, although they have not made a formal approach.

The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association offers practical help to democracies. Unlike many organisations, its training and seminars are low on ideology and high on good sense, which should not be underestimated. Also, it is exceedingly cheap to run. If the UK branch received the same money as the dome, it would be funded for 1,000 years. The CPA creates good will. It helps members to learn about colleague countries and allows politicians to network.

Although I would like to speak about many Commonwealth issues, such as the tensions between India and Pakistan and Her Majesty the Queen's visit to Australia, time is short and I shall confine myself to two matters. I hope that the Minister will be able to provide decent answers if his mind is concentrated on a small rather than large set of issues. He has often called himself a master of joined-up thinking; I hope that he will do us the credit of giving us some joined-up answering instead.

The British Council is a key player in the Commonwealth. I am sure that the Minister is more than grateful for its expertise and for the high regard in which it is held. That strengthens his Department's efforts in advance of Commonwealth events. However, the Government's policy is hampering and frustrating the British Council. What will the Minister do about that? He will know that, in the developing countries that are Commonwealth members, the British Council has suffered from the decision taken by the Department for International Development to stop using its services and to concentrate on bilateral giving to other Governments. As a result, in Africa alone, overall British Council programme funds are down by more than 50 per cent. The Government boast of their funding of the British Council, but the Minister should note that for each year of the current comprehensive spending review, its funding will be lower than in any year of the previous Parliament. He will know that the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs has found that the British Council is severely underfunded. What assurances can he offer, particularly on Commonwealth needs that can be met by the British Council?

The second issue concerns ethical and moral foreign policy and the situation in Zimbabwe, to which other Conservative Members referred. Pakistan has been suspended from the Commonwealth councils as a direct and clear-cut response to the violation of the Harare principles. How can we then sit back and ignore what is going on in Zimbabwe? The argument may be that there is no mechanism for suspending Zimbabwe, but I think that that should be altered.

The Commonwealth principles contain some simple statements, including

> We believe in the liberty of the individual ... We recognise prejudice as a dangerous sickness,

and

> We oppose all forms of colonial domination.

When the Harare declaration was established, we set up a group to examine the way in which Commonwealth members met those principles. Zimbabwe was represented on the Commonwealth Ministers Action Group—the body that was to sit in judgment on the way in which countries adhered to the principles. Indeed, Zimbabwe was in the chair and was only replaced in that role in November. However, the country was transferred on to the high-level group of countries that is also considering the Commonwealth's future and the way in which Commonwealth countries adhere to the

principles. I have called for the Ministers to suspend Zimbabwe from the high-level group, but there has been no reply. I have called for a suspension of EU aid to the Zimbabwe Government, which is required not least after the Court of Auditors report showed that aid was being diverted to other ends and was not reaching the people most in need. The Government have not responded.

Zimbabwe is not even observing the basics of the Harare declaration. It is sending money and support to a war in the Congo rather than feeding its own citizens; it prevented opposition parties from gaining access to the media during the referendum; it is about to give presidential consent to a Bill allowing interception of electronic mail and other communications; it arrests journalists because they write the truth—the reports of the torture of journalists last year are horrific—instead of Government propaganda; it condones the illegal grabbing of farms and instructs squatters to stay put; it raids diplomatic bags and gets away with it.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): My hon. Friend is giving us an impressive list of the horrors of the Mugabe regime. Is she aware that last Friday, Mugabe threatened that his political opponents would face death?

Mrs. Gillan: Nothing that comes out of that regime surprises me after the catalogue of misery that I am recounting.

This morning I received an e-mail that I think will interest hon. Members. It stated:

> Here in Kwekwe there had been considerable land invasion of productive commercial farms with the use of city council police and Government transport. Drunken unemployed crowds are rented for the occasion. There is evidence that they have been armed. They have been predominantly arriving at night, ramming down security gates with heavy vehicles, breaking entry to property, taking over homes with contents and expelling the occupants into the night with abuse and beatings. Farmers, in the interests of protecting their families and their lives, have had no alternatives than to be passive. The police are rendering no assistance whatsoever.

I shall make the e-mail available to the Minister afterwards. It ends:

> Mrs. Gillan, please do all you can. There are a lot of people depending on the likes of you to do something. Please make a fuss in the House of Commons. It has to be known.

I am making a fuss in the House of Commons. I called for EU aid to the Zimbabwean Government to be suspended when it became obvious that it was not being used to help the poor. I called for Zimbabwe's suspension from the high-level group, because it has lost the right to sit in judgment on others until it sorts out its own affairs. I now call on the United Kingdom Government to call for Zimbabwe's suspension from the Commonwealth. The Government cannot operate an ethical and moral foreign policy only when it suits them. It is about time that the Government stood up and were counted. They should show backbone and set an example by saying no to what is going on in Zimbabwe.

The Commonwealth is a proud association with much to offer the world and an opportunity to continue to set a great example in democracy and human rights. Let us ensure that the Government do not let the Commonwealth down. Nothing less than the Minister's full suport for my requests will do.

11.41 am

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): It is a great pleasure to follow my hon. Friends the Members for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait), for Cheadle (Mr. Day) and for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan). I heartily congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham on landing this important debate. Given the number of Labour Members, it is lamentable that the only Labour Members who have found time to come are the Minister and his Parliamentary Private Secretary. That is pathetic and shows how important the Commonwealth is in the scale of Labour priorities.

The Commonwealth faces a crisis today with problems in Zimbabwe. My hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle spoke eloquently about the success of the Commonwealth. Britain can be congratulated on the peaceful way in which we slipped away from our empire and handed power and responsibility to a kaleidoscopic variety of peoples. Some would say that that might have been precipitate. When the original plans for Indian independence were discussed it was suggested that African states should take independence as late as the 1980s. Decisions were made by the Macmillan Government and I still feel that we have responsibility for many of the countries from which we stood back.

We have been much less directly involved than the French and there have been successes on both sides, but I fear that we cannot stand back any further from Zimbabwe. What is happening there is appalling and is down to one man who is, in simple terms, a thief. Zimbabwe faced prosperity. My brother worked in racing stables there for some years and commented on how much better the race relations between its small white minority and the various black populations were than in, for example, neighbouring South Africa. It is an extraordinarily rich country with wonderful potential for prosperity across the board at every level.

What Mugabe has managed to do is tragic. With 60 per cent. inflation he has achieved what the Beira patrols never did. He has created extraordinary fuel shortages, mostly because he is an ex-communist and does not understand sums. The devaluation of the Zimbabwe dollar meant that fuel had to go up, but the national oil company, Noczim, held the price of fuel. It now has a $9 million deficit. The state-owned power company Zesa has run up a debt of $20 billion. The shortage of hard currency is so chronic that the Zimbabwe *Standard* reported on 30 January that the Cambridge examination board had refused to clear examination results because it was owed £2.6 million by the Zimbabwean Government. That is the level to which this wonderful and potentially prosperous country has been reduced.

It is obvious to anyone who takes an interest in Zimbabwe where the money has gone. As a kleptocrat who has visited 150 countries since he took power, Mugabe's foreign travel bill has been a staggering $260 million. On 23 January, the Panafrican News Agency reported that he takes $50,000 in cash with him on each trip and that the first lady takes $10,000. It was also reported that Mugabe

> does not have to account for the use of that money. Who would have the gall to ask him for the change?

Those around him also are on the gravy train. Government officials are paid an average of $250 a day on foreign trips. Ministers take an average of $15,000

[Mr. Owen Paterson]

and senior Government officials are paid $12,500 a day. Compare that disgusting behaviour with the state of the average Zimbabwe citizen. One in four adults between the ages of 19 and 49 has HIV or AIDS, and 2,500 people a week die of the disease. Mugabe is a truly revolting dictator.

The result of the referendum was a potential breakthrough; 55 per cent. of the population voted against giving Mugabe unacceptable powers. However, the country now faces rigging during the next general election campaign; it will be rigged with straightforward violence. A strong case can be made for postponing the general election. Indeed, that was proposed by the Justice Minister, Emmerson Mnangagwa, as a result of an independent survey, which showed that a quarter of those on the electoral roll were dead or fictitious or had multiple entries. Mugabe has ignored that, and insisted that the election go ahead.

The circumstances are not propitious. The attempt to blame the 4,500 white farmers for all Zimbabwe's ills is nothing less than a disgrace. Critically, those farmers dominate the tobacco industry. Some 40 per cent. of Zimbabwe's export earnings have been hit and, on 11 March, *The Economist* estimated that the total loss was about 400 million Zimbabwe dollars. It is nothing less than ethnic cleansing. We went to war last year to stop ethnic cleansing in a country with which we have no cultural or historical links, virtually no commercial links and a questionable strategic link. In Zimbabwe, we have links going back to days when British settlers first arrived and the capital was named after a British Prime Minister. We have a real responsibility to look into what is happening there.

Mrs. Gillan: Does my hon. Friend share my concern about the forthcoming election? The register of voters is hopelessly obsolete, there is no independent electoral commission and the President appoints one fifth of the Members of Parliament. Does my hon. Friend agree that that bodes badly for a fair and free election?

Mr. Paterson: My hon. Friend is correct. We have a critical role, and the Government and the Commonwealth could take beneficial action to try to ensure that the election is as fair as possible. The electoral roll is totally distorted and Commonwealth observers are needed now.

Mrs. Gillan: Is my hon. Friend aware that observers have overseen no elections in Zimbabwe since the early 1990s, and perhaps even before then? Does he share my concern that Commonwealth observers have not been invited to Zimbabwe during the past decade?

Mr. Paterson: My hon. Friend is right. I was not aware that no observers had been in. Given the circumstances, it was remarkable that the referendum result went the way of sensible, right people. There are good people in Zimbabwe, if only we could support them. The new Movement for Democratic Change, led by Morgan Tsvangirai, and the Zimbabwe Union of Democrats, led by Margaret Dongo, could win 75 seats if encouraged and if the election went fairly.

Our first problem is the horrific persecution of the press. In an appalling case last year, Mark Chavunduka, the editor of the independent *Standard*, and his reporter, Ray Choto, were arrested after publishing a report on an alleged military coup in which 23 members of the Zimbabwe national army had been detained for plotting to overthrow the Government. The authorities failed to comply with the several high court orders calling for the immediate release of Chavunduka. The military stated:

> The judge cannot direct us ... anyone who meddles with military matters is subject to military matters.

When the two were released, they had hideous signs of torture on their bodies—of cigarette burns, of electric shocks and of having been submersed in drums of water.

Those who perpetrated that torture are also involved in the extraordinary and outrageous invasion of white farms. Those who turn up are not just squatters and poor peasants looking for land, as the Government describe them. They turn up in Government-registered vehicles, have food and supplies and are directed by men in flashy suits and sunglasses who spend most of their time on mobile phones to Harare asking for instructions for what to do next. Mugabe is clearly driving the operation.

An appalling case featured in one of the broadsheets yesterday concerning an attack on some people whose family had been farmers since 1820. Mr. Smith of Nyarenda farm in Mashonaland was knocked to the ground with an axe; one of the mob shouted:

> You white dog. Our President, our God Mugabe, has ordered us to kill you.

The Government must begin to address the situation or there will be no hope of prosperity in the Zimbabwean economy. No one will invest further and there might be a wholesale exodus of the highly skilled farmers who provide 40 per cent. of foreign earnings through tobacco exports.

A high court order taken out last week compelling the squatters to leave was put through by Judge Paddington Garwe. However, the police commissioner, Mr. Augustine Chihuri, ignored the directions—the police have done nothing and the 72 hours have elapsed. He was under clear instructions from the Government. Up to 650 farms have been invaded.

Some think that there might be justice in the matter. They argue that the white farmers constitute only 1 per cent. of the population and that it would be fairer if there were even land distribution. I cannot endorse that view. Of the 2,000 farms that have been acquired by the state since 1980, 462 have been distributed among Mugabe's cronies.

Death threats were announced last week on opponents of the Mugabe regime. African News Online reported calls to clamp down on the broadcasting of songs critical to the Government. Officials cannot speak in public under clause 20 of the public service regulations.

I shall end with a most sinister quotation from police commissioner Augustine Chihuri. He said:

> The police force will not hesitate to arrest members of the opposition for fear of being labelled brutal.

The Commonwealth has a real moment of truth. I call on the Government to ensure that Commonwealth monitors go in this week, before the election campaign

descends into total chaos, and that Zimbabwe is suspended from the high-level group. Further, I call on them to make it clear that Zimbabwe will be suspended from the Commonwealth and that all aid will be ceased if the policy of ethnic cleansing is continued.

11.55 am

Mr. Bowen Wells (Hertford and Stortford): I regard myself as a Commonwealth man because I have found the Commonwealth to be a great teacher and a great friend. My first association with the Commonwealth was in 1955, when I had the misfortune to experience an aircraft breakdown in Karachi, Pakistan. There, for the first time in my life, I witnessed the most abject poverty, and Pakistan is still among the poorest countries in the world. People were living in cardboard boxes alongside the Sindhu river, which runs through Karachi, and had been living in that condition since the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947. That poverty was created by human beings and by badly administered government. The enmity between people within the Indian sub-continent engraved itself on my mind, and we can all do something to eradicate it. Much is being achieved through the efforts of the Commonwealth, both in the sub-continent and throughout the Commonwealth, and that sets an example to the rest of the world

I have had the good fortune to be close friends with two Commonwealth Secretary-Generals, one of whom is Sir Shridath Subindrinath Rhamphal of Guyana, where I served for seven years. He led the way in considering the political aspects of the Commonwealth and in enhancing the pursuit of democracy, fairness and the rule of law, because he is a lawyer. Above all people, he values the Commonwealth and has enhanced its ability to provide help. My other friend is the retiring Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, Chief Emeka Anyaoku of Obosi, Nigeria. He and I have something in common in that we both joined the Commonwealth Development Corporation as management trainees—he in Nigeria a few years before I joined the corporation in London. Throughout the time that he has led the Commonwealth as Secretary-General, he has been true to the Commonwealth Development Corporation's concept of economic development. One of his enduring marks will be his promotion of the Commonwealth private investment initiative, which is administered by the Commonwealth Development Corporation in three regions of the Commonwealth. Through the gathering of private sector money to invest in small and medium businesses in Africa, the Caribbean, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, economic development in those countries is being encouraged. The project has been very successful.

Although I had not realised it, the chief and I came to a similar conclusion about the effect of democracy in Africa. I was asked to give a speech to an African conference last year, in which I put it to the assembled Africans that democracy was a natural form of government for Africa. The speech came to the attention of the chief, who sent me a copy of the speech that he made when he was asked to address the newly opened South African Parliament following the first election after the end of the apartheid regime. He spoke on exactly the same theme as I did, and I want to quote two passages from his speech. He mentioned the Harare declaration in October 1991 and said:

> it was agreed that whatever the national variations, a true democracy would be judged by the presence of a number of essential universal ingredients. These included the right of a people to choose freely the men and women who would govern them and to cashier them; the primacy of the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary; freedom of expression and association; and the continuing transparency and accountability of government.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr. Paterson) explained that, sadly, those factors are absent in Zimbabwe. I have not doubt that the situation would bring about the disapprobation of the chief, because the rule of law is not being respected or complied with. In fact, it is being undermined by President Mugabe. I remind the Chamber that Zimbabwe has a tradition, through the Commonwealth, of democracy and, if supported by the British Government, it will triumph.

Chief Emeka Anyaoku continued:

> What Commonwealth leaders identified as the essential ingredients defining every genuine democracy hold good for Africa.

Mr. Battle: I am listening carefully to the hon. Gentleman. I greatly respect his comments, given his record and interest in such matters over many years. I assume that he believes that we are strong enough to support Zimbabwe and that he does not align himself with the comments of the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan), who was asking for a full blockade and boycott.

Mr. Wells: The Government must consider carefully what action to take in Zimbabwe, so that they support those who support democracy and are interested in re-establishing the rule of law and enabling the people of Zimbabwe to decide freely who should govern them and how they should be governed. I hope that the Government will support that. I am sure that they disapprove of the illegal invasion of other people's property. There are 20,000 acres of land in Zimbabwe in the ownership of the Government that could easily be used to satisfy the legitimate desires of the people of Zimbabwe to own and farm more of their land.

Mrs. Gillan: I have called for Government to Government aid and for EU to Zimbabwean Government aid to be blocked. Does my hon. Friend agree that that would be the way forward? Aid to non-governmental organisations and aid that can reach the people directly should, of course, continue to go into Zimbabwe. I must make it clear that we have called for a block on Government to Government aid to Zimbabwe and I do not want the Minister to misinterpret that objective.

Mr. Wells: My hon. Friend is right. We should be careful what aid to Zimbabwe we block. In the light of current events, it would clearly be inappropriate to continue dealing with those who support the Government. Much of the aid budget in Zimbabwe is going to the people of that country for the fight against AIDS, for the education of women and the health of the children and their mothers. I hope that that assistance will not be stopped.

What the chief said in his speech makes good sense in relation to Zimbabwe. He said:

[Mr. Wells]

> What Commonwealth leaders identified as the essential ingredients defining every genuine democracy hold good for Africa. Democracy in Africa will differ in its detailed arrangements from country to country, but if it is a genuine democracy, it will have to incorporate these essential ingredients.
>
> Why these particular features? At the heart of any genuine democracy lies accountability . . . And accountability can only be enforced if the governed have the power to make or unmake governments.

It is essential for the Commonwealth to recognise that such elements must be in place, but they are sadly lacking in Zimbabwe, as they are in Pakistan and were in Nigeria. However, Nigeria should be welcomed back because it has returned to democracy after a series of military dictatorships. The instinct of the African people is to go back to a form of government that rests on the consent of the people of that country to be governed.

Why am I referring to a particularly African form of government? As Chief Ameka said in his speech,

> A study of traditional government in any part of Africa would disclose one fact—a healthy hostility against the concentration of power without accompanying checks and balances to control it, beginning with the position of the Chief.
>
> No chief was a chief except by the will of his people. In many African societies this maxim was impressed upon the chief in the process of his installation and was in addition to the various mechanisms in place to ensure that the chief marched in step with the wishes of his people.

That cannot be said of President Mugabe in Zimbabwe at present.

Democracy lies at the heart of how Africa and other parts of the world have traditionally been ruled. We now have to build a modern society based on those traditions. The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association is fostering and helping democracies emerge and take their rightful place for all the peoples of Africa, the Caribbean, the Indian sub-continent, Malaysia and even Australia and New Zealand. We are speaking in this Chamber today partly because the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons visited Australia and thought that this ancient House could experiment with an equivalent to that country's alternative Chamber.

The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association allows us to learn from each other, possibly to advance democracy, to make it more accountable and to fulfil the amibtions of chief Emeka Anyaoku, who has led the Commonwealth so well. As my hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham said, London will host the association's conference in August and September. The conference will be a great opportunity to enhance the association and the concept of the Commonwealth, which is based fundamentally on democracy. The conference embraces the ambitions that we all cherish of seeing the economic as well as the political development of the Commonwealth enhanced through talking to each other.

In the same speech, the chief said:

> Sir Winston Churchill once said that the best way of governing states is by talking. Indeed, government by talking is one of the many definintions of democracy on offer. So it was in traditional Africa.

I hope that the people of Zimbabwe, whether they oppose or support Mugabe, will honour that African tradition, with the help of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. It has held post-electoral seminars to improve the knowledge of parties in government or opposition in the legislature of Zimbabwe, so that they know what to do in a traditional constitutional manner.

As we pointed out in the March 1996 report of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Britain hugely benefits from its membership of the Commonwealth. Countries throughout the world are jealous of the relationships of Britain, Australia and Canada with the Commonwealth. Our common language, traditions of law and forms of government, and our deep understanding of the Commonwealth are huge bonds to very different countries with different cultures and religions. In international forums such as the World Bank, the United Nations and the World Trade Organisation, the British can talk with and receive support from many Commonwealth countries because of those bonds. Britain must value and cherish those traditions even more than it has done before. It is through those friendships and traditions that we learn from each other, and that real peace, economic development, justice and the rule of law can be obtained. Britain should enhance the Commonwealth in every way that it can.

12.9 pm

Mr. Nigel Jones (Cheltenham): I congratulate the hon. Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait) on securing the debate. I thank her for her kind words to me, and I thank the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan), an old—I should say not old, but former—pupil of Cheltenham ladies college. It is a great privilege to follow the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells), who is the chairman of the Select Committee on International Development, on which I have the privilege of sitting. He and I share a strong interest in the Commonwealth, which I believe is a great force for good in the world. It enables big and small countries to meet as equals in an atmosphere of mutual respect and generosity and in which countries whose economies are not major can be noticed.

I shall talk about countries where the population lives on an average of less than a dollar a day, particularly countries in sub-Saharan Africa. I have a great interest in Africa. Last year, through the wonderful job that we do, I had the privilege of visiting three Commonwealth countries in Africa: South Africa, as a UN observer of fair elections during its second election; Botswana, as a member of a CPA delegation; and Mozambique, as an Inter-Parliamentary Union observer of its second democratic election, where I had the privilege of meeting former United States President, Jimmy Carter. One thing that the Commonwealth does well and needs to do more of—with which the Government should perhaps help—is the monitoring of elections that bring democracy to Commonwealth countries. I am not sure what we do about Zimbabwe; I certainly do not volunteer as an observer of its elections, but I am sure that one or two hon. Members would be prepared to do so.

The Commonwealth can act as a powerful unit in a crisis, as we saw in the recent disaster in Mozambique. I visited Mozambique last December and was shown some of the damage that the el Nino rains caused a couple of years ago. People said that it could happen

again and, sure enough, it did. They had the most appalling floods, as well all saw on our television screens. The Commonwealth responded extremely well to that crisis. South Africa stepped in and gave enormous help, and the UK also did a huge amount. Having sat on the International Development Committee, I believe that the Department for International Development did its best to get resources there as fast as it could, from wherever it could find them. Last week, we grilled the Secretaries of State for International Development and for Defence, and they did their best. There is a debate on whether we need regional emergency centres; we should think about that within the Commonwealth, and, more broadly, the United Nations.

The Government of Malawi have only two helicopters but sent one to help during the floods. I had the privilege of meeting the President of Malawi, Dr. Bakili Muluzi, two or three years ago. Malawi, formerly Nyasaland, is one of the poorest countries in the world and we need to give it more help. I was pleased that the Government doubled assistance to Malawi in the comprehensive spending review, but the country has severe problems: it has half a million AIDS orphans, out of a population of 12 million, and more than 60 per cent. of the population is malnourished. As a Commonwealth friend, we need to work to help it, particularly with the products that it exports. Its biggest foreign currency earner is tobacco, not the best product on which to base an economy. The lake, which provides much protein for the people, is over-fished. We also support health clinics there. Health is a real problem for the whole of Africa, particularly with the scourge of AIDS.

In Kenya, which has 30 million people, the infrastructure is crumbling, roads are deteriorating, and health is also a problem. Tanzania, which has continuing internal tensions between the mainland and Zanzibar, also has health care problems. I do not understand why it moved its capital from Dar-es-Salaam to Dodoma; for one of the poorest countries in the world to move its capital, at great expense, was perhaps not the best use of money—particularly a country as heavily indebted as Tanzania.

I met John Cheyo, a Tanzanian politician, who explained that the local hospital in his constituency was closing because the roof was falling in. With pain in his eyes, he told me that women were dying in childbirth.

Africa has some bright spots: Botswana, which we visited last summer, was a real surprise. I expected it to be another poor African Commonwealth country, up to its ears in debt, but it is not like that at all. It is more than twice as big as the UK, and as big as France, with fewer than 1.5 million people. It has been an extraordinary success. I understand that a previous Government decided in 1965 that there was no strategic reason to keep Bechuanaland, as it used to be called, so it became independent—as Botswana—in 1966, and discovered diamonds in 1967. We jokingly suggested to the President, Mr. Festus Mogae, that we had come to renegotiate the independence settlement, and he told us that we could not.

We visited the Jwaneng diamond fields, an extraordinary, huge hole in the ground with incredibly large digging equipment, and we met the manager, who told us that he had just received a report on a saliva test of his staff, whose participation was voluntary and anonymous. The company had discovered that 30 per cent. of its staff were HIV positive, right across the pay grades. I simply cannot understand how to build into a business plan the replacement of those staff, many of whom have many years of experience and training. The Commonwealth needs to put pressure on the United Nations and medical researchers to try to find a cheap solution to the AIDS problem, because countries in sub-Saharan Africa cannot afford the enormous cost of drugs, such as those used in this country to cope with AIDS.

The same is true in the north of the country, which has the most wonderful wildlife, as do many countries in the Commonwealth. I do not suggest that she is wildlife, but we had the privilege of meeting Miss Universe, Miss Botswana, who is not only extraordinarily beautiful, but is making AIDS awareness here campaign during her year as Miss Universe.

Sierra Leone is another country with which I have links, as a patron of the Kambia hospital appeal. Kambia is a town north-east of the capital, Freetown, and my local hospital, Cheltenham general hospital, has a link with Kambia. Last year, during the civil war, the rebels looted, set fire to and destroyed part of the hospital, and as a result, the area had no health care. In a debate on Sierra Leone last year, when I told the Foreign Secretary about that, he confirmed that the hospital had been badly damaged and promised that the United Kingdom would provide some cash for reconstruction, although not specifically for that hospital. I am not pressing for an answer today, but perhaps the Minister would consider whether funding might be provided to enable that hospital to be rebuilt so that the people of Kambia have health care.

There are tensions in the Commonwealth. A fifth—indeed, perhaps almost a quarter—of the world's population lives in the Commonwealth, especially in the Indian subcontinent, and there are big tensions between India and Pakistan. The CPA, which several hon. Members mentioned, is a force for good. To have Members of Parliament from Pakistan and India in the same room, talking one-to-one, can only be beneficial. We shall have to think long and hard about allowing countries such as Rwanda to join, but it might be the solution for that war-torn country. I pay tribute to the staff of the CPA—of which I am an executive member—in London and in other countries. On CPA visits, staff have been magnificent in organising sometimes difficult and strenuous tours.

The CPA is an extraordinary organisation and it is cheap to run. We must ensure that it continues. I hope that the Minister will reassure us that the CPA will indeed continue and that some funding will be provided for my hospital in Sierra Leone.

12.20 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. John Battle): In the remaining 10 minutes, I shall attempt to answer questions relating to two debates. The first is about the future of the Commonwealth, and I thank the hon. Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait) for the tone in which she introduced it. Within that wide-ranging debate, we have had another on the crisis in Zimbabwe, which we all take seriously. I shall do my best to blend my answers to

[Mr. John Battle]

those two debates. I, too, welcome the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Mr. Jones): we are glad to see him back with his customary style, courtesy and consideration. We hope that recent events are behind him and will never be repeated—for any of us, I am tempted to say.

The Commonwealth celebrated its 50th birthday in 1999. It has come a long way in those 50 years. It is now in a process of transformation. It is a dynamic, loose association, originally of half a dozen countries, but now with 54 members. I agree with the hon. Member for Beckenham that it is important that its history and purpose should be spelt out often and in public. She is right that it is not as well known as it should be.

A week after we took office, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary spelt out our commitment as a Government—

> to strengthen the Commonwealth and to improve the prosperity of its members.

That has been the basis of our approach in our many dealings with the Commonwealth secretariat and with individual members of the Commonwealth.

I shall not rehearse at length—I do not have the time—the characteristics that set the Commonwealth apart from other international organisations, but it is important to remember that it is a different sort of organisation. It is not the United Nations, the World Bank or the World Trade Organisation. It operates through consensus at all levels, so majorities can never overrule minorities. As one member, we are equal with the other 53 nations that comprise the organisation. It is not treaty-based, but developed for itself a set of guiding principles—most famously, the Harare declaration of 1991—to which member states are expected to adhere. It is an informal, genuine family of nations that have much in common.

The hon. Member for Cheadle (Mr. Day), who has apologised for leaving, pointed out that Mozambique had benefited from a relationship of friendship, which is why the Commonwealth is different from other organisations. As I said, it is a genuine family with much in common, such as the English language, and legal, judicial and parliamentary systems. Some Members of Parliament are also members of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. They know from experience about the Commonwealth's administration systems, contacts, education and so forth, which go back through many years of history.

At the heart of the Commonwealth are commitments to good governance, the rule of law and the protection of human rights. The Commonwealth has invented a mechanism to ensure that those principles are translated into practice—the Commonwealth ministerial action group of eight Foreign Ministers whose responsibility is to investigate serious and persistent violations of the principles enshrined in the Harare declaration. It is relevant to the issues that were raised about Zimbabwe.

The Commonwealth ministerial action group was established in 1995 by Heads of Government at the Auckland Commonwealth Heads of Government conference as part of the Millbrook Commonwealth action programme. The eight Ministers were given a mandate to deal with

> serious or persistent violations of the principles contained in the declaration.

They are about promoting democracy and good governance, respect for human rights and the rule of law, and sustainable economic and social development. It was established to ensure that those principles were implemented. The UK plays an active part in the Commonwealth ministerial action group, but the other seven members do not, as some Members thought, include Zimbabwe. They are Australia, Bangladesh, Barbados, Botswana, Canada, Malaysia and Nigeria. Zimbabwe is no longer a member of CMAG.

Mrs. Gillan: In November, Zimbabwe left CMAG, but it is still on the high-level group that is considering the future of the Commonwealth and what we might call the CMAG-ing of countries such as Pakistan. Will the Minister join me in calling for Zimbabwe to be suspended from the Commonwealth?

Mr. Battle: No we will not, because it is not our role to do so. We have led action in response to the situation in Zimbabwe. I should be grateful to receive the hon. Lady's e-mail—I assure her that we shall take its contents seriously. However, she must accept that we led EU action and raised concerns directly with the Zimbabwean Government, bilaterally and multilaterally. We also moved the resolution that was passed by the EU to toughen up our approach and to spell out the situation in public, and we let the Zimbabwean Government know in no uncertain terms that the international community was not happy with the situation.

Mrs. Gillan: The Minister has clearly spoken out, but the Government have done nothing. Has 1p of EU aid that goes directly to the Zimbabwean Government, or 1p of Government-to-Government aid from this country to Zimbabwe, been stopped?

Mr. Battle: I am more than happy to discuss Zimbabwe, rather than the wider issues that are associated with the Commonwealth. The hon. Lady has changed her ground. Did we take action? Yes. The Government initiated discussions with our EU partners, which led to the EU demarche and the declaration, and we have continued to put diplomatic pressure on Zimbabwe in an attempt to resolve the situation peacefully. I hope that the hon. Lady will not go down the road that was suggested by a Conservative Member, who appeared to argue that we should resolve the situation by going in with a pair of jackboots. That position was not adopted by the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford, who has for many years taken a great interest in the Commonwealth. I agree with him—we seek to ensure that aid programmes focus on reducing poverty and that they benefit the people who need them rather than the Government. That is our programme's purpose. Funding is going to AIDS and women's projects on the ground, and to health and education programmes. Our aim is not to cut off aid or block resources, which would hit the poorest.

Mr. Paterson: I do not know which Conservative Member the Minister accuses of advocating the use of jackboots, but I regard that as a pejorative term. I asked

for Commonwealth monitors to be sent in immediately to ensure, in an atmosphere of intimidation and violence that is getting worse every day, that the general election is fair. I also called for aid to be suspended and for Zimbabwe to be suspended from the high-level group and from the Commonwealth if ethnic cleansing continues.

Mr. Battle: I thought that I had spelled out the situation. The hon. Gentleman is a superb unilateralist—he thinks that he runs the world, let alone the Commonwealth. How would he implement his policy in relation to an organisation that operates through consensus? We have to achieve consensus before taking action. That is why we believe that it is important to engage in conversations when seeking to introduce change.

The land issue is important. The commissioner of police was ordered by a court to remove squatters from farms and to tolerate no governmental interference. Despite the fact that the court's deadline had passed, no action was taken. The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Mr. Hain), said that that was another twist in the sad spiral of bad governance that grips Zimbabwe. We made it clear that one of the few redeeming features of Zimbabwe's current crisis was the existence of an independent judiciary. Our aims are to ensure that the President and Ministers do not put themselves above the law and that we support the rule of law in Zimbabwe where we can.

In the minute that remains, I must respond to the suggestion of the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham that we were not serious about British Council funding. Under this Government, the grant in aid for the British Council increased by 2 per cent. in real terms, which is in line with the settlement of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Our increase in commitments is above the rate of inflation. I visited the British Council, which does a superb job establishing bilateral educational links between countries—it encourages people from overseas to visit this country and vice versa. We support its works in the Commonwealth and in the rest of the world.

I shall respond to the point made by the hon. Member for Cheltenham. It was agreed at the Heads of Government conference in 1999 that the scourge of HIV and AIDS is a global emergency, and that that issue would be a high priority. We committed more than £22 million at that conference to fight the HIV-AIDS challenge. We are devoting resources to it, and will continue to do so.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody): I call Mr. Nigel Evans on the next debate.

Education (Ribble Valley)

12.30 pm

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I first say what a tremendous fan I am of yours? That is always a good note on which to start.

However, I am not a great fan of this Chamber, and I hope that what I have to say here will not be sidelined. It is vital to my constituents: the parents, pupils and teaching staff in the Ribble valley, and will, no doubt, also have implications for the rest of the country. I am delighted to have this opportunity to express my concerns about the Government's impact on education in the Ribble valley. I am also delighted to be able to do so on the day after the Budget—"Gordon's grim and tonic"—which headlines the good news while leaving the grim news to creep up on an unsuspecting public.

I shall divide my comments into four sections: nursery, primary, secondary and school sports—one aspect of school sports in particular. On nursery education, when Lancashire county council believed that it was to be part of a pilot scheme for nursery centres, it decided to embark on a wholesale review of nursery provision in the county. Nursery schools which stood apart from primary schools were told not to confirm any places until after the review. That led to a great deal of uncertainty for parents and for the staff in those schools.

I visted Ribblesdale nursery school in Clitheroe, where the headmistress—the excellent Mrs. Dewhurst—and the teaching staff were extremely concerned that the review would prejudge the merit of having stand-alone schools such as Ribblesdale, and that they would be amalgamated into other primary schools. I toured the school and met many parents who treasured the excellent nursery provision available. Will the Minister ensure that, when reviews take place in future, excellence is the determining factor, and not simply the fact that stand-alone schools may cost more than integrated provision? We need a period of stability for parents and youngsters in Ribble valley. The fact that a wide variety of nursery provision is available gives parents a greater choice.

The reason why I put such emphasis on assurances for stand-alone schools is that the local authority states in its review document that it intends to give more money to deprived areas. I have no problem with giving money to those areas where it is most needed. However, the document states:

> those nursery schools not required for enhanced provision should be amalgamated with adjacent primary schools.

That would extend the age range of the primary school to include nursery-age children, and I have a problem with that. It is a clear example of socialism hitting hard. Nursery school children aged four are to be given their first lesson in the brave new world of politics, and of redistribution from the haves to the have-nots. Good quality nursery provision in Clitheroe could be sacrificed to pay for a more comprehensive nursery provision in a poorer area. It is a plan to soak the rich, starting with the children of those deemed well-to-do. I ask the Minister to come to Clitheroe and to see for herself that the children come from all kinds of backgrounds, and that excellence in education should never be sacrificed on the alter of political dogma.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Ms Margaret Hodge): Hear, hear.

Mr. Evans: I am delighted to hear the Minister assenting, and I look forward to her response, which I am sure will not be coloured by any political dogma whatever.

The children attending primary schools in Ribble valley have also suffered from vicious cuts in education. I have raised the issue of cuts in the provision of swimming lessons for youngsters over a period of several months, in oral questions and letters. The Minister for Sport wrote to me on 12 October 1999, stating:

> All primary schools in England are required to teach swimming, including the principles and skills of water safety and survival, as part of the National Curriculum for physical education.

She went on to say:

> In a recent meeting with OFSTED I raised the question on monitoring of the swimming requirement as I feel there are still many youngsters leaving school without achieving this standard.

I applaud those aims. However, when an education authority halves the amount of money that is available for swimming, the provision of swimming is also halved. It also means that parents have to dig deeper into their pockets to pay for the "swimming tax". Primary schools in my area have to bus their pupils to swimming pools, some of which are miles away, which involves extra cost. The Minister clearly recognises the extra burden on parents, especially if they have more than one child in the school.

The local newspaper, the *Lancashire Evening Telegraph,* quoted Sandra Dundon, who is head of Sabden county primary school. She said:

> We have had two separate 10 week swimming sessions, with 20 children a session. Under the old system we would have taken 60 children swimming during the whole school year. We now also have to share transport with children from Altham and Simonstone CE schools to get to and from Padiham pool. This could mean some youngsters being unable to swim when they leave primary school.

The article also states:

> Headteachers told the Lancashire Evening Telegraph that swimming lessons—which have been a crucial part of the curriculum for more than 30 years—have been cut since County Hall and Blackburn with Darwen Council were forced to devolve swimming budgets to individual primary schools.

Mrs. Blackwell, who is campaigning for more school swimming for primary school youngsters, sends one of her children to Bolton by Bowland primary school. She explained how parents are having to contribute to pay for the swimming coaches, and her child still gets only a third of the previous provision. She has two other children. I am sure that the Minister understands the enormous extra stealth costs that are placed on those parents if they are merely to maintain any semblance of normal swimming lessons. We are talking about life-saving skills, and youngsters in my area have suffered because of the cuts.

I understand, because of representations to county hall, not only from me but from Labour Members, that extra money for swimming lessons will be made available later this year. However, the figures for Sabden primary school reveal that it still has to make up a shortfall of £1,305. After all the fuss about the Chancellor's announcements yesterday, that represents taking with one hand and giving back with the other. I hope that the Minister will have some good news for the parents of the Ribble valley and the rest of Lancashire about getting the swimming lessons that their children deserve.

As we all know, small rural schools have suffered from the average cost of teachers' salaries being met by the county council, while actual costs—especially with regard to mature, experienced teachers—are sometimes higher. I understand that the county council is now considering phasing in actual cost refunding. That will be welcome to all the small schools in the Ribble valley and the rest of Lancashire. However, I do not understand why it has to be phased in—surely actual costs could be met immediately.

Mrs. Milne-Redhead is head teacher of Slaidburn primary school, which is one of the smaller schools in my constituency. She has explained that the amount of paperwork that she receives from the Minister's Department is "dreadful". The school has only a small number of pupils, but the amount of paperwork must make her feel as though it is one of the larger comprehensives. The school governors recently suggested having an additional meeting solely to concentrate on sifting through all the directives and red tape emanating from the Department. That is worrying, and I should like the Minister to tell me whether she believes that it is acceptable. Small rural schools are the lifeblood of many of our villages, and any threat to them must be resisted.

That brings me to Tosside school in my constituency. Its future is under review. It is a small rural primary school on the borders of Lancashire and north Yorkshire, and is very much out on its own, with 5.3 miles of unclassified roads between it and the next school. During the winter, there are often treacherous conditions and poor gritting in the area. It has only nine pupils at the moment, but had as many as 30 during the 1970s. The threat of closure has dogged the school and its prospects for many years. That has led some parents in marginal areas to send their children to schools elsewhere instead of to Tosside school where there is a possibility of closure and of children being uprooted and moved to another school. There has been little encouragement to fill the school. It needs continuity and stability. It has two full-time and two part-time teaching staff.

As the Minister will realise, Tosside is a rural school surrounded by farms. Farming is facing its deepest crisis for 60 years and villages such as Tosside need life support. We do not want to kick away its only chance of survival. The local pub recently closed for several months and an application was made to turn it into residential accommodation. That was resisted by the local authority and I congratulate it. The pub is now under new management and has reopened, which is good news for the village. The village has one local shop, which is not far from the school. If the school closed, the shop might be under threat, and jobs involving maintenance and cleaning at the school would also be lost.

Because of the considerable number of complaints about the possible closure, the matter has been referred to Ofsted for advice and a possible visit. If the Government believe in small, rural schools, they must

ensure that the school if given another chance to grow. It needs a good number of years of life so that the teaching staff can sell the school to the parents; if the parents can be confident that it will not close in the middle of their children's education, it will have the chance to prosper.

The Ribble valley is blessed with excellence and variety in its secondary education. The quality of life in the area is very good and 75 per cent. of it is an area of outstanding natural beauty. I am sure that the Minister understands that people want to live there and that that is not due solely to the quality of the Member of Parliament.

House building has increased in recent years and, bizarrely, the brownfield developments are giving cause for concern, although there have been too many greenfield developments. The 1991–2006 structure plan envisaged 2,400 homes being built in the Ribble valley and, to date, 2,250 have been built. There are 1,161 in the pipeline, including large developments on brownfield sites at Calderstones and Brockhall, which are both sites of former large Victorian asylums. The extra houses are causing demand for local schools to go through the roof. Ribblesdale school in Clitheroe, under the stewardship of the headmistress, Glyn Ward, has an excellent reputation. She has turned the school around and I congratulate here on her tremendous work.

I hope that the Minister will find an opportunity to visit Clitheroe and, while she is visiting the primary school, she can see what is happening in Ribblesdale. Last year, I was able to show my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition around Ribblesdale school and he saw the excellent technology teaching that the school now offers local people. It now has technical college status and I offer my congratulations on that. Many youngsters want to attend Ribblesdale school. Other local schools include Longridge high, St. Cecilia's, St. Augustine's Bowland high, Clitheroe royal grammar, Fulwood high, Archbishop Temple and Corpus Christi. Demand for places at all those secondary schools is going through the roof. Even in the Fullwood area, house-building is high, and a third former asylum in Whittingham is under threat of an enormous housing development, putting more pressure on local secondary schools.

I have a meeting arranged on Sunday with local Ribble valley parents and councillors Albert Atkinson and John Hill. They are furious that school provision does not match local demand. That hits all sorts of people. We are not discussing parents who do not receive their first choice of school; they are being offered schools that never even featured on their radar screens. The stress and pressure for parents and children is intense. I need not rehearse the heartbreak when groups of local youngsters who live only yards away from one another are broken up and sent in different directions. I need not repeat the horror stories of youngsters facing long bus journeys from the Ribble valley to neighbouring areas during dark winter mornings and evenings to obtain secondary education.

Extra provision has been made in some schools. Ribblesdale school is now bursting at the seams as extra provision has been made available, and parents are waiting to hear how successful their appeals have been for places at other local schools. I resent the local authority telling the local grammar school that it cannot increase its numbers to 30 to cater for the additional demand for local places. The chairman of the education committee, Hazel Harding, says that she does not believe in selection and therefore does not want to encourage greater numbers of youngsters to go to the grammar school. Try telling her that the Secretary of State for Education and Employment was only joking when he said that there would be no difference in terms of policy on those schools, and that he was giving some kind of credibility to grammar schools. The Government say one thing while the county council says something completely different. I want politics to be taken out of local education provision.

Clitheroe royal grammar school, as the Minister acknowledged in a letter, is a beacon school. It has a high academic reputation; indeed, it is one of the best schools in the country. It is so good even Labour Members of Parliament would like to send their children there. There are no additional fees at Clitheroe royal grammar school, unlike at Manchester grammar school. Clitheroe royal grammar school should be allowed to provide the 30 additional places. It should be able to act like a safety valve so that additional youngsters from the vicinity can attend it. It is an indictment of the small-mindedness of some local politicians that they would prefer to see young children bussed around the county to spite the grammar school. That is a disgrace. There will be an extra building at Bowland, but its excellent new head, Maurice Graham, has told me that the new places will not be available for at least a year. There is speculation that Bowland high school will be replaced with a new school, but in five years' time. Short-term solutions are needed for the current crisis in school places.

According to the county council, extra house building means that it cannot use future projections on an area's housing to determine where a new school will be needed. Section agreements can be applied to large housing developments, whereby building is encouraged in a certain area as long as a school is also provided. In the Ribble valley, however, many such developments are small, and could not afford to pay for the building of an extra school. The local authority should be able to look at projected house building in an area, and build extra provision so that local youngsters who move into those houses can go to local schools.

I hope that the Minister will reconsider that policy. Given all the extra house building—and the fact that people are moving around—she should give comfort to people moving to the Ribble valley, and to those who have lived there for many years and are now subject to a change in local government policy on where youngsters go to school. Government policy should change to ensure that local people and local children can access local provision.

12.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Ms Margaret Hodge): I, too, am a fan of yours, Madam Deputy Speaker. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) on securing the debate and expressing concerns about education in his constituency. It is a shame that he did not express the same concerns when his party was in government, and that he did not do more to secure

[Ms Margaret Hodge]

adequate funding for education in his constituency. Under the last Budget of the previous Conservative Government, the old Lancashire county council suffered a real-terms cut in its standard spending assessment for education of £13.2 million. Next year, we will provide the new Lancashire county council, which is smaller than the old one, with an extra £12 million in its SSA. That does not include the money that the Chancellor announced in yesterday's Budget—a 10.5 per cent. real increase, which will go directly into schools, including those in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. I would have hoped that he would applaud that record.

The hon. Gentleman raised the issue of nursery education. This Government's record on nursery education is second to none. We are investing £8 billion in early-years education and child care. We got rid of the divisive nursery voucher scheme immediately after we came into office. All four-year-olds now have a place in a nursery class, and we are doubling the number of free places for three-year-olds in nursery classes. In the first nine months of this financial year we have created 106,000 child care places. That is more than the established target, and more than double the number that the previous Government created in 18 years.

Next year, Lancashire county council will receive more than £2 million to provide an additional 1,871 free places for three-year-olds. That is the largest proportion of funding for three-year-olds in the north-west. In Hyndburn and the Ribble valley, 900 places for three-year-olds already exist in the statutory sector. Lancashire county council has received a child care grant of more then £1 million, enabling the creation of almost 2,500 new child care places in the first nine months of this year. Next year, it will receive a grant of £1.214 million—a 20 per cent. increase on this year—which will enable the creation of further places.

Lancashire county council is reviewing nursery education and putting excellence in education above political dogma, unlike the previous Government, who introduced a divisive nursery voucher scheme. Nursery places will be created in the location that is right for parents, so that we can overcome the travelling issue that arises in many rural areas, and to which the hon. Member for Ribble Valley referred. As I understand it, the nursery in his constituency is full, so there is no question of it being under threat. We are looking simply at the redistribution of surplus places.

As a member of the Conservative party, the hon. Gentleman ought to welcome this initiative. As Lancashire county council redistributes surplus places to areas in greatest need, the private voluntary sector will be able to play a role that it has hitherto been unable to play in the expansion of new places. That will provide real diversity and choice for parents. The hon. Gentleman ought also to welcome the proposal to change nursery schools into nursery centres, which will provide a more extensive service, spread costs and enable them to stay open for longer.

Mr. Evans: I am grateful to the Under-Secretary for her commitment to keep Ribblesdale nursery school open. However, does she agree that the priority should be not cost but excellence in the provision of nursery education? We should not amalgamate Ribblesdale with other primary schools simply because it would be cheaper to do so.

Ms Hodge: Excellence is of course the priority, but the hon. Gentleman will agree that we want excellence and value. Lancashire county council's review contemplates the integration of child care and education, which will sustain excellence, increase value and extend the quality and services that nursery schools traditionally provide. Indeed, there are many examples of excellent practice in the Lancashire area. I draw the hon. Gentleman's attention to the rural child care project, which began in September 1998, and to which I often refer in speeches. So far, it has provided nearly 250 child care places in rural areas.

The hon. Gentleman referred to swimming, which should of course be encouraged. He will know from correspondence with Ministers in my Department and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport that swimming forms part of the national curriculum. By the age of 11, pupils should be able to swim unaided, competently and safety for at least 25 metres, and be aware of the principles and skills associated with water safety and survival. Of course, the distribution of available resources is a matter for the local education authority, but I draw the hon. Gentleman's attention to yesterday's statement by the Chancellor. This year, an additional sum of between £3,000 and £9,000 will go directly to every primary school. The school that the hon. Gentleman cited will be able to control those resources, so it could divert them to its swimming shortfall if it so wishes.

The hon. Gentleman referred to rural schools. He will understand that I cannot comment on the individual case that he cited. He will remember that, in February 1998, we announced that, in any proposal for reorganisation, the presumption in the Department will be against the closure of rural schools and that the onus will be on the local education authority to make a strong case. From September 2000, that important policy will be supported by the small schools support fund that we have established. That fund will help small schools pilot innovative approaches to joint working, which will provide them with stability and greater assurance of a future so that they can overcome some of the difficulties that relate to their small size.

In addition, we have made funds available for this year and next to provide more administrative support staff—an issue raised by the hon. Gentleman—in small schools where administrative tasks are thought to be most pressing. I hope that he will agree that our policies, such as those on smaller infant class sizes, will support rural schools.

Lancashire county council has a surplus of places in the primary and secondary sectors, but that surplus is being addressed in its school organisation plan. I hope that the hon. Gentleman appreciates—as I do, given the information that I have received from officials—that the particular shortages faced in his constituency have been recognised in that school organisation plan. Therefore, Lancashire county council has plans for 214 extra places in the primary sector and 345 extra places in the secondary sector. However, I hope that he will agree that we want excellence and value, and that providing surplus places that are not required or demanded by local parents wastes resources.

It is not appropriate for me to intervene in admission arrangements in secondary schools, which is essentially a local issue. Lancashire local education authority needs to settle that matter through consultation with local people and to decide which arrangements work best in the interests of local parents and children. Such issues are always especially difficult in rural areas, where children have to travel long distances to school. However, it is appropriate and proper that such decisions should be taken locally; it is for local people to decide what works best locally. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will agree that our new admissions framework is intended to maximise parental preference through clear, fair and objective admissions criteria. Where local agreement is not possible, the admission authority and, in some cases, parents, can object to an independent adjudicator.

Yesterday's Budget announcement brought good news for schools. If the hon. Gentleman had really not wanted to play politics with children's futures, he would have welcomed the announcement of an extra £1 billion for the coming financial year. There will be an 8.5 per cent. real-terms increase over two years, most of which will go directly to schools. The 10 per cent. increase over two years in spending on schools means that each primary school in his constituency will receive between £3,000 and £9,000. Secondary schools will receive between £30,000 and £50,000 each. Head teachers will determine how to spend that money. Special schools will receive £15,000 each.

I shall put those increases into context. The average after-inflation increase between April 1998 and April 2002 per pupil will be £300. That increase should be compared to the £50 decrease per pupil between 1995 and 1998, when the Conservative party was in government.

Mr. Evans: Does all the wonderful trumpeting of all the extra money mean that youngsters will be able to attend local Ribble valley secondary schools? Can the Minister guarantee that, if any shortage occurs, the grammar school will not be victimised by Lancashire county council and that it will be able to provide extra places for the children in my constituency?

Ms Hodge: As the hon. Gentleman knows, that is a matter for local decision. He should ensure that he has an influence in the local arena that truly reflects local priorities and parents' preferences, not his own political ideology. Much of what we have done in Ribble valley has benefited its pupils. We have put children first in terms of child care places, the size of classes, numeracy and literacy targets, information technology and books. We have invested in children because they are our future.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody): Order.

Salerno Mutineers

1 pm

Miss Anne Begg (Aberdeen, South): Almost two years ago, a constituent of mine, Bill Bradbrook, contacted me about what he saw as an injustice that occurred in 1943, during the second world war. He thought that now was the time to forgive, and to set the record straight. Mr. Bradbrook contacted me not on his own behalf, but on behalf of his friend, another constituent, Hugh Fraser. Mr. Bradbrook brought his friend to my surgery and I sat and listended to Hugh Fraser's story. It was the story of a young man who had proudly joined the Cameron Highlanders to fight for his country and had risen to the rank of corporal; a young man who had fought bravely with the 8th Army in the desert campaign and was of undoubted high moral integrity. It was the story of a retired man who, despite having achieved much as an inspector of police in Aberdeen, could not shake off a black stain on his character.

As I listened to the story I found myself getting caught up in the events in north Africa and Italy more than 50 years ago. Despite having been a history teacher, this was the first time that I had heard of the mutiny at Salerno, in Italy. Since that day, I have become increasingly fascinated by the events surrounding the largest war-time mutiny in British military history.

What had motivated 191 men all to make the same decision to disobey an order to fall in in a field near Salerno on 20 September 1943? Why had these men, when told that their action constituted mutiny and that mutiny was a capital offence, remained where they were? Why did so many of them do this? Not all of them could have decided that they did not want to fight any more. Surely something must have gone wrong with the line of command for so many men to refuse to obey the same order. The more I have studied the details of what happened to those men, including my constituent, Hugh Fraser, the more convinced I have become that a great injustice was done, which should now be put right. I called for this debate to highlight what happened to those men in 1943, and afterwards, and to ask my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence to give serious consideration to awarding the men, who were convicted of mutiny, a free pardon.

What went wrong at Salerno? The Highland and Tyne Tees divisions had fought bravely with Montgomery and the 8th Army in north Africa and he promised them that he needed them for only one more action. One reason Montgomery was so successful as a military commander was the loyalty that he generated among his men. As essential part of the north Africa campaign had been the esprit de corps that Montgomery had fostered. If a man was separated from his unit, he was to do everything in his power to get back to it.

When the 8th Army crossed over to Sicily, many of the men were wounded or ill, often with dysentery. After all, they had taken part in the long desert campaign. This group of men who were to become the Salerno mutineers were sent back to hospital in Tripoli. From there they were taken to transit camp 155, which was also in Libya.

During that time, Major-General Douglas Wimberley, who commanded the 51st Highland Division, of which my constituent, Hugh Fraser, was a

[Miss Anne Begg]

member, visited camp 155 and said that his men should be returned to their units. There is no doubt that the men believed that they would be. This is confirmed by a number of men who were in camp 155 at the time—especially the camp duty sergeant-major, Sergeant-Major Green who gave evidence for the defence in the subsequent court martial. My constituent remembers Green telling him that he would be going back to his own unit.

In the belief that they were to rejoin their units, the men agreed to join the draft that was called on 14 September 1943. They did not know exactly where their units were; they knew only that they were somewhere in Italy. No one told them that they were going anywhere else: their true destination was kept secret.

Where were the men going? At the time, things were not going well for the American 5th Army in Salerno, so reinforcements were sent for, and three light cruisers dispatched. The American commander had expected the reinforcements to come from what was then Philippeville, in Algeria, which was the official reinforcement camp for Salerno, and also the closest.

There was some confusion over signals and a draft was called at camp 155 instead. The men from the Highland and Tyne Tees divisions readily volunteered, even though many of them were far from fully recovered from their wounds or illnesses. These were the men who had fought so bravely along with Montgomery and they believed that they were rejoining their comrades-in-arms. At no time were they told that they were rejoining the 46th division that was fighting alongside the US 5th Army at Salerno.

Montgomery did not know what was happening to his men either. He wrote on 10 April 1944 to Sir Ronald Adam, the Army's senior administrative officer, saying that, had he been consulted, he would have said no. Montgomery was angry and blamed the whole confusion on Major-General Charles Miller, the man in charge of Army administration in Africa, whom he described as

the real culprit in this case.

The first that the men knew of their true destination was off the coast of Italy when the message came over the ship's Tannoy system. Many of the men did not believe what they were hearing. They had been told that they were to join their own units. When the men disembarked, the new recruits who had accompanied them were marched away and the veterans of the 8th Army were herded into a nearby field. There they stayed for three days. The men at this time were convinced that if they only stuck together, someone, somewhere, would realise that there had been an administrative error and sort it out. They genuinely believed that right was on their side and that good sense would prevail. Unfortunately, it did not.

After another two days they were told to parade. That was on 20 September 1943. The corps commander, Lieutenant-General Richard McCreery arrived and admitted that there had been, in his words, "a cock-up" which he would sort out when the men joined the new unit. He said that there could be no compromise and that they had to obey orders. If they disobeyed it would be mutiny, which was a capital offence. The order was then given. The men were told to pick up their kit and fall in by Captain Albert Lee. The order was repeated three times. Some of the men moved off the field at that time, but 191 did not. They knew that they had disobeyed an order in wartime. They knew that that could be construed as mutiny but they did not feel that they were mutineers. They were not refusing to fight. They just wanted to fight with their own comrades.

All 191 were placed under arrest and marched to a nearby prisoner of war camp. By that time, ironically, the reinforcements were no longer needed at Salerno, as the crisis had passed, but it had not passed for the 191. The mutineers were shipped back to Africa where they were held in a prison near Constantine in Algeria for five weeks before their trial. The whole affair had been an embarrassment for the British Army and so was kept very hush hush.

On 22 October 1943, the defence team for the mutineers met at Constantine for the first time. Captain Hugh Quennell took control. They had six days to prepare a defence, which was an impossible task. They did not even have time to interview the men. Moreover, as this was at least a month after the men had been arrested, they did not know how ill many of the men had been at the time of their arrest.

The court martial opened on 29 October in the gymnasium of the local French school, the only place big enough to hold all the defendants. The men were each given a number to hang round their necks to identify them; my constituent, Hugh Fraser, was given the number 111. The transcript of the trial has only recently been released and it shows that it proved impossible for the defence team to call the witnesses that it needed, as many of the men were then on active duty. Those witnesses would have spoken up for the men and proved that they were following orders in insisting that they should return to their own units. The only witness called was Sergeant-Major Green from camp 155, who confirmed that the men had been told that they were returning to their own units; that there was an order from GHQ, which confirmed that; and that the men had not had the necessary medical to determine their fitness to return to active duty.

The trial lasted for five days, but not one of the mutineers was called to the witness stand. Even so, they were found guilty. As a corporal, Hugh Fraser was kept in solitary confinement and passed his time—when he was not breaking rocks—reading the New Testament and polishing his mess tin, which he says became the shiniest in the British Army. On 15 November he was told his sentence: 10 years' penal servitude, and to be reduced to the ranks. He could not believe what he had heard.

The next day, 16 November, the three sergeants involved in the mutiny found out their fate: they were sentenced to death. Luckily, two weeks later, that was commuted to 12 years' hard labour. However, fortunately for the mutineers, on 15 November, Adjutant-General Sir Ronald Adam, the second most senior man in the British Army, arrived in north Africa. He asked to see the papers relating to the mutiny. He was horrified by what he read and demanded that the men be released. Their sentences were therefore suspended, but the men's misery did not end there. They were released but were sent to join the units they had refused to join in September. Many were treated

harshly, and 80 of them subsequently absconded. That fact has been used in the past by the Ministry of Defence to refuse the men a free pardon. John McFarlane was one of those men and he was stripped of the medal that he won before the mutiny for his bravery in the desert campaign. Unfortunately, he is now dead, but that he absconded twice has been given as the reason to his family why his medal cannot be reinstated. I pay tribute to the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Mr. Roy) who raised John McFarlane's case with the Minister.

My constituent, Hugh Fraser, was not one of the abscondees. Even so, he still says:

> What I would like more than anything is for John McFarlane's military medal to be returned to his wife. It is a sin to take back a gallantry medal after it has been awarded. It broke his heart and the hearts of his wife and family.

Most of the research into the events leading up to and after the mutiny at Salerno was conducted by the historian Saul David, and I recommend his book "Mutiny at Salerno—an injustice exposed" to anyone who is interested in the subject.

In January this year, Saul David submitted new evidence to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence from Eric Griffin, who came across two men, whom he called the Tunis mutineers, in the summer of 1944 when he was serving as a clerk to the command psychiatrist, Major O'Hanlon, based in Naples. There is no doubt that the two men were Salerno mutineers. The men's commanding officer had been told that the mutineers' original sentences had been commuted to continuous duty in the front line and, as his unit was being taken out of the line for a rest, so these men could not go with them, he sent them to the psychiatric unit. There is no such punishment in British military history; but if that unofficial vindictiveness was widespread, it is little wonder that the men absconded, as they had been left with little choice.

I shall sum up the reasons why the men who disobeyed an order on that fateful day of 20 September 1943 now deserve a free pardon. They should never have been in Salerno; they were the wrong men from the wrong transit camp. The men genuinely believed that they were lied to about their destination. It is certainly true that those officers who knew that they were going to join the 46th division did not tell the men before embarkation.

The men should not have been put in the position where they had to decide whether to obey the order to fall in or not. Sir Richard McCreery admitted that there had been an error. He should have sorted it out and not insisted that the men joined the new units, especially as, by that time, they had lost faith in the officers who were dealing with them. The men may have disobeyed one order, but they believed that they were carrying out the orders of the one commander whom they trusted, the one who had led them through the desert campaign—General Montgomery. He had told them that, come what may, they were to try to get back to their own units at all costs. The court martial was not thorough in its investigation and the defence was cursory in the extreme.

New evidence now suggests that the men were victimised subsequently in their new units and forced to stay on active front-line service, even when the new units were given leave. Perhaps that helps to explain why so many men absconded. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will carefully consider the evidence that I have presented to him and that he will reach the same conclusion as me: that the time has come to make reparation for the injustice that was done to the Salerno mutineers. I am asking for a free pardon, not to say that the men were innocent—they all admit that they disobeyed an order in wartime—but to allow them or their families to collect their campaign medals.

The men were not cowards. They did not refuse to fight. It is time for the Army to put its embarrassment at the sorry incident behind it and admit that the men were victims of a failure of command and should not have been put in such a situation. We all like to think that, when tested, we will stand up for our principles. That is what men such as my constituent, Hugh Fraser, did. I shall leave the last words to him, a man who, after the war, rose to the rank of inspector of police, a man of undoubted high moral integrity. He said:

> Given the same circumstances, I would do the same again. It was purely and simply a matter of principle.

1.17 pm

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. John Spellar): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, South (Miss Begg) on securing a debate on a matter that has aroused the sympathy of many hon. Members over the years. The events surrounding the Salerno mutiny of 1943 have been carefully examined by the legal authorities and the Ministry of Defence, including Ministers, on several occasions. The examinations included consideration of points raised by hon. Members as well as several researchers, particularly in the past 20 years.

Many misunderstandings and erroneous claims surround the Salerno mutiny. Let it be understood at the outset that there is not, and never has been, any suggestion by the authorities that the men were cowards or traitors. Nor was the value of their previous service or strong regimental and divisional loyalty ever denied or ignored by the authorities. Nevertheless, I must refer to the key point that has been overlooked in many discussions on the subject. It has long been a basic tenet of military life—it was during the second world war, and it is today—that a solider has no defence in military law that allows him to choose which lawful orders he will obey and which he will not. My hon. Friend mentioned the letter of 10 April from General Montgomery, who wrote:

> The men refused to go into battle, which is of course quite inexcusable—and cannot be condoned.

In September 1943, after an opposed landing on the Italian mainland at Salerno, the allies had gained a precarious foothold. The main British element of the 5th Army force consisted of the 46th and 56th divisions that were not part of the 8th Army. However, fierce German resistance inflicted heavy casualties, primarily on the infantry and General Alexander, the senior commander, arranged for several drafts of infantry reinforcements to be moved as quickly as possibly to Salerno. Among those was a draft of 1,500 men moved on 15 September by Royal Navy warships from a transit camp at Tripoli, holding primarily 8th Army soldiers awaiting posting. Among that draft were, as my hon. Friend said, some

[Mr. John Spellar]

300 men formerly with two 8th Army formations, the 50th Northumbrian and 51st Highland divisions. Those two divisions were resting in Sicily and had been earmarked soon to return to the UK to prepare for the D-Day landings in June 1944.

The use of those men from Tripoli was not, as is often claimed, an administrative error by the staff at higher headquarters. Contemporary signals show that the relevant headquarters was made aware that those reinforcements from Tripoli would include men previously with 8th Army formations in Sicily, rather than men already earmarked for the 5th Army, who could not be moved in time.

Miss Begg: I do not know whether my hon. Friend agrees, but there is evidence that there were conflicting signals that day. One signal was apparently sent to what was then Philippeville, and another to camp 155. That confusion resulted in the Salerno mutineers volunteering for a draft for which they should not have been asked to volunteer; there were already plenty of men at Philippeville and they, in normal circumstances, would have been called to assist the 46th division.

Mr. Spellar: My hon. Friend points to evidence that, contrary to what I described, there was an order from headquarters to transfer those troops. Areas of confusion often arise in such circumstances. The key issue, to which I hope to come if there is time, is that when a matter is resolved by a legitimate order, it is not within the duties of soldiers to resist and refuse it.—[*Interruption.*] My hon. Friend may intervene, but I will not be able to go through the whole case.

Miss Begg: Will my hon. Friend confirm that the men of the 8th Army, of the Highland and Northumbrian divisions, need not have volunteered for that draft?

Mr Spellar: As I said, headquarters ordered the movement of troops because of an emergency in Salerno and heavy casualties taken by the infantry division; other units that might have been used were not thought to be able to get there in time, and there was therefore a legitimate order for the troops to be transported. Indeed, such cross-posting of men to new units and formations was justifiable, lawful and not at all uncommon in emergencies.

Miss Begg: How common was it, in such cross-transfers, for men to be returned to active duty after an illness without a medical examination to determine their fitness?

Mr. Spellar: I could go into the research on those areas, but we are dealing with a military emergency, an invasion of Italy, unexpected but heavy losses at Salerno and the order to send in reinforcements. My hon. Friend reiterated the usual allegation that the men were misled about their destination and did not know where they were going. I am sure that hon. Members will understand that operational security meant—and often mean—that the destination of an emergency draft was not announced so that only a handful of more senior people in the camp actually knew. That is standard security procedure. Until the destination was announced during the voyage to Salerno, some men assumed that they were returning to their units.

Much emphasis has been placed on whether the men were needed when they arrived. The mutineers' testimony shows that, even while at sea, when they had no knowledge of the situation at Salerno, there was already a conspiracy to refuse to serve there.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that German attacks peaked on 16 September. However, commanders had to plan for the continuing, immediate threat. A further important factor often overlooked is that such had been the casualties among the British infantry that non-infantry troops from the Royal Engineers and the beach administration companies at Salerno were already fighting at the front as infantry. Even on 16 September, a further 400 Royal Artillerymen were posted as temporary infantry reinforcements. Clearly, replacements for the non-infantrymen in the front-line were needed, and these non-infantry troops were needed to resume their normal tasks. The inevitable difficulties of operating a beachhead under attack had been exacerbated by their removal, which might explain some of the feelings of chaos among the new arrivals.

After landing at Salerno on 16 September, some 1,200 of the 1,500 reinforcements went, without any protest, to join the troops at the front. The remaining 300, largely from the 50th and 51st divisions, refused to move, saying they would serve only with their own units and divisions.

As the men's refusal became clear, the operational situation was explained to them a number of times, but to no avail. The men were personally addressed by the corps commander, who explained why they were needed. He was aware of their grievance at being cross-posted, so he promised that, provided that they complied with current necessary orders, they would be given the opportunity to re-join their previous units once the emergency was over. There is evidence that that promise was kept.

Finally, a formal parade was held at which an explanation was again given of the seriousness of the 300 men continuing on the same course, including the reading of the relevant parts of the applicable legislation. About 100 of the group obeyed the commands and joined units at Salerno. However, 192 stood fast and refused to obey the orders. They were again told of the serious nature of the crime of mutiny, and were allowed time for further reflection before the order was repeated. As my hon. Friend suggested, those who failed to comply were arrested and subsequently charged with mutiny at a court martial at the allied base in north Africa.

It shall speak about the conduct of the court martial and the actions of the defence team. Eleven extenuating circumstances were properly presented. No evidence was submitted by the defending officers to say that the men had been unfit to fight by the operational standards of the time, nor did the men choose to give evidence themselves and be cross-examined. The court subsequently found all but a few of the men guilty of mutiny.

The court heard all the defence statements of

extenuating circumstances in mitigation before passing sentence; they reflected the responsibility expected according to rank. Three sergeants were initially sentenced to death, but that was subsequently commuted to 12 years' imprisonment; the corporals received sentences of 10 years and the remainder received sentences of seven years. However, all sentences were subsequently formally suspended, thus offering the men a chance to redeem themselves; the sentence would be activated only if there was later misconduct.

The conviction for mutiny led to the loss of campaign medals but no gallantry medals were forfeited automatically on conviction. Of the two military medals held, only one was forfeited later, following the subsequent conviction of the holder for another offence.

Following suspension of sentence, the men were posted to other units in the Mediterranean theatre. Retaining the men there, rather than posting them back to their own units—by then in the United Kingdom—was lawful and probably understandable. It could hardly be expected that men who had broken military law should be allowed to achieve the objective of their unlawful action, and the bonus of a return to the UK.

We fully understand the strong loyalties to former units felt by the men, but, as General Montgomery suggested, those could not override lawful orders based on operational necessities and did not give them the right to mutiny. General Montgomery was in no doubt: he could not condone their action in refusing, when called upon, to provide operationally necessary reinforcements for the battlefield. The inescapable fact remains that the men mutinied on active service in the battlefield. By any account, that is a serious offence. To grant a pardon for that offence would be a disservice to the many men, including other 8th Army veterans, who obeyed orders, whether they liked them or not, and fought on. It would be a particular slight to those who gave their lives as a result.

Many who took part in the mutiny—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody): Order.

NHS (Oxfordshire)

1.30 pm

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): I am pleased to launch the first debate on the national health service following the Budget and to draw attention to the crisis facing the NHS in Oxfordshire. The Minister will know from previous meetings and correspondence how bad the situation has become in Oxfordshire. My postbag, and those of other Members of Parliament in the county, has increased because of the gap between expectations raised by the Government and the services that the health authority has been able to deliver.

At the general election, the Government said that they had "14 days to save the NHS". There was no mention that that announcement would be repeated yesterday—nearly three years into the Labour Government's period in office. The funding announced yesterday would have been critical to preserving services in Oxfordshire during the first two years of this Parliament.

Local people, patients and elected councillors of all parties are upset to find that services that survived 18 years of Tory cuts have fallen victim to the Tory spending plans imposed on the county during the Government's first two years. The Minister will be aware of the cuts in Oxfordshire, but it would be helpful to recount some of them.

Two community hospitals—at Burford and Watlington—were closed, and 18 beds were lost at Abingdon hospital in my constituency. The trust and health authority admitted that the closures took place because there was not enough money to keep those hospitals open. The trust was in deficit and had to cut its budget. That can be disguised, using the language of "cost improvements" or "cost savings", but the fact remains that there were financial cuts. The community trust recognised that closing hospitals provided a bigger financial saving per bed than cutting beds generally, or cutting services, such as occupational therapy. However, those hospitals not only provided a local service, but helped acute hospitals by providing recuperation and rehabilitation.

The three Rs—recuperation, rehabilitation and respite care—so important to many elderly patients, have been seriously damaged by the Secretary of State for Health's decision to allow the closure of those hospitals in line with the health authority plan, and his failure to finance the health authority and, through it, general practitioner groups and the community trust, well enough to keep the hospitals open. Occupancy rates in those hospital beds were high. They served GPs, who could divert patients from acute hospitals to community hospital beds, and they enabled hospitals, such as the John Radcliffe, to discharge patients and make more cost-effective use of their beds, and to provide a more appropriate environment, especially for elderly patients who needed no longer to be in the hurly-burly of an acute hospital.

Will the Minister give an assurance that the funds announced yesterday for this financial year can and should be used to re-open those community hospital beds? The health authority and the Government have tried to disguise the closure of beds by talking about an additional hospital in Bicester and by changing the

[Dr. Evan Harris]

means by which patients are admitted to beds. However, that is irrelevant, and entirely separate from the number of beds closed in Oxfordshire.

We heard recently about the closure of the cardiac rehabilitation unit in Oxfordshire—a service for people who have suffered heart attacks, to enable them to recover and improve their quality of life. Sadly, that service has effectively ceased across almost all of Oxfordshire. Again that is due to a shortage of funds in the acute trust, which cannot obtain funding from other sources. We were told yesterday that money will be available from 1 April. A litmus test of the Government's commitment to the NHS would be whether such a service could be restored immediately. Many hon. Members who represent Oxfordshire constituencies have received heart-rending letters from cardiac patients who would expect to see, in line with the Government's health service policies, an improvement in rehabilitation services. They would not expect them to be cut.

The Minister will know that Oxfordshire's mental health care NHS trust has a severe financial deficit. It survived 18 years of Conservative Government, but in the third year of a Labour Government, it is facing a recovery plan that requires it to make significant cuts in clinical services for various patient groups. The trust has tried to make cuts that do not affect patient care, but the jargon of the trust recovery plan leaves me in no doubt that cuts will be made to occupational therapy, psychotherapy and psychology services. Those cuts could affect clinical and medical posts at a time when the Government say—indeed, they were elected on this platform—that we will have more doctors, nurses and caring professional staff, such as occupational therapists.

In light of the new money, will the Government confirm that the funds can, and, as mental health desperately needs additional funding, should, be used to ensure that the cuts do not occur? People in Oxfordshire will not understand the hype that surrounds a cash bonanza for the NHS if community hospitals remain closed, more community beds are closed, cardiac rehabilitation services continue to be affected and more cuts are made to mental health care services.

The John Radcliffe hospital faces a critical cash crisis. For many months, more than 100 beds have been closed because of a lack of nurses. Although it is not providing a proper service, people might think that it is saving money. But on 17 February, the *Oxford Mail* reported that the hospital had a predicted debt of £3.5 million by the end of the financial year, despite cuts in clinical services. On the radio this morning, prior to a health authority meeting, it was confirmed that that figure was an underestimate. The John Radcliffe hospital is in even greater financial crisis. Combined with the accumulated deficit in the ambulance trust and the mental health trust, and with continuing difficulties with waiting times at the Nuffield orthopaedic centre, Oxfordshire health authority can, at the end of the financial year, report only a deepening financial crisis.

Will some of the cash bonanza that the Government announced yesterday be available to obliterate those deficits without further cuts in clinical services or cuts in planned growth in services for the next year? Oxfordshire people will want to know whether their services match the hype surrounding the Government's comprehensive spending review and yesterday's announcement of significant extra funds for the health service.

The situation is drastic for people who want to gain admission to the Oxford Radcliffe hospitals. General practitioners in my area are for ever being sent letters explaining the difficulty that the trust is in. On 25 January, the Oxford Radcliffe Hospitals NHS trust sent a letter to GPs stating:

> Dear Colleague . . . At 8.30 this morning we had 26 patients waiting for admission in the A&E Department; all our cubicles and corridors were full—

the assumption being that today's NHS fills corridors. It went on to say:

> We had in excess of 20 patients waiting for admission to a ward from our GP Referral Unit and also Edward Buzzard Ward.
>
> Level 3 of the escalation policy was called at 5pm last night. This states that "all cubicles in A&E are full and the number of patients on trolleys in corridors is so overwhelming to the extent that patients cannot readily be taken off the ambulances.

Coming at a time in January significantly after the increased activity caused by the flu epidemic, what sort of a comment is that on the Labour Government's stewardship of an NHS, which, with all good intentions, they promised in April 1997 to save?

Mr. Michael Jabez Foster (Hasting and Rye): What always surpises me about the comments of the hon. Gentleman and other Liberal Democrats is that although one can understand their concerns, one cannot understand what solution is being proposed. Is the hon. Gentlemen suggesting that significantly more funds should have been made available earlier on, and if so, where does he think the money should have come from, beyond putting 1p on income tax?

Dr. Harris: I am grateful for that intervention because it enables me to explain what we would have done. There is no reason why the Government should have stuck to Conservative spending plans during their first two years in office; during that time, real-terms growth for the NHS was still the lowest for the past two decades, even taking into account the additional funds provided by the Government. As we made clear, we thought that the Chancellor should have opened his war chest much earlier than he did, and should have eschewed an income tax cut earlier in the Parliament in favour of putting money into public services.

The Liberal Democrats stood on a platform of putting 1p on income tax to go towards education, if it was necessary, as we believed it was. We also made it clear that, if the Government would not do that, they should not cut taxes for the better off at a time when the NHS was desperate for funding. If that money were directed into the NHS, Oxfordshire's share of the income tax cut would be about 1 per cent. of the total amount available, which would be about £26 million if all the funding was allocated on a weighted capitation allocation through the hospital and community health services budget this year. That money would have eradicated all the deficits in Oxfordshire and would have permitted some growth in services.

As a result of his departmental responsibilities, the Minister will know of the very important mix between social services and health services. Some of the cuts in the Oxfordshire health service would not be so bad if social services had not been clobbered year after year under successive Conservative Governments and then again under this Government. The Government capped Oxfordshire county council, which meant that it could not spend what it wished to spend on social services, which made the crisis in NHS provision even worse for the health authority.

I joined an all-party delegation to see the Minister at the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions to plead with him, in the light of the squeeze on health services, not to cap Oxfordshire county council, but to allow local people and the representatives of the four parties on the council to improve social services, as the Labour party said that it would before it was elected. Under this Government, two care homes for the elderly in my constituency have been closed. Care homes for the elderly that survived 18 years of Tory cuts were closed under this Government's stewardship. I receive more letters about the closure of Oseney court than on any other matter. Indeed, Labour councillors joined Liberal Democrat and Conservative councillors to plead for Oxfordshire to be allowed to spend the money that it requires to improve services and not to cut services.

Therefore, I should be grateful if the Minister would explain why, two years into a Labour Government, we are facing cuts in all the services that I have mentioned. Will he also explain why the cash bonanza that the NHS is about to receive is coming only now? Are the Government saying to the people of Oxfordshire, "Do not be sick, ill or infirm, except in the pre-election year of a Labour Government"? The people of Oxfordshire cannot understand why, having voted for a Government who pledged to save the NHS, all they have seen is cut after cut. When the Minister replies, I hope that he will either say that the cuts will be reversed by the new funding or at least apologise for the Government's failure to deliver the improved health services in Oxfordshire that they pledged.

I am, of course, aware of the inheritance received by the Minister and his Government, and that it takes a long time to train the nurses and doctors that the health service needs. I accept that, and have not called for the staff to be conjured up overnight. However, if the funding for which most people felt that they were voting had been put in place at the beginning of the Parliament, Oxfordshire would not be in its current situation.

The Government pledged to save the NHS. They might also have pledged to stick to Tory spending plans, but we in Oxfordshire know that the two pledges were incompatible. They decided to keep their pledge to the better off and to stick to a tax-cutting agenda, rather than funding the health service to meet their pledge to the elderly, the ill and the infirm. That is sad for patients and their relatives in Oxfordshire.

1.45 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. Hutton): I would like to congratulate the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) on securing the debate on NHS provision in Oxfordshire.

I reassure the hon. Gentleman that the Government are fully committed to a high-quality national health service for all the people of the country, including those living in Oxfordshire. Our principle is that the best services should be available to everyone, no matter where they live. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that we have set a modernising, radical agenda for transforming the NHS that will, in time, deliver year-on-year improvements in health and social service provision.

The hon. Gentleman has chosen to highlight the problems in Oxfordshire. Although the Government fully recognise that the NHS faces considerable pressure in meeting its challenging agenda, it is only right that I take the opportunity to focus on the positive progress being made in his area. He completely failed to acknowledge such positive progress and developments.

I begin by reminding the hon. Gentleman about how much money we are investing in the NHS—investment is higher than ever. In December, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health announced total funding of £34 billion for England's health authorities for next year. That represented an average cash increase of 6.9 per cent., which is a rise of 4.2 per cent. in real terms.

The hon. Gentleman will be aware of the Chancellor's statement in the House yesterday that national health service spending will rise by 6.1 per cent. each year above inflation until 2004. An extra £2 billion of new money will be available to the NHS from 1 April this year. The investment is sensible and sustainable and will continue the Government's drive to modernise the NHS, and help to create the fast, fair and convenient health service that people expect.

I should say to the hon. Gentleman and to his Liberal Democrat colleagues that the significant increases in NHS funding dwarf the commitments made by his party at the election. I read his party's manifesto today; it said that it would increase health service spending by £540 million a year. That would have been a completely inadequate response to the crisis that he attempted to describe.

Dr. Harris: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Hutton: I shall not give way. The hon. Gentleman had a chance to make his speech; it is now my chance to set the record straight.

The allocation for Oxfordshire health authority is £327 million this year. Next year, we shall be backing up our commitment to provide year-on-year increases for the health service by allocating the authority £357 million, which represents a cash increase of £23.6 million, or 7.09 per cent. The increase is higher than the national average.

We have not stopped there. We recognise the need to support local services if we are to expect them to keep pace with out modernisation agenda. That is why Oxfordshire health authority has received £6.3 million in special assistance funding since April 1998 to support the modernisation programme and reconfiguration of services across the county.

Oxfordshire has received not only that additional investment. I remind the hon. Gentleman that the authority received an extra £10.8 million in 1999–2000, which we provided to support our modernisation programme. To cut hospital out-patient waiting times, £300,000 was allocated. An allocation of £200,000 was

[Mr. Hutton]

made to support the booked admission scheme at Oxford's John Radcliffe hospital. Oxfordshire received £1.9 million of extra money from the Government's accident and emergency modernisation fund. A sum of £850,000 has gone to support the upgrading of that hospital's accident and emergency and intensive care departments. An extra £100,000 will be invested to improve cancer out-patient services and more than £100,000 to help to tackle lung cancer. I could continue.

The additional investment has made a real difference. For example, in-patient waiting lists have been reduced. Between March 1998 and January 2000, waiting lists in Oxfordshire went down by more than 2,000. More people in Oxfordshire are being treated by the NHS than ever before, and 5,000 more people were seen in hospitals in Oxfordshire in the second quarter of this financial year than in this quarter last year. Those are the latest statistics.

In December 1999, the Oxford Radcliffe Hospitals NHS trust met the required target on waiting times for cancer patients—a 100 per cent. success rate that should be celebrated. Unfortunately, the hon. Gentleman failed to do that. The upgrade of facilities at the John Radcliffe hospital will result in the expansion of treatment areas and an increase in the number of high dependency beds from 12 to 16.

With that additional investment, we shall be reducing waiting lists, modernising every casualty department that needs it and investing more money in key areas such as cancer and coronary heart disease treatment. The hon. Gentleman said that the coronary rehabilitation unit was closing. He is wrong. It is not closing; the health authority has put it on the priority list for funding in the coming financial year.

Not only are we supporting the services that patients receive, we are starting the biggest hospital-building programme in the history of the NHS. The hon. Gentleman failed to refer to it, but a £80 million redevelopment is taking place at the Oxford Radcliffe Hospitals NHS trust, which will mean patients being treated in modern, purpose-built accommodation. Services will no longer be split between sites, which will reduce the need to transfer patients, removing also the problems that that can often cause. Staff will not have to waste time travelling between sites. Access for patients and visitors will be improved.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned mental health services. In September 1999, I had the pleasure of visiting the brand new medium-secure unit on the Littlemore mental health centre site. A £9 million private finance initiative funded unit will provide 30 mental health beds, and a further 10 beds for people with learning disabilities. The establishment of that unit is good news for the NHS and for the people of Oxfordshire. It is another part of the Government's modernisation programme for the NHS, which will provide safer and more secure care for people with severe mental illness.

The hon. Gentleman will be aware of Oxford's excellent reputation as a world-class centre for innovation and teaching. We want to encourage that. That is why £4.2 million will go to the brand-new Oxford centre for diabetes based at the Churchill hospital. It will be linked with the drug company Novo Nordisk and Oxford university, renowned for its academic excellence, to develop research facilities for diabetes and related problems.

Since 1998–99, the health service in Oxfordshire has benefited from more than £34 million of new and targeted Government modernising funding; that is on top of the general increase in health authority funding. That investment will continue in future years.

The hon. Gentleman referred to community hospitals in Oxfordshire. It is true that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State had to make some difficult decisions about the future of those hospitals, but he made the right choice. I assure the hon. Gentleman that such decisions are not taken lightly, but we need to ensure that the right balance of services is available for all hospitals in the county.

The changes are part of a modernisation programme for community services in Oxfordshire and of a coherent development programme for health services in the area. The changes provide an opportunity to redress the inequity of access to community hospital in-patient services. They will also secure the development of increased and more flexible community-based services, which will enable more patients to be treated in or near their homes. That is what patients want, and it is completely in line with the Government's thinking.

We need to make more of the link between community hospitals and intermediate care. Some services will be given in specially designated hospital wards, some in step-down facilities, and some improved care services will be given in the home. For instance, the intensive community support services scheme in Watlington and Wallingford is an innovative approach to providing support services for the local community.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the brand new 30-bed community hospital that is to be built in Bicester. He said that it was irrelevant—but it is not. It is part of the modernisation of community services in the county. In an expansion of facilities, the current 12-bed unit will be replaced. There will be more beds to provide equity of services for the county's anticipated population growth. I remind the hon. Gentleman that, as part of the process, the 18 beds earmarked for closure at Abingdon hospital in his constituency will remain open until the new facility at Bicester hospital has been expanded. The hon. Gentleman failed to mention that, when my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced his decision, he rejected proposals to close beds at Wallingford, Wantage and Witney community hospitals.

The uncertainty surrounding community services in Oxfordshire is over. The changes will help to shape local health services. The aim is to develop modern, effective, dependable services so that all patients in the county can benefit from the latest in community health care services. All parties have already begun to work closely together to manage that transition.

The hon. Gentleman referred briefly to staffing shortages and pressure on NHS beds generally, and, to be fair to him, he said that those problems would not be solved overnight. We accept that and have always made that clear. We are tackling those matters. Work is progressing on some of the historic recruitment and staff retention problems of the NHS in Oxfordshire. Some of the investments that I have outlined today will help to

deal with wider pressures affecting the service in the hon. Gentleman's part of the country. However, what he described in his speech bore no resemblance to what is really happening in the county. It made no acknowledgement of the hard work of Oxfordshire NHS staff, who work tirelessly for patients. It is incumbent on Members of Parliament to try to provide an accurate picture—[*Interruption.*] I will not give way to the hon. Gentleman. Hon. Members should attempt to give an accurate assessment of what is happening before presenting the national health service in their part of the country as being in complete collapse. That is a travesty. The hon. Gentleman did himself and his party no favours in trying to caricature the problem.

We are the first to recognise the county's problems. The hon. Gentleman has spoken about them at length today—eloquently and articulately—and on other occasions. That is his job as a constituency MP, which I know he takes seriously. However, a fuller and more balanced depiction would have served his constituents better than the hatchet job that he tried today.

Some of the historic deficit problems that the hon. Gentleman mentioned are being tackled. However, he and those like him who want, for political reasons, to portray the national health service in their constituencies as being in a state of collapse will have been slightly embarrassed by the timing of today's debate. We are beginning a record investment programme for the health service, which will substantially modernise and improve the services that the hon. Gentleman, you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I expect for our respective constituents. We are embarking on a 10-year modernisation programme. The results will be clear for the hon. Gentleman's constituents and others to see.

If, as we need to do, we are to assess the national health service and analyse its problems, that must be in the context of the current change and new investment, the new doctors and nurses and the refocusing of services so that patients' needs and interests always come first. We are beginning to work through some of those changes in the national health service. I am confident that, with the continuing fantastic work of Oxfordshire NHS staff, the range and quality of services will improve year on year. We shall all be able to take confidence and pride in the fact that the national health service, about which we feel so strongly and passionately, is providing modernised health care into the new century.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at one minute to Two o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 23 March 2000

[MR. MICHAEL LORD *in the Chair*]

Pensions Reform

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mr. Dowd.*]

2.30 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Social Security (Mr. Jeff Rooker): This is the first Thursday afternoon debate in Westminster Hall in which I have participated. The Government are pleased to have initiated a debate on pensions reform. The date is fortuitous: such matters are arranged through the usual channels, but we could now be in the Chamber, perhaps making similar points on the Budget or pre-empting speeches on the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill, which will be debated on Report on the Floor of the House next week and the week after.

This debate provides an opportunity for the House to evaluate the changes that the Government have initiated, some of which have already been dealt with in legislation, and to consider the future. I shall not cover too much of the background, but hon. Members will realise that many of our proposals stem from the pensions Green Paper of December 1998, in which we set out a long-term reform programme to meet the needs of the next 50 years. We cannot snap our fingers on pensions reform and make meaningful changes instantaneously or, indeed, in a decade; we must consider the long term, but doing so can make the figures seem large and the changes distant. I accept that it is not easy for hon. Members to grapple with those matters and explain them to their constituents. It is not easy for the Government to explain delays, but they are the inevitable consequence of dealing with pensions. Pensions are generally paid at the end of people's working lives, which can cover the best part of 40 to 50 years, so changes take time to come into effect.

I was a Member of Parliament when the legislation that implemented the state earnings-related pension scheme was debated in the late 1970s. I remember saying and listening to other hon. Members say, "All this will take too long; 20 years is a long time." SERPS was intended to cover the best 20 years of people's working lives. SERPS has been changed. Nevertheless, it provides decent pensions for those who retire now after working for the past 20 years. On average, men retiring today receive in excess of £50 a week under SERPS. That has taken 20 years, but it is now happening.

Our objective, which I think everyone shares, is to ensure that people look forward to a decent income in retirement and are not apprehensive about that period of their lives. The reforms must produce a fair balance between the responsibilities of the state and the individual and of the public and private sectors. We have made no secret of the fact that we wish to shift the balance of pension provision from 60 per cent. public, 40 per cent. private to 40 per cent. public, 60 per cent. private. The changes that we intend to make fit that overall framework.

Our starting point is that too many older people are poor. That is one of the serious issues, together with child poverty, that the Government are tackling, but we can do so only if we are prepared to be honest and target our resources. Without action, inequality will grow.

I wish to deal with today's pensioners and tomorrow's pensioners—our twin-track policy. The needs and aspirations of today's older people are on the Government's agenda. We entitled today's debate "Pensions Reform", but the wider agenda for dealing with older people goes beyond income. Income is important, but the Government have to deal with many broader issues—hence the establishment of the inter-ministerial group for older people. One of its purposes is to ensure that as Departments across Whitehall create and initiate policy changes, they think about the needs and aspirations of older people. Whether in health, housing, transport or Home Office matters, we want the agenda for older people to be taken into account. Much research has been commissioned. Ministers have been listening to what older people have to say around the country and a national event in May will pull together some of the issues that emerged at regional meetings. Our commitment to the basic retirement pension as a fundamental building block remains, although there is scope for arguing about its level and operation. All other pension provision will be made in relation to it.

I wish to speak about the minimum income guarantee—a new higher threshold, means-tested provision for older people. It is age-related and paid at three levels. It changes at the age of 73 and again at 80. According to the general household survey, at least 500,000 pensioners fail to claim it. In a few moments, I shall return to how we intend to address that problem. The current level is £75 a week for a single pensioner and £116.60 for a couple. This April, the rates will change to £78.45 and £121.95, which could mean an increase of £280 a year for a single person compared with the pre-April 1999 position. Those are the basic figures at the ages of 60 and 65. As I said, at 75 and 80 the mean figures are higher.

Our policy of increasing MIG in line with earnings each year will continue for the rest of this Parliament—I cannot go beyond that. The Chancellor of the Exchequer has made that abundantly clear on more than one occasion. We also delivered—or, at least, with our announcements, started to deliver—on the Green Paper pledge to reward savers on low incomes. A saver on a low income can be trapped and unable to access available benefits.

One of the problems with MIG is capital limits, particularly the lower one for income support, which has remained at £3,000 since 1988. I regret that it will take a year for it to change, but an increase will come into effect in April 2001. It is the nature of the beast: many parliamentary and administrative procedures have to be undertaken and it takes time for the changes to come through. Nevertheless, the increase will take the limit way above any indexation. If it had been indexed, it would be between £4,600 and £4,800. The increase to £6,000 is substantial.

The upper limit at which MIG if phased out will increase from £8,000 to £12,000, although that has not been frozen so long. There is a discriminatory element in that the upper limit was changed in the early 1990s. The

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upper limit is more useful to people with more savings. We have concentrated the biggest change—a doubling—on those with the lowest amount of savings.

One can get only a flavour of the changes from the Chancellor's Budget speech because much of the detail is in the documentation that follows. The Chancellor announced that a review into the new pensioner credit would investigate ways of building on MIG to provide further help for those who have worked hard to provide for themselves. Such people have no savings, so are not cornered by the capital limit, but have a low income that is just above MIG limit. They might have an occupational pension that is worth tuppence ha'penny, perhaps £7 or £8 a week, but which is enough to take them above MIG limit. I know from my constituents that the greatest bitterness about the working of means-tested limits comes from those who are just above the limit. They also miss out on the other passported benefits, some of which can have a greater value than the little bit of extra income that stops them receiving the benefit in the first place.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): I should be interested to hear whether the review will look at housing benefit and how it affects that group. I have constituents with very small private or occupational pensions and for every pound that they receive they seem to lose much more in housing benefit.

Mr. Rooker: We have only just announced the review. Our target is to publish its findings before the Chancellor's autumn statement, which is generally made in November. My hon. Friend is basically right. The tapers on housing benefit are great and can operate extremely harshly. The matter should be considered. A housing Green Paper is also due to be published, certainly before the summer, and a substantial element of that will deal with housing benefit. It may get subsumed in the publication of the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions.

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): On the point about the changes to the thresholds, can the Minister shed more light on what it says in the Red Book? The Red Book refers to a cost for such a change of £145 million. Can we take it from that figure that the Government will also look at the tariffs underlying the thresholds? At present, it is assumed that one earns 20p on every £1 of capital. I would love to find the bank that could do that for us. That is clearly an absurd figure and should be reduced.

Mr. Rooker: Without the benefit of a note, I can tell the hon. Gentleman that the decision that has been announced is on the capital limit itself, not on that tariff income. The tariff income implies an interest rate of 20 per cent. and if we consider the question of pensioner credit, we would have to look at that. It has been set deliberately high, in effect to force people to use part of their capital to get to the limit. The calculations in the Red Book imply not a change in the tariff income—if they do, I shall come back to the hon. Gentleman later—but only a change to the basic capital limit. The tariffs will be looked at in the larger term review. It clearly should be an item on the agenda if one is considering pensioner credits.

We also know that, for various reasons, people who do not claim MIG are unaware of it. I have not yet met anyone who is embarrassed to claim it. I am not saying that no one is, but research shows that 500,000 to 600,000 people have missed out. That information comes from the general household survey of real people, although the grossed-up figure is a statistical exercise to give us an idea of the extent of the problem.

MIG take-up campaign has been a long time in coming, but I should be embarrassed if I had to say at the next Department of Social Security questions that it is due imminently shortly or shortly imminently, as was the case on the previous two occasions. To the best of my knowledge, the multi-million pound, Government-driven, MIG take-up campaign will be announced before the next Social Security questions on Monday week.

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove): I do not wish to encourage the Minister's blushes, but will he explain why there has been such a terrible delay?

Mr. Rooker: One embarrassing reason is that it has been a bigger exercise than we contemplated, simply because—this is not a criticism—the Government have not conducted a take-up campaign like this before, so we have no example to follow. When the disability living allowance was introduced, the problem was its success. There was such a great response to that brand new benefit and so much free advertising for it, that sacks of mail remained unopened and Members of Parliament were issued with about 10 dedicated telephone lines because correspondence could not be answered quickly enough.

Some research was carried out into why people were not claiming the benefit. Hon. Members may say that that beggars belief, but we know why people do not claim: they are ignorant about it, they will not go to a benefits office, they are embarrassed and they do not want to know about a means test. However, a proper take-up campaign cannot be based on such evidence. It is clear from the statistical information that some people who do not claim MIG are content to claim housing and council tax benefits. The argument that they do not want to take the means test does not apply. It may be because access to housing and council tax benefits is via the local authority, although it is Government money. There is a different avenue into the system and that may be a factor.

We have considered a range of issues and it has taken a while to assemble the finance. I can tell the hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Miss Kirkbride), that the Benefits Agency has identified 2 million people from its records who might be eligible for MIG, based on criteria such as age and what has been paid. We do not know everything about their circumstances or their capital and that is a problem. It has not been a five-minute job to find 2 million people from our computer records, but we will write to all of them, although not on the same day as we could not cope with the response. There will also be newspaper and television advertisements and a free help line, which will take applications on the

telephone. People will be contacted in three tranches of 600,000 or so, but they will not have to have a letter to be able to claim or to use the telephone help line, and they will be informed of that fact. Electronic claim forms will be used; people will not be sent a 40-page form to sign, because the size of the document puts them off.

Something else that puts people off MIG is that although we may talk about it, until now not a single Government publication, leaflet or application form has that name on it, as it is delivered through the income support system. Our constituents do not know about it. This is a new and fairly complex way of putting the information across. It has taken all this time to put together a genuinely open and effective take-up campaign, My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will write to all hon. Members at the time of the launch to tell them about it. We did some pilot research in about 15 local authority areas. I will ensure that hon. Members from those areas also receive the research report. They may find it useful to know what was said about their constituencies. An announcement will be made prior to the next Social Security Question Time. If it is not, my head will be on the block. I cannot give the precise date, but I am assured that it will be before Monday week.

Winter fuel payments are not means-tested. This is part of our effort to share the extra wealth in the country among the pensioner population as a whole, which was not the least of our manifesto commitments. The payments are well timed. It is true that they are based on households, not on people, and of course there is still the backlog because of last year's judgment of the European Court of Justice that men over 60 have to be eligible. The court ruled that the payment should be age-related, not simply for pensioners. We hope to announce shortly how we will make retrospective payments for the past three winters, and get the payments for the coming winter to the right people in November and December. As hon. Members know, the amount is to be raised to £150 per household. The increase resulting from the European Court judgment will benefit 1.5 million people. By and large, by definition they will be men because we assume that we have included all women over 60: if we have not, I want to know about it.

Mrs. Jacqui Lait (Beckenham): On a technical point, given that the retirement age for women will go up in the next few years, what arrangements, if any, will the Government put in place for winter fuel payments, or do they intend it to remain at 60 whatever the retirement age?

Mr. Rooker: I do not think that we shall need to make arrangements because by and large the payment will be tied to retirement age and as that equalises, the payment will move up. I hope that by 2020, when the retirement age for both men and women will be 65—there is to be a transfer between 2010 and 2020, at which the retirement age for women will go from 60 to 65—winter fuel payments will be tied to that equalised age. That is my assumption, because payment is tied to age. We must pay at the same age to both sexes as a consequence of the European Court's judgment that discrimination between genders on the basis of age is wrong.

I will speak briefly on aspects relating to tomorrow's pensioners. Although MIG is good and will, we hope, be made more successful, I do not want to be in the position of selling MIG to today's 20, 30 and 40-year-olds because I do not want them to retire on to the means test. I want them to do better than that. MIG is there essentially for today's pensioners and those who will become pensioners in the very near future—those who either did not have an opportunity for a second pension, have not had a full work record for various reasons such as unemployment, caring or disability, or have been unable to make provision that others were able to make.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): On the unemployment point, I am sure that the Minister agrees that it is vital that people who may become unemployed while making provision for a stakeholder pension have some sort of safety net to ensure that that unemployment does not cause real grief later. Will he explain what he intends to do about the wave of contribution insurance policies, because at present they cover only accident and sickness, although from 2001 they will cover unemployment? Will that create an unlevel playing field? Will the new policies apply to existing friendly or stakeholder policies? As people will be able to put lump sums or irregular payments into stakeholder pensions, will it be permissible for them to phase in their premiums to insure against unemployment?

Mr. Rooker: Those are legitimate questions, to which I do not have all the answers. The rules for stakeholder pensions have been made flexible to corral the maximum number of people into the scheme, irrespective of whether they are part of the target group. I hope that the nature of the payments will allow people who experience periods of unemployment to make up shortfalls. I am not sure about private sector insurance policies. Some are time-limited for unemployment benefits, perhaps covering only a few years. That will probably be a matter for the stakeholder providers. It is possible that the same private sector companies will provide stakeholder pensions and insurance policies, but that is a separate issue. The hon. Gentleman's point is wholly valid and must be addressed.

Mr. Leigh *rose—*

Mr. Rooker: I should be happy to develop this case and correspond with the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Leigh: That is the assurance that I wanted. Although the points are technical, I want to know what will be permissible.

Mr. Rooker: I would be more than happy to reply to the hon. Gentleman later. His questions are legitimate and require answers. Indeed, we do not want to cause a negative effect on the take-up of stakeholder pensions.

During the past few months, I have repeatedly said that it has been known, but not always said, that for the past 50 years, the basic state pension has not been enough to provide a decent retirement income. There never was a golden day. I would dispute the contention that since 1948 the basic pension, on its own, has provided a comfortable and decent quality of life in retirement. The problem is that Ministers with responsibility for pensions of both parties have never admitted that, so there has been no impetus to act. There

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were attempts to improve matters, including those made by Keith Joseph and in the 1960s by Richard Crossman, but there has been no impetus to tell people that if they do not do something about their pension arrangements, such as providing for a second pension, they will experience some poverty and be stuck on the means test when they retire. We must be open and spell out the problem.

On the state second pension proposals, the Committee stage of the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill, which reforms SERPS, has been completed. Hopefully, its Report stage will be finished before Easter. It is, however, possible for changes to occur as it proceeds. SERPS is good at delivering pensions, notwithstanding the changes that were made to it in 1986 and 1995. However, it is useless for the low paid, and inadquate for people who spend a lot of their time as carers or who are disabled but have some work experience. We need to redress the balance. We want to raise earners above MIG. The state second pension will triple the amount that many low-paid people would have received under SERPS.

When the state second pension is introduced—our target date is 2002-ish; certainly not before then—18 million people will immediately begin to accrue bigger pension entitlements. It is important that hon. Members take that point on board. On this year's figures, 4.5 million of those pensioners will be low earners with an income of less than £9,500 a year, and 9.5 million will be moderate earners with an income of between £9,500 and £21,000. Also included will be 2 million carers and 2 million disabled people with broken work records. It will unarguably take time before their pensions are paid, but they will begin to accrue bigger pensions from the start.

Many people will gain under the new system compared with SERPS. Hon. Members who sat on the Committee will have seen the charts and graphs produced by the Government Actuary to show that that. The state second pension is good for low earners, but moderate earners with an income of between about £9,000 and £20,000 a year without access to a good occupational pension scheme and for whom personal pensions are unsuitable should enter a funded stakeholder scheme. We have published draft regulations and hope to have them on the statute book soon—probably just after Easter.

As we have said, we are working to a tight timetable. We want to get the details right because the private sector will be providing the pensions, not the Government. That does not mean that new personal pensions cannot be sold. I shall comment on potential mis-selling. The Financial Services Authority has made it clear that advice should take proper account of the introduction of stakeholder pension schemes. We are still on target for registering stakeholder providers from October and for starting the schemes from April 2001. The schemes are designed to be simple to compare. The proposed maximum charge of 1 per cent. will mean that people will know exactly what they are paying—there will be no hidden extras.

People in the industry have complained that they cannot meet the requirements. However, some companies have managed and have said that they will be happy to provide the pensions, when the regulations come through, within the maximum figure of 1 per cent. It is not the Government's business to be bowled over by others in the industry when there appear to be providers willing to offer products within these challenging but realistic parameters.

We want access to stakeholder pensions to be via the workplace so far as possible, but it will be possible to purchase them as a retail product in the high street. We want to encourage potential members. Take-up is voluntary—there is no requirement for an employer contribution. Employers will be required only to allow employees to have access to a stakeholder provider and to have a stakeholder pension; they will also have to make deductions from earnings. That method is by far the best way to pay for a pension—much better than one-off payments and direct debit—as our reseach shows that what is not received is not missed.

We have made the situation extremely flexible. It is so flexible that we are open to sniping criticism from hot shots in the financial press who say that people can buy a stakeholder pension for a child on the day that it is born or for a millionaire's wife as a tax device. That is part of the price that we pay for making the scheme so flexible, and there is nothing wrong with buying a pension for a child because, being a pension, no one can get to the money. It is not a savings scheme—the money is locked into a pension once it has been paid in. It is not a false device for gaining a pot before retirement.

A couple of weeks ago *Money Marketing* conducted a survey of pensions that are being advertised as stakeholder friendly. I have seen advertisements from companies that state that their pensions are stakeholder friendly and that they will convert when the Government regulations are up and running. We do not want any mis-selling, either before or after stakeholder pensions are introduced. The regulatory authorities, whether that is the pensions ombudsman, the occupational pensions regulatory authority or the Financial Services Authority, will take a dim view of people who deliberately mis-sell pensions and who put a stakeholder badge on products that do not conform to the regulations. We have already published the draft regulations, so there is no excuse. However, last week's survey showed that of about 60 pensions that were claimed to be stakeholder friendly, only six met all the criteria for a stakeholder pension.

The Financial Services Authority will examine the *Money Marketing* survey. I was set to name the bad guys this afternoon, but then I thought that perhaps it might be better if I named the good guys. I do not want a company to be able to quote *Hansard* and say, "The Minister says that our product is the best." However, if there is evidence of continued mis-selling, I will name names. This new provision is designed to target millions of moderate earners who have no access to a second pension. We will not allow them to be sold a pup in advance of the scheme as a result of companies using the term "stakeholder friendly" despite the fact that there are hidden charges and exit charges. We will not stand for that. The regulatory authorities will come down like a tonne of bricks on companies that do that. It is right that I should put that warning on the record.

I want to make one further point and that is about the future. Pensions are not a politically sexy issue, unless one is a poorer pensioner for whom the Government of

the day are not doing enough or a Maxwell pensioner—I raise that issue before anyone else does—whose pension was stolen by that crook. Those people have a direct interest in pensions, but we need to get other people, in their 20s and 30s, interested in pension provision. There is no mechanism by which to do that, except through the exhortations of Ministers, but I would not even begin to try to do that because no one would listen. If we could find a way of giving every employee, once a year, not just a P60 but a piece of paper that sets out their pension forecast at that time, including the state retirement pension, the state second pension, SERPS and any occupational stakeholder or personal pension, and add the statement, "If you think these figures are not enough and want to do something about it, you must put in another 5 per cent., which would have this effect," a lot more people would say, "Hang on a minute, I do not understand this. It is not enough. What can I do about it? Why am I being short-changed? Why am I not getting a bigger pension?" People would clamour for more information, which would have a big effect on the education of the population.

It is not easy to provide a universal pension forecast but we shall try to do that, hopefully to start in 2002. We are currently conducting a pilot scheme through the pension schemes of Prudential and Sainsbury, and we hope to have the initial results of the pilot before the end of the month. Later this year, in about September, we shall pilot another seven companies, as well as the civil service pension scheme. That will be a big exercise, but it is important to get the design of the forms right and the scheme must be computer-generated. The scheme will not be compulsory, but I would hope that, within a few years, it would be able to embrace every employee in the country. That will put in the past all the problems about people not being prepared for their old age.

We have included a provision in the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill to make the pension forecast exercise easier by enabling people to opt out rather than requiring them to opt in, as they currently have to do in the pilots. For example, Sainsbury had to write to 60,000 of its employees who are in the company pension scheme asking them to approve the inclusion of the Department of Social Security information in their pension forecast. Data protection is extremely important, so it would be much better to give people the right to opt out.

Improvement of people's knowledge will probably be the biggest single policy that the Government can carry through with the support of all parties. All hon. Members would agree that such improvement is a good thing if we can get the practicalities right, which is why the Government initiated the pilots. It is the one single change that will have the maximum effect.

Mr. Drew: Is there a significant problem with the number of people who are working in a succession of part-time jobs? Such employees often have the most deficient knowledge about pensions entitlements and provision.

Mr. Rooker: Not only that, there are also millions of self-employed people, many of whom do not have any provision. We must find a way to corral those people in as well.

We have made a modest but good and positive start. MIG is in place, and we are about to publish literature on it and to deal seriously with pension issues in the take-up campaign, which, as I said, is a multi-million pound national campaign. The stakeholder legislation is on the statute book, the draft regulations have been published and are being consulted on as I speak. We are on course to start in April of next year. The state second pension legislation is currently passing through the House and we have promised to develop ideas for a pensioner credit, whose introduction we hope to announce later this year, although it will obviously be for the next Parliament.

There is much to do, but I am confident that we have made a good start. Although not everything is perfect, many statistics show that most of today's pensioners are in good health and are extremely active. I have tried to avoid using too many figures, but I shall detail them if it is necessary to do so. We want pensioners to continue to be mentally and physically active and to have a good quality of life. Most have a decent income, although a substantial number are still living in poverty. We must address that group and target our resources on it.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Nicholas Winterton): I advise the Chamber that I intend to call the Opposition spokesman next and then the Liberal Democrat spokesman. I shall then return to the usual procedure for calling speakers in such debates, but I feel that it is helpful to hon. Members to hear the leading parties' views early in the discussion.

3.12 pm

Mrs. Jacqui Lait (Beckenham): I welcome this debate on pensions reform, although I find its timing somewhat peculiar, as Parliament is in the process of considering legislation that adds to the Government's reform programme.

I welcome the Minister of State to the debate. I was not entirely sure who would turn up from the Department of Social Security. I was also not sure whether the Minister would still be the pensions Minister, whether he might be Secretary of State for pensions or whether he would be heading up a new Pensions Ministry. That thought resonated with me, as the Wilson Government abolished the Pensions Ministry in the 1960s, and my godmother was a Minister of Pensions in 1959. I thought it ironic that new Labour should go back 40 years and become old Labour. Even if we have a Minister of Pensions in the long run, with most benefits going to the hydra-headed monster led by the Department for Education and Employment and—in respect of in-work benefits—the Secretary of State for Social Security, and with the Treasury removing all of the tax elements of pensions, we must wonder what is left for the right hon. Gentleman. He has announced his retirement, and I hope that he enjoys being the Minister for pensions until the next election, which may take place some 12 to 15 months from now. As ever, it is a pleasure to debate with him, and we look forward to the next stages of the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill in the coming week.

The Government came to power promising to think the unthinkable on pensions and appointed the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) to do so—

[Mrs. Jacqui Lait]

which he did. He is not here, which is a shame as I had hoped he would contribute to the debate. However, he is no longer in the Government and, as we have heard, the unthinkable has become the modest proposals that we have been considering during this Parliament. It is a shame that the Government, who came to office promising to look after everyone and give them a decent retirement, have in effect added two new products to an already overcrowded pension market. Is that the unthinkable? Should we not take a more radical look at pensions reform?

In addressing the broad matter of pensions reform it is helpful to consider where we started. It is acknowledged that there has been a huge increase in pensioner wealth in the past 20 to 30 years. Indeed, some of the older legislation brought many people into occupational and other pension schemes well before 1979. However, in that year, 47 per cent. of pensioners had incomes in the lowest fifth of the national income distribution. By 1995–96, that figure had nearly halved, to 24 per cent. and the proportion of pensioners reliant on means-tested benefit had reduced from 57 to 40 per cent. The main reasons were the 162 per cent. increase in real income from occupational pensions and a rise of 110 per cent. in investment income.

I am sure that it is in the minds of several hon. Members to say that the figures I have given are from Conservative central office. I hate to disappoint them. They come from Professor Robert Walker, director of the centre for research in social policy at Loughborough university, in an article in *The Times* in September.

It is obvious that provision has already expanded hugely. A consequence has been the development of very complex tax regimes. I understand that at least 12 different tax regimes apply to the pensions system. Constituents' faces glaze over when one talks to them about this. The complexity puts people off. The Government acknowledged that in their document "Road to the Manifesto—Security in Retirement", which stated that they would

> place a high priority on ensuring that schemes are simple to understand and operate for both members and employers.

I have given the entire quotation, because I should hate to be accused of choosing only those parts that would fit my argument.

The Minister concluded his speech with the wholly admirable idea that everyone should be given an indication of what his or her pension would be. The Committee welcomed that initiative, however, it is both necessary and difficult to achieve partly because of the sheer complexity of the pension system. If the Government want to think the unthinkable, that should include simplifying the system. I acknowledge that there have been some straightforward proposals to do away with carry forward and carry back. However, it is no exaggeration to say that that is nibbling around the edges. We need a much more over-arching review of how the interaction of the tax system and pensions produces such a complicated and difficult regime and, dare I say it, how that adds to pension charges. If the Government had a real desire to reduce charges, the best that they could do would be to reduce complexity.

However, the two products delivered by the Government have resulted in more complexity. You were in the Chair, Mr. Deputy Speaker, when the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill was discussed in Committee and we were trying to elucidate the complexities of the state second pension. It was full of initials and the eyes of my hon. Friends glazed over when we were debating it. I did not blame them for a minute, because the debate was full of terms such as qualified earnings factor and low earnings threshold. The Bill states, for example, that

> the value of N is 0.5 for each tax year by which the tax year in which the pensioner attained pensionable age precedes 2009–10,

yet it is meant to be reducing the complexity of the pension system.

The Minister alluded to the simple concept of the state second pension. We agree that it is a simple concept, but the problem is that people who enter into such arrangements will not be faced with a simple statement. They must decide whether it is worth while to claim a state second pension. They must analyse what is in it for them, which leads to matters such as the qualified earnings factor. It is horrendously difficult for people to understand the state second pension, when it applies to them and moves on from simply being a concept.

Mr. Leigh: To reduce the complexity, it may be worth our considering the Australian model under which all employers and employees are required to put aside money for a state-regulated, but privately operated, pensions system. If a real reform were undertaken, it would be possible to do away with such complicated differentiations between the state second pension, the stakeholder pension, personal pensions and occupational pensions and ensure that our society was based on provision for the future.

Mrs. Lait: My hon. Friend makes a good point. It is not only in Australia where such attractive schemes are in place. The difficulty is how to move from where we are now to that position. By trying to simplify matters by introducing the state second pension and the stakeholder pension, the Government have made the system more complicated because they have delivered yet another product rather than a fundamental reform. Our criticism of the Government's pensions reform policy is that it is more complex; they have not grappled with the need for simplification.

I shall return briefly to the state second pension, Mr. Deputy Chairman.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. May I assist the hon. Lady? I hold few titles, but the one that I do hold and immensely honour is that of an additional Mr. Deputy Speaker for sittings in Westminster Hall.

Mrs. Lait: My most abject apoloigies, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I shall try to remember to address you by your correct title.

The state second pension has a curious hump-back structure. It is designed to ensure that people move out of the state sector and into stakeholder pensions. That happens at the break point of £9,500. The Minister said in Committee that he expects the figure of £9,500 to change from time to time—to take account of inflation, growth in the economy or whatever criteria he has in mind. I have not found from the papers that accompanied the Budget statement and the Red Book—

I hope that I have read them throughly—any change to the £9,500 projected figure. It was announced a year ago and there has been an increase in inflation, albeit a small one.

I am sure that the Minister knows what I am coming to now: the interaction with stakeholders, the state second pension and the minimum income guarantee. He talked at great length about the minimum income guarantee and, understandably, he wishes it to be restricted to people who are retired or approaching retirement imminently. He is hoping that the stakeholder and state second pensions will be so successful that people will not need to apply for the minimum income guarantee or, indeed, the new pensioner credit. I was grateful to him for referring to that because the Red Book was slightly disingenuous about the pensioner credit in that it did not mention it. However, it talked about introducing a taper to the minimum income guarantee.

I am sure that the Minister is bored with me saying that the existence of the minimum income guarantee has an effect on whether people take up stakeholder and state second pensions. The increase in the minimum income guarantee will make stakeholder pensions even less attractive to people who we would hope might be saving for their pension. Generally, people who start making contributions early in a stakeholder pension and earn up to the target of £20,000 will, with luck, accumulate a pension pot of £100,000 in today's terms. The annuity rates on £100,000 are low at the moment, because of low interest rates and the fact that the Government do not need to issue gilts upon which annuities are based. Should the economy continue as it is doing— and there are big questions about that—and annuity rates remain low, in 20 or 30 years' time, those retiring on stakeholder pensions will make a clear calculation that it was not worth their while taking out a stakeholder pension. I should like the right hon. Gentleman and others in the Government to address that.

The interaction of the minimum income guarantee and the new pension product would not encourage any rational economic person, looking after his family on relatively low earnings, to forgo expenditure on his family to save for his pension. We may deplore it, and we probably all do, but a rational person would say, "It is not worth my while." Unfortunately, the flaw in the stakeholder pension is in its strategy.

I return briefly to the state second pension. The key is that, because of the hump-back structure and the £9,500, the structure of the state second pension will—and I acknowledge that the Minister said this—quite deliberately push people earning more than £9,500 into stakeholder pensions. If it is not worth people's while to go into stakeholder pensions, they will choose the minimum income guarantee.

The Minister said that he would introduce stage 2 only when he or whatever was left of the Department was satisfied that the Government were reaching their target audience. He knows that we have tabled and continue to table amendments to get him to define the target audience. He rightly referred to people earning up to £20,000. Such people cover a wide range of different family circumstances and structures. How the Minister conducts the excerise to define whether his target market has been reached is of great interest to us all. Unless he defines the target audience and how it will be reached, it will be impossible to judge the success of the stakeholder scheme. Merely saying, "Of course we shall consult and report to Parliament, and of course we shall debate the matter" is not good enough. Unless he defines precisely to whom he is trying to sell stakeholder pensions, he and his successors will have an out in determining the success of the scheme.

Mr. John MacGregor (South Norfolk): Perhaps I should declare an interest as a non-executive director of one of the six companies that the Minister mentioned that offered schemes run in accordance with stakeholder pensions—not one of the ones that he identified as doing the reverse.

I am sorry that I was not in the Standing Committee that considered the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill to follow the important point that my hon. Friend made. Although I recognise that it might last only for one Parliament, indexing the MIG to earnings will provide no real incentive for a financial adviser to advise people who earn between about £9,500 and £15,000 to take out a stakeholder pension. There is a genuine dilemma, as many financial advisers will probably say, "I am not sure that it is worth your doing it, because the minimum income guarantee is likely to continue well beyond this Parliament." There is a genuine difficulty for the Government, but unless they deal with it, in due course they may well be accused of the biggest ever mis-selling of pensions. It is a genuine problem, and they must find an answer.

Mrs. Lait: I could not agree more with my right hon. Friend, and I am glad that he made that point. I suppose that I was trying to skirt around it by referring to the target audience. Although many stakeholder providers believe that the costs involved might be as low as 1 per cent. of the cost of producing the policy, many will argue that the people for whom stakeholder is intended are precisely those who, because of MIG and the state second pension, need advice, and no advice comes for free. Some companies may regard stakeholder as a loss leader, and subsidise it; others may not. My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that the Government must tackle that.

If the Government respond to all those points, the stakeholder pension might become a good vehicle. We look forward to examining the regulations on stakeholder in detail in Committee. Hopefully, that will be after Easter, as the Minister said. We are glad that matters are proceeding. So many measures seem to be being introduced shortly or imminently, but we have a date, and that is good.

I was also glad that the Minister clarified his remarks at the Pensions Management Institute conference yesterday. Although, unfortunately, I could not attend because I was debating a different subject in this Chamber, I heard reports that led me to believe that the Minsiter may have taken an attitude towards companies that are trying to develop new products to meet stakeholder requirements that might put them off rather than encourage them. He needs to deal with the apprehension that has arisen as a result of his remarks yesterday, which were reported to me as more confrontational than those this afternoon.

[Mrs. Lait]

If the Minister and his advisers believe that some products are not compliant, every argument and justification can be advanced for ensuring that they are. Unfortunately, he put that in a much more threatening way. It would be helpful if he discussed that. I am sure that he does not want anyone to withdraw from the market, but would prefer them to increase the number of products that comply with the new requirements.

The right hon. Gentleman briefly mentioned the self-employed. We return to the words "shortly" and "imminently", because, when we talk about encouraging the self-employed to make more provision for themselves, the answer is always, "We are consulting." Self-employed people should not be put off by delays in addressing their concerns. Two years out of a pension pot is a long time, and there has already been a fall in the number of products being taken out. Although the right hon. Gentleman should not proceed precipitately, he ought to address the issues relating to self-employed people more directly, so that the Government do not have to deal with self-employed people who say, "I couldn't purchase a stakeholder pension, because I was waiting for the Government. It's now not worth my while, and therefore I'm going on to MIG." I am sure that the Government do not want that. We certainly want more self-employed people to be in a position to make their own pension provision. As the labour market changes, there will be more self-employed people who do not have a business to sell, because they operate in the knowledge-based industries.

We are also concerned about the take-up campaign. I am glad that the Minister was clearer about the time scale; he said that action would be taken before the next Social Security questions. However, unless he makes a major announcement about the take-up campaign tomorrow, he will have only seven days to do something. I hope that we get that announcement in the next seven or eight days, but it is a tight time scale. We look forward to seeing the details of the campaign.

The Minister said that the Benefits Agency has identified 2 million people who are potentially eligible for the minimum income guarantee. He went on to say that the agency would write to everyone. I am glad that it will take that approach to the matter. However, as I understand it, people are eligible for most benefits only from the date of application. If it is a roll-out campaign, and if the 500,000 people identified by the general household survey submit applications in the coming months, from what date will they be able to claim benefits?

Mr. Rooker: It will be the date on which they claim the benefit—the date on which they sign the form. People do not have to wait for the letters; they can make inquiries. As with other benefits, the key date will be the date on which they claim. The benefit is there to be claimed today, without the need for the take-up campaign.

Mrs. Lait: I am grateful for that information, but I foresee difficulties if the system works alphabetically. Someone whose surname begins with Z would get the letter 26 weeks later. There will be some very unhappy people whose names begin with Z. I wonder whether it would be worth while for the Minister to consider whether some flexibility might help to avert potential rows, especially given the effect on the United Kingdom of decisions by the European Court. There may be challenges. I do not know, but I can see it happening. Perhaps more thought should be given to that campaign. Many hon. Members were swamped, as the right hon. Gentleman said that he was, by problems from constituents applying for disability living allowance. Will he consider setting up an MPs' telephone line? I know that there are special lines for applicants, but one would also be useful for us.

Mr. Chairman—I am sorry, I mean Mr. Additional Deputy Speaker. That reminds me of The Mikado.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am not sure whether the hon. Lady will catch my eye in future when I am in the Chair.

Mrs. Lait: I do not want to dig myself into an even deeper hole, Mr. Additional Deputy Speaker, but one must admit that The Mikado was one of Gilbert And Sullivan's most successful operettas. I am sure that you are one of our most successful additional Deputy Speakers.

I am sure that everyone is absolutely delighted that I am drawing my remarks to a close. First, however, I must acknowledge that the right hon. Gentleman announced in a written answer yesterday that the Government plan to relax some of the rules on annuities. That is welcome, especially because of the present value of annuities. However, I do not know whether the Government are going as far as people demand. I support the pensions reform working party's suggestion of a basic annuity for everybody, which would provide an income just above the minimum income guarantee. That is an astute and clever way to avoid the stakeholder pension difficulty that we discussed, although it does not deal with the rest of people's pension pot and their desire to look after that more effectively and efficiently themselves. The Government should consider that and the issue of income draw down at 75 more creatively.

Miss Kirkbride: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, because I missed the Government's answer to that parliamentary question. This morning, I received a letter from an extremely concerned constituent. He is 73, about to turn 74, and he is unhappy about having to make a decision quickly. I now have the chance to ask the Minister to please get on with it. Some people desperately need the system to be changed.

Mrs. Lait: I could not agree more. We shall return to that when we consider the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill on Report. The pressure will continue to build up. Given the flexible working market and the improving health of our pensioners, providing for income draw down at 75 smacks of ageism. I heartily recommend that the Government take a more lenient view. We must address annuities, their value, and the income draw down, and the issues around them—I hate the word "around", and I must stop using it.

I also hate people who always say that they are making one last point, but that is what I am about to do. It is based on the Red Book. The subject is not

necessarily the right hon. Gentleman's responsibility, but it is worth throwing into the pot, because pensions are crucial to it. The royal commission on long-term care made some radical suggestions on care for the elderly, but the Government have not necessarily acted on them. The issue has not gone away, but the Government have undertaken no significant policy developments. However, I spotted a reference in the Red Book to the fact that people can buy annuities against their houses, as they did with the old home income plans, and receive tax relief at 23 per cent. up to £30,000. It struck me immediately that tax relief at 23 per cent. gives an annuity of up to £36,900. A footnote in the Red Book says that the total is not expected to exceed £3 million.

The sum of £36,000 would pay for two years' long-term residential care. The statistics suggest that, because of other changes that have been made to support independent living at home, most people are in residential care for between 18 months and two years. If that was the purpose of the annuity, it is a mean measure. This matter is part of the portfolio of the Minister responsible for pensions. If we divide £3 million by the £9,600 tax relief, we realise that only a few hundred people will benefit from that relief for long-term care purposes. If that is the direction that the Government wish to take on long-term care for the elderly, they should come out and say so, instead of hiding it in the last two lines of a page in the Red Book. Only 400 people will benefit from that measure, at a cost of £6,900 each to the Treasury, when thousands could benefit. The grief caused to families who have to sell their houses could be reduced, too. There is a need to develop better strategies for the elderly to pay for long-term care, and I would like the Minister to comment on that.

The Minister talked about big ideas, while admitting that they are actually fairly modest. We have asked whether those ideas will help retired people. The Government did their biggest damage to pensions provision when they withdrew advance corporation tax; that stealth tax is beginning to hit people's pockets. We see local authorities report, week after week, on how much damage it is doing to their pension funds. The Minister probably thinks that that does not matter because the poor council tax payers will not notice that particular increase amid the other increases to their council tax, and the local authority pensions funds will be topped up.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Miss Kirkbride) said, that measure is now hitting the people with Tesco pensions. From April, people who have been paying 3.75 per cent. of their salary into the Tesco pension plan will pay 4.25 per cent. Not only Tesco, but company after company will be affected. The withdrawal of ACT will have such an effect on our economy that what the Government really intend, and what they are about, will at long last hit home to people. It will also have a fundamental effect on pension funds; the more politicians meddle in pension funds, the less people want to get involved in them.

Mr. Additional Deputy Speaker—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Just Mr. Deputy Speaker will do.

Mrs. Lait: Government stealth taxes are working their way through the pensions system. The Minister has admitted that the pension reforms are modest. We have an increasing number of pensioners, and at the next election the Government will have to answer to them.

3.48 pm

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): I want to address several aspects of the Minister's speech, and to develop some thoughts about how we could reform the pensions system. In such a debate, it is right that we focus both on today's pensioners and on tomorrow's. It is a good time to debate these matters; it is a couple of days after the Budget, and few days before the Report stage of the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill. We have already heard the Minister and the hon. Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait) discuss some of the points that I will raise.

There are 10.5 million pensioners in this country, and there is no such thing as an average pensioner. There is a wide range, from the very poor to the extremely wealthy. No single figure can tell the truth about pensioners' incomes and life experiences. The poorest two fifths of single pensioners live on incomes of less than £93 per week, while the richest one fifth of pensioners live on incomes of more than £205 a week. Comparing those figures to the mean—£129—gives us some idea of how the distribution works out in practice. Averages are useful, but they are all too often misleading about the reality of pensioners' incomes.

There are equivalent figures for couples. The poorest two fifths of pensioners receive about £158 a week per couple, and the top fifth's income is £436 per couple. The mean is about £248. Again, the distribution works very much against the poorest pensioners. Clearly, there is a significant gulf between the wealth of a few and the poverty and straitened circumstances of many. As contributors to this debate have said, pensioners' incomes have increased. Between 1979 and 1997, the increase was 62 per cent. However, that figure hides an awful lot of differences. While the richest saw their incomes go up by 85 per cent.—£87 a week—the poorest fifth of pensioners saw theirs go up by just 22 per cent., or £10 a week. In other words, the poorest pensioners were only £10 better off after 18 years of Conservative rule.

Seven out of 10 pensioners rely on state benefits for half their income, and almost two in 10 depend wholly on state benefits. Undoubtedly, the wide coverage of occupational pensions, and their increasing use, has done much to boost pensioner incomes. However, as the figures reveal, many people who retire today face a bleak prospect on very low incomes. What is the Government's response? Let us deal with their immediate response, which is made principally through the basic state pension; I will deal with the minimum income guarantee shortly. From 1 April, the basic state pension will go up by 75p a week—at least in theory, as I will explain in a moment. Many people outside this Chamber will consider that increase an insult, and

[Mr. Paul Burstow]

inadequate to meet the costs that pensioners face. It will be largely—for many pensioners completely—consumed by council tax rises alone.

The increase in the basic state pension masks an even greater scandal: 25 per cent. of pensioners will not receive even the 75p increase in their basic state pension this year. They will not receive even 50p extra a week. One million married women with poor pension contributions records rely on their husbands to establish their record for the purposes of receiving pensions, and thus receive category B pensions of £39.95 a week. A further 1.5 million people—mostly women, mostly single women and widows—are in the same boat. For them, 1.1 per cent. is just 45p. What a bonanza for those pensioners.

The Government's response to the poorest pensioners is more means testing and the minimum income guarantee. However, between 400,000 and 700,000 people—about 37 per cent. of those entitled to the minimum income guarantee—do not claim it. We have heard a little about the Government's take-up campaign and we look forward to events over the next few days to see whether it will start before 3 April. The campaign must be welcomed, because it is essential that everyone who is entitled takes up his or her entitlement. Claiming the minimum income guarantee is not a cause for stigma or something that should be resisted. However, we must acknowledge that it is not being taken up.

Last year, the Department of Social Security commissioned a report called "Helping Pensioners: Contextual Survey of the Income Support Pilots". It is based on 10 pilots in various local authorities and makes interesting reading. It found that only four out of 10 pensioners said that they would definitely make a claim, and that 36 per cent. said that they would not make a claim. The reasons that they gave were stigma, uncertainty and an unwillingness to deal with the Benefits Agency. The report concluded:

> Given the existing eligibility criteria for IS, the stock of IS ENRs—

what a piece of jargon—

> is continually refreshing itself. Encouraging all pensioners entitled to IS to take up their entitlement will be difficult. Previous research has shown, for various reasons, that there is a group of pensioner IS ENRs who will resist such encouragement.

The report also concludes that a far more strategic approach will be needed than those adopted in previous take-up campaigns. We look forward to the Minister's outlining the strategic elements of the campaign to the House before 3 April.

I hope that the exchange about incentives to take-up that took place between the Minister and the hon. Member for Beckenham can be considered further. Is there any scope for recognising that an entitlement, once established, should attract some backdating of income support? Is it possible to use a device of that sort to provide an additional incentive to people who have not hitherto claimed, despite years of entitlement?

As the pension population grows and the gap between the minimum income guarantee and the basic state pension widens—the former being earnings indexed and the latter price indexed—more people will be caught in the means-testing trap. That may present a disincentive for people to take out stakeholder pensions, or to make other provision.

Government research shows that women—especially older women—constitute the largest group of pensioners missing out on the minimum income guarantee. Furthermore, it is clear that the oldest pensioners are also the poorest. Liberal Democrats believe that there is a much more effective way of getting cash help to those most in need of it. We want the Government seriously to consider the reform and uprating of age additions to the basic state pension. That would remove the stigma, and avoid the bureaucracy and paraphernalia of a massive take-up campaign.

At present, the basic state pension pays an extra 25p a week at the age of 80. That has not been uprated since 1971. That would have been worth £3.70 today if it had been linked to earnings. The Liberal Democrats propose that it should be uprated to £5 a week, and that there should be a further age addition of £3 a week at the age of 75. If those proposals are taken together with our proposal for a general uprating of £2 for the basic state pension this year—rather than the £2 proposed for next year by the Chancellor in his Budget statement—the oldest pensioners would receive an increase this year at double the rate of earnings.

Such an increase could be afforded. For the purposes of the Budget, the Chancellor raided the budget of the Department of Social Security to the tune of £2 billion. That would be more than enough to meet the cost of our proposals. However, the Government prefer a tax cut to the payment of a decent pension. Consequently, the old will, in many ways, be paying for the sick in future.

I turn briefly to the pensioners of tomorrow. SERPS will affect future pensioners as well as those already drawing pensions. It is a scandal that the plans to halve widows' inheritance rights, introduced by the Conservatives in 1986, went unpublicised until 1996. The reports of the National Audit Office and the parliamentary ombudsman make depressing and disturbing reading. They tell of a systemic failure by the Department of Social Security to translate policy into practice, or to recognise trouble when the alarm bells began to ring. The NAO report, published in 2000, found that there were still problems. It is interesting to note the results of its survey work. Paragraph 1.20 states:

> In March 1999 the Benefits Agency reviewed what information a sample of 23 offices across the country had provided. This found that in 14 offices staff would have provided incorrect advice, and in one other, some, but not all, staff would have done so. In another office, staff provided incorrect information until early 1998, when a customer advised them of the change.

That is not the way in which this system should operate. Customers should not have to notify the staff of the Benefits Agency of changes to benefits. It is crucial that that does not happen again. I am pleased to see the Government's proposals to address that issue.

It is worth quoting what the Secretary of State said on 15 March about the inherited SERPS scheme, because it is an important part of the way in which the scheme will work. He said:

> People will be required to give us information on how they were misled when they make a claim, and we shall, of course, ask them questions about that when we process the claim. However, if there

is no documentary evidence, it will be for the Department to challenge or disprove the claim.—[*Official Report*, 15 March 2000; Vol. 346, c. 312.]

That is fine, and one can understand why the Government wish to approach the matter in that way, although we may wish to challenge them in debate in due course. The Secretary of State went on to tell the House that an advertisment setting out the plans would be placed in many of our reputable journals, but I fear that it will sow yet more confusion, because it says:

> To put this right we are introducing a scheme that will protect the rights of those SERPS contributors who can show that they were given wrong information about their entitlement and who as a consequence may have made different choices about their finances if they had known about the change to SERPS.

At best, that is ambiguous, at worst misleading. Surely the Government want to maximise the number of people making inquiries, instead of compounding the Conservative Government's errors. I hope that all literature will be fully market-tested with those who will respond to it, to ensure that it is understandable to all of us, not just to some. The NAO report says that about 3 million misleading leaflets were issued between 1986 and 1996. There is no way of knowing how many people read those leaflets.

I was interested in what the Minister said about rolling out the take-up campaign. The Government will write to 2 million people to encourage them to apply for the minimum income guarantee. We welcome that proactive approach. Why can there not be a similar approach to SERPS mis-selling? Why cannot the Government write to those who may have been affected?

In Committee, the Minister, the hon. Member for Beckenham and I grappled with the detail of the state second pension for what seemed like months, but was in fact merely weeks. Its principles and objectives are welcome, particularly in respect of carers, because it is the first time that a pensions benefit values the role and unpaid work of carers. However, the important principle that carers' work will be recognised by ensuring that they will have a pension in later life is let down by some of the Bill's details and the practice that will flow from them.

If the new pension entitlement is targeted through the invalid care allowance, hundreds of thousands of carers will be excluded from the state second pension. Some 370,000 carers receive ICA, but 855,000 people provide more than 50 hours of care a week. Entitlement to the state second pension for carers should not hinge on another person's attendance allowance claim: it should be a clear and unambiguous entitlement for the carer.

Questions arise about pensions provision when I meet carers in my constituency—at our carer centre or the Sutton carers forum. Carers want to know about the state second pension, and are shocked and dismayed to learn that they will not all receive it because of the rules that will underpin it. People who have spent years caring will not have them counted for the scheme. More than 120,000 people have received ICA for five years or more, and 32,000 of them have received it for more than 10 years—10 years of care that will go unacknowledged in the new scheme. The Government should backdate national insurance credits in some way, to reduce the number of carers left in poverty in retirement.

The Government talk about the entitlement to national insurance credits for state second pension where a person is in receipt of ICA throughout the year. I shall not go into that in detail today, because we explored it ad nauseam in Committee, but carers who, through no fault of their own, have broken ICA records will lose out. The Government rightly targeted respite care in the national carers strategy, to give carers a break from caring, but their plans run counter to that, and that must be avoided at all costs.

Because of the linking rules, carers become disentitled to ICA when someone has been in care for 28 days. That must be borne in mind when the new pension is rolled out. Similarly, if the ICA earnings limit rules remain as at present, ICA is reduced pound for pound when earnings exceed £50, so no contributions are made to national insurance for the state second pension. The Government cannot want that. A carer could lose a whole year's contributions to the state second pension. The proposals will not make a difference to many of my constituents who are carers.

Will the Government consider recognising and valuing carers through an increase in the ICA generally or, if that is not affordable, by extending it to pensioners, many of whom feel aggrieved when they do not qualify for ICA, despite having heavy caring duties? I hope that the Government will consider that idea seriously.

I had hoped to spend some time debating the Conservative party's emerging and evolving plans for pensions. Some hon. Members will have read with interest in *The Daily Telegraph* a few weeks ago the trailing of an important speech by the shadow Secretary of State for Social Security, and we wait with bated breath to hear the direction in which the Conservative party proposes to take us. *The Daily Telegraph* reported that the hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) seemed to be suggesting ways in which it might be possible for people voluntarily to opt out of the basic state pension, and it would have been interesting to hear more about that. Unfortunately, the hon. Gentleman did not deliver his speech in this country. He got on an aeroplane and flew to New York to deliver it. Following persistent attempts by my office to obtain it from the Library and from his office, I understand that the speech is still being typed, so we cannot test those emerging policy ideas.

I want to spend a few moments discussing tax—a matter that has an impact on the income of many pensioners and on which reform is necessary. The low income tax reform group of the Chartered Institute of Taxation has done much good work in promoting the cause of older people and the impact on them of the tax system. I want to refer to two issues: the age gap and the bureaucracy trap.

First, with the abolition of the married couple's allowance from 6 April this year, new anomalies will enter the tax system, particularly in its impact on older people. Let us consider two male twins, the older born on 5 April 1935 and the younger on 6 April 1935. Before the changes, both would have expected to receive the higher rate of married couple's allowance, but only the older will now receive it. Assuming that both twins live for many more years, their annual tax calculations will be different even if they have exactly the same income. How can the creation of such an anomaly help older people? The situation gets worse. Let us assume that the

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twins had not married, but in 10 years marry wives younger than themselves. Only the older twin would receive the married couple's allowance. If they marry older women, both would receive the allowance. Treasury Ministers will have to answer constituency inquiries about that, and I hope that they have good explanations. I do not, and I think that the proposal is madness.

The second issue is the bureaucracy trap. Many pensioners who fall below the tax threshold are regularly pursued and worried by the taxman. The solution is simple—a tax exemption certificate. That would spare lower-income pensioners the need to communicate with the taxman and all the form filling that that entails. I hope that such a simple proposal could be embraced, even at this late stage, when the Finance Bill makes its way through the House.

For many of today's pensioners, reality is a life not of wealth and plenty, but of thrift and hardship. More can and should be done for them. The state pension is welcomed for tomorrow's pensioners, but we must question whether travelling 50 years into the future to realise a modest and temporary boost to pension income is a lost opportunity. The Liberal Democrats will try to put that right during the passage of the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill over the next few weeks.

4.9 pm

Mr. Alan Hurst (Braintree): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate, and to follow the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow). His speech could have been entitled "In Praise of Older Women", because he seemed to see a certain advantage in that direction. I agree that we must consider the distinction between pension provision for those who are in work and several years from pensionable age, and that for those who already receive, or will soon receive, state pensions or occupational pensions. The phrase "tomorrow's pensioners" is not quite right, because those who will soon be pensioners face the same problems as those who already are.

Before I go too far in that direction, I want to make some positive points—as would rightly be expected of me—about the Government's pensions policies thus far. The winter fuel payment, which is equivalent to a pension payment and will add £3 per week to the basic pension, has been handled very well. I suppose that a possible precursor was the £10 payment to which Sir Alec Douglas-Home referred as a donation. As a result of that condescending and charitable tone, he became embroiled in difficulties. I am pleased to say that the winter fuel payment, which will be a permanent entitlement, is in a different category. It is particularly astute because it is paid to the pensioner household in winter, when pensioners must spend money on heating and Christmas. Christmas is an expensive time for everyone, but particularly for those on limited fixed incomes.

More credit than has perhaps been given is also due to the Government for the introduction from this autumn of free television licences for those aged over 75. Television is often the main form of entertainment for many people, but particularly older people. Those who have difficulty getting out and about find it difficult to access alternative forms of entertainment, which in any case often do not exist. Perhaps we should be more positive in rebutting—to use a Millbank word—the criticism that the concession will not be made available to those aged, say, 65 or 60. As with all such matters, the first small step is the beginning of the longest journey. The Government have made a substantial stride, and I hope that younger pensioners will be granted the concession in the not too distant future.

My right hon. Friend the Minister dwelt at length on the minimum income guarantee. I hope he will not object to my saying that he makes a slight error in continually referring to it as MIG, which in most people's minds is a Russian fighter plane. If we want to encourage people to understand what is on offer, we should at least describe it as the minimum income guarantee. However, perhaps we should have chosen a name that relates directly to pensions, such as the minimum pension assurance. That is merely a suggestion, but what is on offer should be made abundantly clear. Notwithstanding that criticism, the minimum income guarantee will benefit today's pensioners greatly. In the period to which the Chancellor referred, it will rise from £75 to £78, and subsequently to £82.

I was a little concerned by a point made by the hon. Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait). She said that increasing the minimum income guarantee might deter others from taking out stakeholder pensions, the suggestion being that one need not do so if there are increases in the minimum income guarantee. That may be arithmetically correct, but there is a dangerous implication.

Mrs. Lait: Would the hon. Gentleman make the state second pension or stakeholder pension compulsory?

Mr. Hurst: There may well be a good case for doing so. The difficulty with the hon. Lady's argument is that it suggests that we should not increase the minimum income guarantee because that would have an adverse affect on tomorrow's pensions. However, I am not sure that she drew that conclusion. The logic of that argument is to suggest that today's pensioners should pay to encourage tomorrow's pensioners, but I am not convinced that that is the right approach.

The greatest cheer that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor received during last year's Budget came when he announced the minimum income guarantee and said that it would be linked to average earnings. I was not the only Government Back Bencher who fleetingly believed that there would be a restoration of the link between the basic pension and earnings. However, like a March mist, the proposal drifted away. Notwithstanding that, the link is useful. The minimum income guarantee is increasing in line with national prosperity. For many years, the pensions debate has focused on what is called the restoration of the earnings link.

I delved back to the time of Mr. Wilson's Governments during the 1970s—the Minister may have spoken in pensions debates at that time—and found that the formula was established in line with the phrase,

"Wages or prices, whichever was more favourable to the recipient". We have concluded over the years that wages are always more favourable to the recipient than prices, but it was wise to involve an alternative. Unfortunately, Mrs. Thatcher's Government decided to remove the benefit, and it is always much harder to bring something back once it has gone.

Books on pensions estimate how much it would cost to reintroduce the benefit, but the figures vary enormously, depending on whether one listens to Baroness Castle. Enormous sums would be involved if one backdated the benefit—I am told that if it were backdated to 1980, it would cost in the region of £11 billion or £12 billion per annum.

We could consider a more modest proposal, namely to raise the basic state pension to £75 or £78 per week, and to continue the link thereafter using the formula set out in the 1970s. Pensioners often suggest that. Hon. Members who talk to older people's groups in their constituencies know that they want a basic state pension that preserves their dignity. They do not want endless means testing.

Stakeholder pensions and private pension schemes may be attractive to younger people, who can plan ahead for their future, but older people cannot rewrite their personal history. From our current position, it is easy to look back and say, "If only I had taken out a sensible pension when I was 23, and not spent my money on A, B or C." Many of today's pensioners did not have the opportunity to establish substantial pensions for themselves. They should not be expected to suffer until such time as the stakeholder private industrial pension system, which is currently being contemplated, catches up with the next generation.

I was encouraged when my right hon. Friend the Chancellor referred in the Budget to pensioner credit and mentioned the sums of £100 and £150. It is early days for such schemes. The consultation is welcome, and may yield considerable benefits.

In preparing for the debate, I looked back to the origins of old-age pensions in this country, specifically David Lloyd George's Old Age Pensions Act 1908. His most famous defence of that measure was his speech to thousands of cheering Cockneys at Limehouse. That was when the phrase "Limehousing" came into use, at least in the Conservative party, as a term of abuse for those who sought to promote social policies at the expense of the better-off.

Re-reading Lloyd George's speech, I realised how much more colourful—and MIG-free—was the enunciation of policies in those days. Describing the pension scheme, he said:

> it is rather a shame for a rich country like ours—that it should allow those who toiled all their days to end in penury and possible starvation. It is rather hard that an old workman should have to find his way to the gates of the tomb bleeding and footsore, through the brambles and thorns of poverty. We have cut a new path through it, an easier one, a pleasanter one, through fields of waving corn.

There is no doubt that he had a way with words, but the proposal was more limited than his oration might suggest. A person had to reach the age of 70—one should bear in mind the lower life expectancy at that time—to have been a British citizen for 20 years and to be of good character, which would be a recommendation in the eyes of my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary. Provided that people met those qualifications, and that their income was no more than £21 per annum, they would be entitled to an old age pension of 5 shillings per week.

That sounds very modest, and it is beyond me why the Conservative party got so terribly worked up about it at the time. However, its importance lies in the fact that it set us on the route that led on through Beveridge, to the legislation of the 1970s and to where we are today. Proposals that appear modest may open up great opportunities for pension improvement, so that not only future pensioners, but those of today, can enjoy rising prosperity.

Although I have an open goal until 5.15 pm, I do not intend to take advantage of it. My final point is that the national minimum wage gives support to the pensioners' case for more substantial current pensions, because it recognises that there is a standard of living below which our citizens should not fall. Pensioners groups do not say that state pensions should be treated in the same way as the national minimum wage—clearly, different calculations are necessary, involving people in different circumstances and age groups.

The minimum wage recognises that there is a standard of living below which people should not fall. Although the Government are, to some extent, taking that approach with the minimum income guarantee, I have made no secret in my remarks of the fact that I would like to see a more substantial basic state pension. We should be more cautious about believing that the private sector can always make better provision than the state. I understand that the national insurance fund has a substantial surplus. Although that obviously cannot be spent all at once—there would not be many more tomorrows if it were—it gives room for manoeuvre. I wish the Government well in their consultations on the proposals announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer earlier this week.

4.24 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Social Security (Mr. Jeff Rooker): I shall try to respond to all the points that have been raised, and shall be happy to write to hon. Members about any that I do not cover. I do not make that offer every time because hon. Members can always return to matters on other occasions. However, as I said to the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh), these are important issues. One of the purposes of these debates is to help the Government. The greater the flow of information, the more likely it is that we will get it right in the future and avoid problems such as mis-selling and mis-advertising.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (Mr. Hurst), especially for the Lloyd George quote. I would like to use that quote, as, I suspect, would some of our friends down at Millbank. Those were colourful days. My hon. Friend finished by mentioning the national insurance fund surplus, which is substantial and healthy. We must always remember that the surplus is not a pot of money—it is not cash—and only represents the difference between two extremely large figures. Therefore, a shift in the economy could wipe it out. Anything that we do on pensions lasts for ever—once the pension is changed, it must be transferred

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through the generations of a working life. That is one of the problems in terms of making calculations. The surplus is a seductive argument, but it does not work. Putting £1 on the pension today will cost £7 billion in 10 years' time. That indicates the scale of the Government Actuary's calculations.

Although my hon. Friend did not use the phrase himself, a couple of his examples brought to mind the phrase "thin end of the wedge". The door is open on certain issues, even though progress might be slow. The television licence is a good example. The Government's proposal for free television licences for those aged 75 plus applies to all households with someone over 75, which is a wide provision. There will be many households in which people under 75 live with someone over 75. The person over 75 must be the licence holder. It is the responsibility of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to guide legislation through the House to deliver that policy, because a power will be necessary to request from my Department the names and addresses of everybody over 75. Data protection legislation does not allow us to provide such information willy-nilly. The 75-year old threshold will be dealt with in later regulations, but it will be easier to campaign for change once payment has started. That is the thin-end-of-the-wedge argument, although it has not worked in terms of the Christmas bonus or the additional 25p for those aged over 80, which have been frozen for years. I do not want to raise hopes, but my hon. Friend's point was that the first step is crucial.

As for the minimum income guarantee, its title was not invented by the Department of Social Security. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer gave it that title, and we are sticking to it. It might be a good idea not to call it that, but that is what it will be marketed as. I accept my hon. Friend's point about the winter fuel payment. It is now a reasonable amount, which is paid in cash before Christmas. A date will be chosen in September, as was the case last year. It is done so far in advance because it takes 10 weeks to print the giros. I regret that, but the objective is to ensure that the money is in people's hands before Christmas. We also have to work on the basis of arranging back pay.

I shall run through some of the matters raised by hon. Members. My hon. Friend the Member for Braintree mentioned the cost of linking the basic state pension with average earnings, which would be £1 billion net in 2000, rising to £7.5 billion in 2010. An increase in the basic state pension and linked benefits to the minimum income guarantee level for April would cost £4 billion net in 2000–01. It would not help the poorest pensioners who are on MIG. Simply raising the basic state pension when the MIG exists would mean that the poorest were not well targeted.

In due course, the Government will introduce regulations for a protected rights scheme in respect of inherited SERPs. It would be impractical to write to all SERPs contributors since 1978, as there are more than 20 million of them—the National Audit Office does not recommend it. There will be initial press advertisements and a substantial programme of advertising to inform people who have lost out because of maladministration.

Mr. Burstow: I want to pursue the matter of the advertisements, which I understand are only the early stages of a wider campaign. Can the Minister say whether the initial advertisements were checked to ensure that they would be understood by potential readers? If not, will that be done before future advertising materials are drafted?

Mr. Booker: It will certainly be the case for future advertisements because we shall consult bodies such as Age Concern and Help the Aged. The Social Security Advisory Committee will advise on DSS leaflets and when possible they will be approved by the Plain English campaign.

It is early days; we have to put together a protected rights scheme, and broad-brush decisions were taken only last week. I do not accept that the advertisements are misleading; people will have to tell us if they have lost out. The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) quoted the statement last week that the burden of proof will be on the Government. However, at the end of the day, people will have to sign a form claiming benefit and stating that the information that they give is truthful and correct.

Reports last week showed some of the worst maladministration since the war; they were devastating in revealing the lackadaisical machinery of government and how the errors came about. No person or section was to blame; the villain was a massive failure of the Government machine, and we must ensure that that does not occur again, in the Department or anywhere else.

The hon. Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait) referred to the setting up of a new, discrete pensions body outside the Benefits Agency but under the control of the DSS, to deal with everything relating to present and future pensioners, pensions policy, legislation, leaflets and information. It would include face-to-face contact with pensioners, to ensure that such mistakes cannot happen again.

Mrs. Lait: The right hon. Gentleman may know that I am keen that the pensions ombudsman and OPRA—the Occupational Pensions Regulatory Authority—should join the other financial products organisations under the Financial Services Authority. Could it work the other way? Could the personal pensions ombudsman come under the aegis of the new pensions body, so that one maladministration monitor deals with all the pensions?

Mr. Rooker: I shall put that off until Report. The hon. Lady has tabled amendments and new clauses, which I shall be required to respond to on Report. Clearly, she has plans for merging different parts of the machinery and we can debate that more fully on Report than we can today.

The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam mentioned retrospection. It is a major problem and we debated it in Committee with respect to carers. I repeat the positive point that 2 million people will gain from the changes. I regret that it is impossible to fix a date for carers in the past; we do not have enough information. However, as I said, there will be a further opportunity to debate the matter on Report.

The hon. Gentleman also asked about people who become 65 after the cut-off date, potentially losing tax relief worth about £500. Nobody receiving age-related

additions before April will lose them; they will continue into the next financial year for the foreseeable future. He made an interesting point about twins. Our computer systems can be pretty useless, but they are not too bad on dates of birth. I would be interested to know if there is a single example in the entire country of twins, one of whom was born on 5 April and the other on 6 April 1935. It would be most interesting if there were. If so, it would be a matter for my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer because it is a tax, not a pension matter. We may find out in due course.

The hon. Member for Beckenham referred to advance corporation tax changes and cited Tesco. As we have said before, the changes were intended to stop companies paying out dividends when it would be better to invest the money back into the industry. Notwithstanding the hon. Lady's example, by and large, the returns on pensions have been extremely good. The measure was part of a wider package of economic reforms and was intended to encourage companies to retain money for investment rather than pay out dividends. The hon. Lady knows what that was about. We need a strong economy. The basic state pension is the foundation of our system. Relying on the private sector could be problematic if the economic environment necessary for the private sector to provide the benefits of occupational pensions is not sustained.

Mrs. Lait: We agree on the need for a strong economy in order to grow. That is precisely my point. Taking £5 billion out of the pensions system was not a reflection of the Government's policy, but a product of the growth of the world economy, within which the UK is growing, but not as well as the American economy. The ACT change did not generate growth in the UK economy; growth happened because of trends in the world economy.

Mr. Rooker: I did not say or imply that; the hon. Lady takes us to another debate. Her point does not relate to pensions reform. That is the problem.

The hon. Lady asked a specific question about thresholds for the state second pension, but I thought that I had answered it previously. I always said that the £9,500 applied to the year 1999–2000. When the pension comes in, whenever that is, the figure will be revalued from the point at which we announced it. If it takes two or three years to come in, there will be two or three years' revaluation to make the figure correct. If I have not made that clear in the past, I do so now. If the pension started in April 2002, the low earnings threshold of £9,500 would have three years' worth of uprating from the date it was announced.

Mr. Burstow: The Minister is right. I recall him dealing with that in some detail in Committee. I have a related question concerning the roll-out of state second pension and his comments about MIG and the interplay between the two. Will he confirm that while most of the examples based on retirement at 2050 show that the basic state pension plus state second pension are equal to or greater than MIG, by the time most pensioners reach 80, they will back on MIG?

Mr. Rooker: No, I do not accept that.

This is my final point and it relates to exchange between the hon. Member for Beckenham and one of her hon. Friends. As I have repeatedly said, MIG is part of the income support system. It is means-tested, not on a person, but in most respects on a couple. MIG and income support for a couple are not twice, but about one and a half times the rate for a single person. For example, a couple who have had work experience, possibly interrupted at some stage, one of them on a stakeholder pension and the other on state second pension, will be way over MIG when they retire. They would not then be subject to the means test on their savings and the other matters.

Financial journalists who insist on using the example of a single person, as opposed to a couple with a state second pension and a stakeholder pension, give a misleading picture. I know that not everyone is part of a couple, but the caveat must be entered that MIG is means-tested. The rate for a couple is not twice the rate for a single person and the figures are different in many respects. Couples could be way over MIG for a decade and a half or more after they retire. It depends on what they retired on, what their earnings have been and for how many years their contributions were interrupted. One cannot give a guarantee about this, but I gave the Committee some examples of people who would be well over MIG at the point they retired and would not fall back on it for 15 or 16 years. I accept that it would be less in other circumstances.

Mr. Burstow: The examples that the Minister referred to showed that, by the age of 80, many pensioners would need to turn to the Benefits Agency to seek MIG. Does that not underline the case for increasing the age addition to the basic state pension?

Mr. Rooker: I cannot accept that, although I also cannot write the scenarios for 50 years' time. The previous Administration's policy was to raise pensions only in line with prices. However, that did not happen during their 18-year term, because pensions increased by more than prices. The policy enunciation was prices for the one and earnings for the other. All our answers in future have to be formulated on that basis because there is no other way to project.

My final, final point is that I am unaware of anything that I said that could have caused anyone concern when I attended the Pensions Management Institute conference at the Hilton hotel in Park lane yesterday. I said virtually the same as I have said today about the mis-selling of stakeholder pensions—if that was what the hon. Lady was referring to—and about the survey that was done by *Money Marketing*, not by the Government. The firms are named in the survey. I have said today that the regulator, the Financial Services Authority, will, rightly, watch to make sure that there is no mis-selling of pensions, and, if it occurs, we shall clamp down on it at the first opportunity. Firms will no longer have any excuse for it because they have seen our draft regulations, which are in the public domain for consultation. I deplore the idea that firms might knowingly and wilfully be mis-selling. It is not good enough, and the FSA should do everything that it can to put a stop to it.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at fifteen minutes to Five o'clock.

Written Answers to Questions

Monday 13 March 2000

CABINET OFFICE

Regulatory Impact Assessments

Ms Southworth: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will list those Regulatory Impact Assessments published during the latest six month period. [114551]

Marjorie Mowlam: The Government are committed to ensuring that regulations are necessary, give effective protection, balance cost and risk, are fair and command public confidence. In accordance with this, we require Departments to produce and publish Regulatory Impact Assessments (RIAs) for all regulatory proposals likely to have an impact on business.

I have presented to Parliament today a Command Paper listing 78 RIAs published between 1 July and 31 December 1999. Copies of those listed have been placed in the Libraries of the House. Please note that this Command Paper entitled "Regulatory Impact Assessments" has replaced the previous series entitled "Compliance Cost Assessment". This is the twelfth such Command Paper.

Rat Infestations

Ms Walley: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what was the total expenditure for each of the past three years for treating and controlling rat infestations in buildings and land occupied by Government Departments. [113045]

Mr. Stringer: Individual Government Departments are responsible for managing and maintaining the land and property they occupy. The information requested is not held centrally, and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

The approximate costs (exclusive of value added tax) incurred by the Cabinet Office on pest control in each of the past three financial years in the buildings in which it is the main or sole occupier (including No. 10 Downing Street and the premises occupied by the Cabinet Office agencies) are set out in the table. The specific costs of treating and controlling rat infestations are not recorded separately.

Year	£
1997–98	13,600
1998–99	14,350
1999–2000 (to date)	14,050

Non-Departmental Public Bodies

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what plans she has to increase the accountability to Parliament of *(a)* non-departmental public bodies and *(b)* task forces. [113305]

Mr. Ian McCartney: None. NDPBs are accountable direct to Parliament through their sponsoring Department. Task Forces, not classified as NDPBs, are accountable to Ministers who in turn are accountable to Parliament.

Global Cultural Diversity Congress

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will make a statement about the involvement of the Central Office of Information with the Global Cultural Diversity Congress and Global Cultural Diversity Congress 2000 Ltd. [112736]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Central Office of Information (COI) was commissioned by Global Cultural Diversity Congress 2000 Ltd., to provide technical and management support for the Global Cultural Diversity Congress.

In addition, at the request of the Chairman of the CRE, a member of COI staff was appointed as an unpaid director of Global Cultural Diversity Congress 2000 Ltd. to provide events and technical service expertise and knowledge.

Anti-drugs Strategy

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what is the nature of the co-operation between the United Kingdom Anti-Drugs Co-ordinator and the United States Office of National Drug Control Policy; in what ways the United Kingdom Anti-Drugs Co-ordinator co-operates with the United States Office of National Drug Control Policy; and what agreements the United Kingdom Anti-Drugs Co-ordinator has signed with the United States Office of National Drug Control Policy. [113088]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The UK and US Governments maintain a wide-ranging dialogue on drugs issues. There are regular exchanges of information and expertise on all aspects of anti-drugs work. The relationship is excellent.

General Barry McCaffrey, the Director of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy visited the UK from 24–26 October 1999 for discussions with Ministers—including myself—and officials. During this visit the UK Anti-Drugs Co-ordinator Keith Hellawell met General McCaffrey and held discussions on drug control policies and initiatives. UK and US officials also held bilateral meetings to discuss a number of drug related topics at this time. The following areas were covered:

drug prevention/research programmes;
drug treatment programmes;
drugs and criminal offenders;
drug-related science and technology applications;
trends in drug availability and drug markets;
performance measures in national strategies;
doping in sports.

At the end of this visit, the United Kingdom Anti-Drugs Co-ordinator and the Director of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy issued a Joint

Communiqué noting satisfaction with their discussions and pledging continued co-operation between the two countries on drugs policy.

Civil Service

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many staff have been dismissed from the Civil Service in each of the last five years; and what proportion of the total staff in post this represented in each year. [113608]

Mr. Stringer: The numbers of staff dismissed from the non-industrial Civil Service over the last five years and the proportions of total staff are as follows. The figures cover dismissals and discharges on inefficiency or disciplinary grounds.

Year of staff	*Number of staff dismissed/discharged*	*Proportion (percentage)*
1994–95	880	0.2
1995–96	750	0.2
1996–97	870	0.2
1997–98	650	0.1
1998–99	594	0.1

PRIME MINISTER

World Education Forum

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Prime Minister what objectives Her Majesty's Government will seek to attain at the World Education Forum in Dakar in April. [114210]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the Answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for East Carmarthen and Dinefwr (Mr. Williams) by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development on 1 March 2000, *Official Report*, columns 296–97W.

NORTHERN IRELAND

News Releases

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland for the period 2 May 1997 to 29 February 2000 what was *(a)* the number of occasions on which couriers were used to distribute news releases from his Department and *(b)* the total cost of using couriers to distribute news releases. [113976]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 10 March 2000]:* During the period an external courier was used twice daily, excluding weekends, at a cost of £54,113.07.

Decommissioning Commission

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland for each year since it was established up to the latest available date what has been *(a)* the total cost and *(b)* the cost to United Kingdom funds of the International Commission under General de Chastelain; and under what main headings the sums were paid. [102157]

Mr. Ingram: The Independent International Decommissioning Commission is jointly funded by the British and Irish Governments. The total costs associated with the Commission from September 1997 to December 1999 are as set out.

(a) Total costs—IR£3,153,332.65

(b) Total costs to United Kingdom government—£1,339,571.43

The costs are divided into three main headings.

	IR£
Salaries/subsistence	1,009,310.09
Travel/accommodation	1,570,881.70
Other[1]	573,150.86

[1] Other includes set up costs for the Commission offices as well as on-going running expenses.

It was not possible to give precise costs on an annual basis since the two Governments work to different annual accounting periods.

Departmental Contracts

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list for the financial year 1998–99 *(a)* the number and *(b)* the total value of contracts let by his Department with external consultants and advisers that (i) were put out to competitive tender, (ii) were not put out to competitive tender and (iii) were let on a non-commercial basis, stating in each case the names of the individuals or organisations that have carried out the work. [109268]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 9 February 2000]:* The figures requested are as follows:

(i) Put out to competitive tender

(a) 520

(b) £9,523,828.15

Individuals/organisations

Admiral
Advanced Learning Systems
AMT SYBEX
Anderson Spratt Group Holdings
Ase Ltd.
BDP
BIC Systems Ltd.
Britannia
Capita Management Consultants Ltd.
Carr Communications
Centre for Research in HE
Change Management Consultancy
Colin Stutt Consulting
Community Evaluation (NI)
Community Technical Aid
Coopers & Lybrand
Deirdre Fitzpatrick Association
Deloitte & Touche
DIBB Lupton and Alsop
Donald McGrigor
Dr. Tony Hughes
DTZ Pieda

EPEC
Ernst and Young
FE Development Agency
FPM Consultancy
FPM McCormick
FSL Computer Systems Ltd.
GPA
Grant Thornton
Helm Corporation
Hillen & Jenkinson
ICL
ICL (CFM)
ICL Multivendor Computing
ICL Outsourcing Ltd.
IMI(NI) Ltd.
James Maguire Associates
Johnlaird Public Relations Ltd.
Juran Institute
KPMG
London Economics
M. B. McGrady & Co
Manchester University
Matt Dryman
Mentor Enterprise Development Ltd.
Microsoft Ltd.
Mike Brogden (QUB)
Mitchell Holmes
Moran Management Development
Mr. L. Worral
Northern Bank Factors Ltd.
OCTA
Parity Solutions
Peks (Glass)
Peritas
Price Waterhouse
PriceWaterhouseCoopers
Psychometric Research and Development
Real Statistics
Research & Evaluation Services
Roy McCune Association
RPS Cairns
Saville & Holdsworth
SGS Yarley
The Learning Centre
Trutz Hasse
Ulster Marketing Surveys Ltd.
University of Manchester
Venture International
Wansboroughs

(ii) Not put out to competitive tender

(a) 241

(b) £1,909,749.77

Individuals/organisations

Advanced Learning Systems
Ann Barlow
B. Jenkins
Bird & Bird
Cambridge Policy Consultants
CCTA
CFM ICL and CEICA
CHKS Ltd.
Claire Archbald
Colin Stutt Consultancy
Coopers & Lybrand
Costello Associates
Coutts
D. Shiels
David Lock Associates
David Raynor Services
Deloitte Touche
DFK Consulting
Digital Archiving Services
DMS Consultancy
Donaldsons Chartered Surveyors
Dr. S. Covey
East Antrim Institute
Elite Training Services
Environmental Resources Management
Ethne Harkness
Farming & Rural Conservation Agency
First Consultants Group
Forestry Commission
Gilpin Black
Gordon Dawson
HCS Ltd.
Helm Corporation
Hillen and Jenkinson
Hughes Associates
Ian Brown FCA
ICL Outsourcing
IFF Research Ltd.
Irvine McKay
John Boyle
Karen McIlwrath
Kiang
Knapp & Kendall
KPMG
Liz Comerton
Manpower plc
Matrix Business Service
Mike Ratcliffe (Pensions) Ltd.
MM Consulting
NCC Service Ltd.
Neil Lambe
NI Quality Centre
Northern Ireland Economic Research Centre
Open Learning Centre
Ordnance Survey NI
Peter Bennett
PriceWaterhouseCoopers
Professor D. Conliffe
Professor Paul Connolly
Professor Seamus Dunn
Professor Vani Borooah
Project Planning International
QAS Systems

Research & Evaluation Services
RMB Consulting
Robert Kennedy
S. Dolan
Simon Bridge Associates
Simon Wallace
The Cabling Partnership
The Further Education Development Agency
University of Ulster
Valerie Kelly (ICL)
Venture International
Western Health Board
York University

(iii) Non-commercial

(a) 7

(b) £42,345.65

Individuals/organisations

Central Office of Information
Helm Corporation
Mr. T. Gourley
Realizations International
Transport Research Lab
Wallace Walker
Wellington Group

Murder Rates

Mr. Quentin Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will set out on a comparable basis the number of murders recorded in Northern Ireland in each of the past 30 years. [110564]

Mr. Ingram: The table shows the number of murders recorded in Northern Ireland from 1969 to 1998 (the latest full year available), divided since 1988 into murders attributable to the security situation and other murders.

Offences of murder recorded 1969–98

	Number of murders		
Year	*Security situation*	*Others*	*Total*
1969	—	—	5
1970	—	—	14
1971	—	—	123
1972	—	—	376
1973	—	—	200
1974	—	—	205
1975	—	—	238
1976	—	—	280
1977	—	—	116
1978	—	—	82
1979	—	—	128
1980	—	—	85
1981	—	—	95
1982	—	—	99
1983	—	—	86
1984	—	—	63
1985	—	—	59
1986	—	—	85
1987	—	—	100
1988	84	27	111
1989	57	10	67
1990	65	6	71
1991	89	25	114
1992	81	27	108
1993	82	19	101
1994	61	21	82
1995	8	14	22
1996	14	21	35
1997	20	20	40
1998	54	26	80

Note:
The 1969–87 figures include both security related murders and crime.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Export Credit Guarantees (Bulgaria)

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what his policy is towards extending export credit guarantees to Bulgaria; and if he will make a statement. [113641]

Mr. Caborn: ECGD cover for Bulgaria was withdrawn in 1990 following a default on their external debt obligations. ECGD are currently conducting a review of cover policy in the light of recent improvements in Bulgaria's economic position. ECGD expect to announce the outcome of this review in the next few weeks.

Anglo-Indian Trade

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what efforts he is taking to promote increased trade between Britain and the Indian subcontinent; and if he will make a statement. [113654]

Mr. Caborn: This region is important to the United Kingdom, in both trade and investment terms. British Trade International is conducting an enhanced trade promotion campaign for India, reflecting the market potential and the high priority we attach to increasing trade. During a visit to India in January, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State re-launched the Indo-British Partnership, the vehicle for developing our bilateral trade cooperation. He announced a new scheme—the Global Enterprise Initiative, designed to encourage 200 new business partnerships over the next two years. He also set a target for a 20 per cent. increase in bilateral trade, currently worth over £4 billion.

We also devote resource to facilitate UK trade with the other countries of the region, notably Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.

International Price Comparisons

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to his answer of 8 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 683W, for what reason the first paragraph of his news release dated 11 February stated that the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry today published the Government's first ever international prices survey. [114261]

Mr. Byers: The DTI News Release was issued to the media on 11 February embargoed

not for use until Sunday 13 February

the day of publication of the International Price Comparison report.

Airbus

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on Government support for United Kingdom involvement in Airbus. [114709]

Mr. Byers: I am pleased to announce that the Government have just entered into a partnership with BAe Systems to secure UK participation in the Airbus A3XX project, to design and build the wings for the world's largest passenger jet. The Government will invest £530 million in the programme, with BAe Systems investing over £1 billion in design and development alone. The Government investment will be repaid by BAe Systems paying levies on aircraft sales.

The major investment in the UK's leading manufacturing industry will create 22,000 long term new jobs in the UK, 8,000 in BAe Systems and supply companies, and 14,000 new induced employment. It will safeguard a further 62,000 jobs, 20,000 on current Airbus programmes and 42,000 in induced employment. It will confirm the UK as a global centre of excellence in an important area of high technology engineering. It is a practical demonstration of the commitment of the Government, BAe Systems and the UK aerospace industry to Airbus, which has developed over the last 30 years into a highly successful European industrial collaboration. Airbus secured over half the orders for large passenger aircraft in 1999, and the A3XX will enable them to build on this firm base.

Pakistan (Exports)

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what open individual export licences for export to Pakistan are being processed; and how long each application has taken. [112769]

Dr. Howells: Licences to export arms and other goods whose export is controlled for strategic reasons are issued by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry acting through DTI's Export Control Organisation. All relevant individual licence applications are circulated by the DTI to other government departments with an interest as determined by those departments in line with their policy responsibilities. These include FCO, MOD and DfID.

As of 3 March, a decision had not yet been taken on 30 applications for an Open Individual Export Licence (OIEL) to export to consignees or end-users in Pakistan of goods listed in Part III of Schedule 1 to the Export of Goods (Control) Order 19994 (commonly known as the Military List), or other goods; 28 of these applications were received before 12 October 1999, the date of the coup in Pakistan.

Policy on arms sales to Pakistan was set out in a note from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to the Joint Inquiry on the Government's Annual Reports for 1997 and 1998 on Strategic Export Controls which was published in the Inquiry's report (HC225, page 74). The note stated there has been no change to the Government's policy of considering export licence applications for Pakistan on a case by case basis against the national criteria and those in the EU Code of Conduct on Arms Exports, and in the light of the statement made on 10 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns 687–88W, by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd) following the Pakistani and Indian Nuclear tests.

Applications for export licences can take some time to process, especially if the situation in the country concerned is fluid. The coup in Pakistan created many uncertainties, and, in the circumstances, it is right for the Government to take the time necessary to assess the new regime's behaviour and intentions before deciding on outstanding export licence applications.

Flower Imports

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what is the value of flowers imported into the United Kingdom from EU countries for each year since 1990. [113895]

Mr. Caborn: The information is given in the table.

UK imports of bulbs, tubers etc., and cut flowers from EU countries

£000

	Bulbs, tubers etc.	*Cut flowers and buds*	*Total*
1990	28,206	128,404	156,610
1991	30,948	123,621	154,569
1992	33,018	126,567	159,585
1993	29,424	131,061	160,485
1994	31,221	148,927	180,148
1995	35,703	165,034	200,737
1996	35,490	191,513	227,003
1997	35,335	225,000	260,335
1998	38,918	257,941	296,859
1999	31,215	261,754	292,969

Source:
Overseas Trade Statistics of the United Kingdom, HM Customs and Excise.

Synchrotron

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he will make a decision on the location of the synchrotron. [110002]

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the location of the DIAMOND project. [105262]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 14 February 2000]:* The Government have announced today that the synchrotron will be located at the Rutherford Appleton Laboratory near Didcot, Oxford.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Television Programmes (Home Recording)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment his Department has made of the proposed EU copyright directive in respect of its effect on the legality of home recording of television programmes. [112558]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 7 March 2000]:* I have been asked to reply.

While the draft Directive would allow member states to provide exceptions to copyright permitting private copying of protected material on audio or audiovisual recording media, an amendment proposed by the European Parliament, and taken up by the European Commission in their amended proposal, would require that right owners receive "fair compensation" in exchange for such exceptions. However, as we have always stressed in discussions with the Commission and other member states, we do not consider that a levy or other form of payment would be justified in relation to the UK's limited exception in this area which allows home recording of broadcasts to enable viewing or listening at a more convenient time ("time-shifting"). Although there have been encouraging signs of flexibility from the Commission and others on the precise meaning of "fair compensation", we are still concerned that the overall approach to exceptions in the Directive is too prescriptive, and we are continuing to press strongly for further improvements in this area. We also recognise the potential conflict between exceptions to rights and the use of technical protection measures by right owners, and we are seeking a balanced solution to this issue which would allow users' reasonable "time-shifting" expectations to continue to be met.

Playing Fields

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the loss of playing fields and recreational grounds since May 1997. [110836]

Kate Hoey: The Government are delivering on the manifesto pledge to protect playing fields that schools and communities need because too many have been lost in recent years and grassroots sport has suffered as a result.

Local authorities are required to consult Sport England on all planning applications affecting sports pitches and playing fields. Since it has taken on this role, there has been a significant increase in the number of local authorities consulting Sport England, which is largely due to greater awareness of their obligation. Applications are assessed by Sport England against its published playing fields policy founded on a presumption against loss unless there are exceptional circumstances.

Figures show that Sport England receive around 60 applications a month and are objecting to about one third of these. The majority of those approved either contribute to better overall sporting provision, do not affect sports pitches or are proven to be surplus to school and community requirements.

In addition, the Town and Country Planning (Playing Fields) (England) Direction 1998 was issued on 15 December 1998 and requires planning authorities to refer to the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions planning applications on playing fields which they are minded to approve but where Sport England has objected.

New legislation has also been introduced to require all state schools to seek approval from the Secretary of State for Education and Employment for the sale of playing fields, and to consult the local community and other user groups. Since these measures were put in place, the number of school playing field disposals has dropped from some 40 a month to only three. Approval is given only where funds raised are ploughed back into sport and education, and where remaining playing fields fully meet the needs of the school and community both now and in the future. Around a half of approved disposals that affect school sports pitches have been at closed or closing schools, and some 70 per cent. of the remainder which have been approved will lead to new, improved sports facilities.

Further measures to help communities increase playing fields and green spaces have been launched through the Green Spaces and Sustainable Communities initiative, launched in January this year by the New Opportunities Fund. This will, by 2002, commit a total of £125 million of projects designed to help urban and rural communities throughout the UK, create new, or enhance existing, areas of open space. This will include as a priority the creation of new playing fields and recreational areas, with an emphasis on the needs of areas of multiple deprivation.

My Department is working closely with the Central Council for Physical Recreation and National Playing Fields Association, as well as the DfEE and DETR, in monitoring and evaluating the measures we have put in place, and will consider whether any further action is necessary.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when he will answer the questions from the right hon. Member for Birkenhead on the Millennium Dome tabled on 15 January (ref. 104655) and 26 January (ref. 108039). [110343]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 15 February 2000]:* I refer my right hon. Friend to the replies I gave on 21 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 800W and on 2 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 350W.

Digital Television

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what progress he has made in establishing a Viewers' Panel on the change from analogue to digital broadcasts. [112559]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 7 March 2000]:* My Department is currently in the process of considering the composition and terms of reference for the Viewers' Panel. I would expect the Panel to reflect the interests of viewers from across the UK and to provide advice on the extent of progress towards digital television from the viewer's point of view. I expect the Viewers' Panel to make its first report next autumn.

Renewable Energy

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what proportion of his Department's electricity is generated from renewable sources; and what target his Department has for meeting its electricity needs from renewable sources by 2010. [113053]

Mr. Chris Smith: The Department obtains its electricity from the host REC, London Electricity. The latest figures from London Electricity (1998) indicated that 98 per cent. of its supply comes from predominantly fossil fuel generating sources via the National Grid and 2 per cent. is purchased from local generators. These are mainly local combined heat and power schemes.

As the Department is too small to justify its own generating capacity, any future increase in the percentage of power obtained from renewable sources will rely on London Electricity or an alternative REC changing the make up of its own supply.

Football Grounds (Athletics)

Mr. Faber: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list those London football clubs with which his Department or Sport England has discussed ground sharing with athletics; and if he will make a statement. [113776]

Kate Hoey: My Department has had no discussions with London football clubs about ground sharing with athletics.

Athletics Venues

Mr. Faber: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if DLA Ellerbe Beckett have been engaged by his Department in an advisory role on architectural issues relating to possible athletics venues in London. [113775]

Kate Hoey: Ellerbe Beckett were asked, as a continuation of their contract with UK Sport, to undertake an assessment of the proposals for athletics at Twickenham put forward by architects acting on behalf of the Rugby Football Union.

Wembley Stadium

Mr. Faber: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what amendments to the Lottery Funding Agreement relating to Wembley National Stadium have been discussed by the Football Association and Wembley National Stadium Ltd. with his Department in the context of the proposed £20 million payment. [113780]

Kate Hoey: My officials have discussed with Sport England some of the issues in relation to their role as a Lottery distributer, and have confirmed that it seems wholly reasonable to consider, with legal advice, amendments to particular LFA conditions which are requested by the parties to the original agreement. However, any proposed amendments to the Lottery Funding Agreement (LFA) are matters for Wembley National Stadium Ltd., the Football Association and Sport England to consider.

Trafalgar Square (Pedestrianisation)

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment his Department has made of the impact of the plans for the partial pedestrianisation of Trafalgar Square on the Square's potential to attract tourists and Londoners. [113643]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The partial pedestrianisation of Trafalgar Square is included in Phase 1 of the wider "World Squares for All" master plan. Public consultation on the master plan, for which the new Mayor for London will take over lead responsibility later this year, has shown widespread public support. Further extensive public consultation is currently under way on the detailed proposals for Phase 1, which aim to improve access for pedestrians and provide greater enjoyment of Trafalgar Square and adjoining areas. Londoners and visitors alike will benefit from improved accessibility of the National Gallery.

Museums, Libraries and Archives Council

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport with which body the Chief Executive of the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council has a contract of employment. [114349]

Mr. Chris Smith: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave on 16 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 54W.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Photo Passes

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Chairman of the Administration Committee what restrictions there are on the number of overseas staff an hon. Member can have photo passes for; when these restrictions were imposed; and what plans his Committee has to review them. [114204]

Mrs. Roe: The Administration Committee endorses the recommendations of the House of Commons (Services) Committee in its Report "Access to the Precincts of the House" (HC(1987–88)580), approved by the House on 30 January 1989, and which my Committee has no immediate plans to review. The Services Committee recommended that no hon. Member should be entitled to Palace of Westminster photo passes for more than three individual members of their personal staff. The number of passes issued to temporary research assistants from overseas is limited to 150 in any one calendar year, and to 50 at any one time.

Hon. Members are permitted to have one temporary overseas student only working for them at a time to ensure that as many hon. Members as possible are able to take advantage of this opportunity. This does not affect the right of hon. Members to employ foreign nationals as secretaries, or as research assistants, on a longer term basis.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Urban Regeneration (Rogers Report)

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many of the recommendations contained in the report on urban regeneration by Lord Rogers (1) have been implemented by the Government; [114410]

(2) he will have implemented by the end of 2000. [114411]

Ms Armstrong: The Urban Task Force report "Towards an Urban Renaissance" made more than 100 forward-thinking recommendations about how to revitalise our towns and cities. It formed an excellent contribution to the debate on how to reverse the social, physical and economic decline that many of our urban areas have faced in recent decades.

The Government are looking at the report's recommendations in detail as we prepare for the forthcoming White Paper on Urban policy. But we, and others, have already acted on many of its proposals. We are keen to maintain the momentum created by the report and believe that we should all be working hard to create an urban renaissance now.

It is important to remember that the recommendations of the Task Force are not for DETR or for Government alone. Many recommendations were directed at local authorities, other public sector organisations and service providers. For its part the Government have already:

set up three pilot Urban Regeneration Companies in Liverpool, East Manchester and Sheffield. These will co-ordinate the regeneration of run-down urban neighbourhoods within a wider local strategy developed by the local authority and its partners, listening to local people's needs and ensuring local priorities are met;

set up nine pilot home zones—traffic schemes in residential areas which will give residents more control over traffic movements and ensure that the needs of people, rather than traffic, come first;

published revised PPG12 which advocates simpler and more effective development plans. This helps to fulfil the Urban Task Force's recommendation to streamline the planning process;

piloted eight Private Finance Initiatives for Housing Revenue Account pathfinders, helping fulfil the need to attract private investment in local communities;

taken steps to put Local Transport Plans on a statutory footing ensuring that local authorities take an integrated and strategic approach to planning transport provision in their area;

revised planning guidance for transport to promote civilised towns and cities where the needs of people are given priority.

Last week the Government also published "Revised planning policy guidance on Housing (PPG3)". This introduces a new sustainable approach to planning for housing which addresses a large number of Lord Rogers' recommendations including promoting better designed places and giving priority to recycling previously developed sites and empty properties.

A great deal of work is still being carried out on the full range of Lord Rogers' proposals and the Government's approach to the many issues he raised will be set out in the White Paper. It is not, therefore, possible to say at this time how many of the recommendations will have been addressed by the end of this year.

Fair Rents

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the average weekly difference between rent officer determinations of registered fair rents during the period that the Rent Acts (Maximum Fair Rent) Order 1999 was in force *(a)* before the cap was applied and *(b)* after the cap had been applied (i) in England and (ii) by region. [113338]

Mr. Mullin: Provisional figures for England are given in the table.

Average weekly amount by which the rent officer determination of 'uncapped' fair rent exceeded the 'capped' rent during the period May to December 1999

	Amount by which uncapped fair rent exceeded capped rent	
	(£) per week	*Number of cases*
London		
Barking	5.46	27
Barnet	8.35	638
Bexley	3.40	226
Brent	8.69	810
Bromley	6.17	335
City of London	2.01	62
Camden	25.49	866
Croydon	3.00	105
Ealing	8.16	614
Enfield	2.83	240
Greenwich	4.10	360
Hackney	4.73	688
Hammersmith and Fulham	3.75	831
Haringey	7.77	845
Harrow	2.75	187
Havering	3.93	154
Uxbridge/Hillingdon	4.03	266
Hounslow	7.05	367
Islington	5.70	714
Kensington and Chelsea	13.17	669
Lambeth	11.64	950
Lewisham	3.99	629
Merton	4.93	318
Newham	5.51	797
Redbridge	2.01	197
Richmond	6.41	429
Southwark	2.12	414
Sutton	1.56	105
Tower Hamlets	8.44	439
Waltham	7.45	721
Wandsworth	5.52	1,314
Westminster	7.74	536
London	7.56	15,853
English counties		
Avon	5.78	578
Bedfordshire	2.77	212
Berkshire	4.96	407
Buckinghamshire	5.53	207
Cambridgeshire	10.27	400
Cheshire	4.58	543
Cleveland	1.63	81
Cornwall	7.29	13
Cumbria	2.25	91
Derbyshire	2.59	120
Devon	3.83	179
Dorset	4.08	226
Durham	3.71	75
East Sussex	5.83	169
Essex	5.59	378
Gloucestershire	10.50	308
Greater Manchester	3.06	1,570
Hampshire	6.65	724
Hereford and Worcestershire	2.97	204
Hertfordshire	6.28	568
Humberside	3.34	273
Isle of Wight	7.62	13
Kent	4.35	618
Lancashire	2.12	271
Leicestershire	2.28	485
Lincolnshire	2.12	107
Merseyside	4.35	2,434
Norfolk	6.26	522
Northumberland	1.79	143
Northamptonshire	4.28	212
North Yorkshire	3.37	376
Nottingham	3.00	246
Oxfordshire	13.32	193

Average weekly amount by which the rent officer determination of 'uncapped' fair rent exceeded the 'capped' rent during the period May to December 1999

	Amount by which uncapped fair rent exceeded capped rent (£) per week	Number of cases
Shrewsbury	3.89	30
Somerset	7.34	93
South Yorkshire	1.85	256
Staffordshire	4.32	100
Suffolk	2.97	243
Surrey	5.00	534
Tyne and Wear	2.49	850
Warwickshire	3.41	533
West Midlands	2.38	532
West Sussex	3.90	441
West Yorkshire	2.23	964
Wiltshire	5.87	289
English regions		
London	7.56	15,853
North East	2.42	1,149
North West and Merseyside	3.80	4,909
Yorkshire and Humberside	2.57	1,869
East Midlands	2.81	1,170
West Midlands	3.03	1,399
Eastern	6.19	2,323
South East	5.66	3,306
South West	6.32	1,686
England	5.86	33,664

Note:

That the unavailability of data from February to April 1999 is because of processing problems directly associated with the introduction of the Order. These problems continued to affect some rent officer areas after April 1999. Consequently the number of cases for each region may be an under-estimate of the total number of fair rent cases determined by the rent officer in that region during the period May to December.

Source:

Provisional rent officer determinations for May-December 1999

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the average weekly registered fair rent paid by regulated private tenants during the period that the Rent Acts (Maximum Fair Rent) Order 1999 was in force in *(a)* England and *(b)* by regions where (i) the rent was capped under the Order and (ii) the rent was not capped under the Order. [113337]

Mr. Mullin: Provisional figures for England are given in the table.

Average weekly registered fair rent paid by regulated private tenants during May-December 1999 where the rent was (i) capped and (ii) not capped under the Order

	Rent capped		Rent not capped	
	£ per week	Number of cases	£ per week	Number of cases
London				
Barking	53.56	27	60.77	4
Barnet	79.12	638	78.45	88
Bexley	58.74	226	63.75	28
Brent	61.62	810	59.84	60
Bromley	71.73	335	85.23	27
City of London	67.47	62	n/a	0
Camden	77.67	866	104.11	80
Croydon	77.36	105	80.86	155
Ealing	64.60	614	76.86	134
Enfield	60.59	240	61.54	110
Greenwich	67.66	360	79.02	7
Hackney	58.62	688	65.47	70
Hammersmith and Fulham	68.23	831	77.30	52
Haringey	65.63	845	72.49	70
Harrow	70.46	187	75.43	37
Havering	63.23	154	80.77	6
Uxbridge/Hillingdon	67.21	266	74.95	27
Hounslow	74.65	367	81.20	14
Islington	66.30	714	84.55	57
Kensington and Chelsea	71.06	669	141.61	239
Lambeth	59.59	950	58.94	101
Lewisham	53.72	629	56.61	75
Merton	80.08	318	80.79	34
Newham	56.30	797	51.24	43
Redbridge	50.06	197	57.27	66
Richmond	75.42	429	84.94	23
Southwark	60.81	414	66.91	123
Sutton	63.34	105	67.62	73
Tower Hamlets	67.21	439	43.00	10
Waltham	50.53	721	52.84	121
Wandsworth	76.32	1,314	88.85	37
Westminster	77.02	536	127.78	82
London	66.56	15,853	81.21	2,053
English counties				
Avon	66.22	578	71.75	80
Bedfordshire	54.81	212	54.98	65
Berkshire	72.64	407	82.70	82
Buckinghamshire	57.20	207	61.47	29
Cambridgeshire	52.59	400	54.68	80
Cheshire	37.10	543	50.37	87
Cleveland	53.52	81	44.78	133
Cornwall	48.57	13	60.04	168
Cumbria	40.19	91	40.65	136
Derbyshire	43.16	120	44.85	424
Devon	60.83	179	64.36	260
Dorset	64.01	226	64.89	379
Durham	46.53	75	43.80	111
East Sussex	72.09	169	75.62	386
Essex	61.69	378	60.18	631
Gloucestershire	57.94	308	76.51	80
Greater Manchester	42.81	1,570	40.79	432
Hampshire	64.88	724	71.32	360
Hereford and Worcestershire	51.36	204	51.59	167
Hertfordshire	76.10	568	73.36	181
Humberside	47.46	273	44.73	357
Isle of Wight	50.83	13	58.19	63
Kent	71.22	618	68.22	557
Lancashire	45.50	271	46.99	115
Leicestershire	47.93	485	51.73	292
Lincolnshire	45.44	107	45.15	159
Merseyside	44.60	2,434	46.52	754
Norfolk	49.71	522	52.86	227
Northumberland	46.01	143	43.35	163
Northamptonshire	53.52	212	50.59	58
North Yorkshire	53.81	376	56.45	161
Nottingham	48.82	246	52.64	546
Oxfordshire	74.28	193	86.69	55
Shropshire	50.49	30	50.65	59
Somerset	56.66	93	61.99	80
South Yorkshire	40.65	256	38.94	628
Staffordshire	41.72	100	43.11	391
Suffolk	49.59	243	51.15	200
Surrey	83.38	534	96.17	72
Tyne and Wear	43.22	850	39.55	255
Warwickshire	49.70	533	51.25	76
West Midlands	46.09	532	49.13	1,073
West Sussex	69.40	441	80.17	191
West Yorkshire	42.82	964	47.16	663
Wiltshire	64.64	289	72.70	46
English regions				
London	66.56	15,853	81.21	2,053
North East	44.51	1,149	42.25	662
North West and Merseyside	43.17	4,909	44.63	1,524

Average weekly registered fair rent paid by regulated private tenants during May-December 1999 where the rent was (i) capped and (ii) not capped under the Order

	Rent capped		Rent not capped	
	£ per week	Number of cases	£ per week	Number of cases
Yorkshire and Humberside	45.41	1,869	44.66	1,809
East Midlands	48.41	1,170	49.34	1,479
West Midlands	48.02	1,399	48.17	1,766
Eastern	59.06	2,323	58.83	1,384
South East	70.99	3,306	73.59	1,795
South West	62.91	1,686	65.49	1,093
England	59.55	33,664	57.99	13,565

Note:

The unavailability of data from February to April 1999 is because of processing problems directly associated with the introduction of the Order. These problems continued to affect some rent officer areas after April 1999. Consequently the number of cases for each region may be an under-estimate of the total number of fair rent cases determined by the rent officer in that region during the period May to December.

Source:

Provisional rent officer determinations for May-December 1999.

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the average weekly registered fair rent paid by regulated private tenants *(a)* in England and *(b)* by each region in (i) 1994–95, (ii) 1995–96, (iii) 1996–97, (iv) 1997–98 and (v) 1998–99. [113336]

Mr. Mullin: The available figures for England are given in the table.

Average weekly registered fair rent paid by regulated private tenants in England, 1994–95 to 1998–99

	1994–95	1995–96	1996–97	1997–98	1998–99
London					
Barking and Dagenham					
£	41.40	43.36	47.47	51.79	54.11
Number of cases	8	69	102	102	93
Barnet					
£	55.64	59.97	71.74	73.52	81.49
Number of cases	797	472	326	758	613
Bexley					
£	32.99	54.23	54.90	54.43	61.03
Number of cases	411	1,321	959	298	261
Brent					
£	40.09	42.71	49.39	54.96	61.54
Number of cases	871	460	337	718	470
Bromley					
£	49.52	53.59	57.49	63.52	69.44
Number of cases	656	702	592	635	523
City					
£	—	60.58	134.62	—	—
Number of cases	—	2	1	—	—
Camden					
£	64.88	76.11	82.48	89.57	101.58
Number of cases	1,252	941	624	897	768
Croydon					
£	54.86	62.72	66.98	72.82	74.73
Number of cases	847	895	699	712	558
Ealing					
£	53.19	54.03	60.85	65.78	74.07
Number of cases	1,028	734	521	788	572
Enfield					
£	43.34	47.57	50.21	53.93	58.76
Number of cases	831	548	683	515	582
Greenwich					
£	46.42	56.12	56.96	61.01	66.63
Number of cases	407	1,571	577	500	218
Hackney					
£	42.34	49.63	50.85	56.45	59.34
Number of cases	640	474	529	491	362
Hammersmith and Fulham					
£	54.87	57.57	63.96	69.70	79.93
Number of cases	1,202	1,207	991	953	799
Haringey					
£	48.03	55.23	57.12	63.09	69.07
Number of cases	673	806	520	514	565
Harrow					
£	48.16	52.05	60.90	64.05	77.69
Number of cases	451	623	364	496	180
Havering					
£	53.61	46.97	50.33	57.15	59.53
Number of cases	230	259	260	317	239
Hillingdon					
£	47.66	53.28	58.06	65.39	66.92
Number of cases	658	543	437	494	554
Hounslow					
£	49.67	54.44	60.28	66.22	73.06
Number of cases	319	437	388	284	273
Islington					
£	47.46	54.16	59.06	65.10	70.90
Number of cases	491	104	325	268	340
Kensington and Chelsea					
£	74.40	93.64	91.31	97.77	120.60
Number of cases	1,234	796	1,116	715	702
Kingston					
£	52.49	58.55	64.66	—	—
Number of cases	411	494	254	—	—

BEST COP

Average weekly registered fair rent paid by regulated private tenants in England, 1994–95 to 1998–99

	1994–95	1995–96	1996–97	1997–98	1998–99
Lambeth					
£	46.92	49.13	54.76	57.58	64.09
Number of cases	1,192	887	1,036	862	819
Lewisham					
£	40.04	47.97	48.61	51.13	56.84
Number of cases	1,051	628	447	639	588
Merton					
£	51.10	60.13	65.16	69.65	75.81
Number of cases	564	529	293	468	424
Newham					
£	32.19	34.68	39.74	41.76	46.98
Number of cases	900	926	774	741	625
Redbridge					
£	38.92	40.89	44.32	46.41	50.36
Number of cases	418	437	464	319	323
Richmond on Thames					
£	57.34	63.47	70.55	75.36	84.35
Number of cases	659	899	731	1,112	774
Southwark					
£	49.30	47.16	51.89	55.13	58.63
Number of cases	997	923	660	786	614
Sutton					
£	45.43	51.00	55.02	61.16	63.54
Number of cases	305	380	267	310	213
Tower Hamlets					
£	41.96	45.70	47.31	49.76	55.90
Number of cases	210	178	259	111	244
Waltham Forest					
£	34.90	36.11	39.96	42.90	46.62
Number of cases	1,145	1,355	1,173	1,155	973
Wandsworth					
£	54.01	55.60	64.49	68.51	77.56
Number of cases	1,517	1,314	1,120	1,257	902
Westminster					
£	90.50	92.72	106.69	109.09	112.32
Number of cases	2,068	2,260	1,820	1,740	1,683
London					
£	53.06	57.96	63.38	67.75	74.87
Number of cases	24,443	24,174	19,649	19,955	16,854
English counties					
Avon					
£	47.37	53.80	56.92	61.74	65.46
Number of cases	730	736	549	568	542
Bedfordshire					
£	37.08	36.44	46.22	46.94	51.99
Number of cases	586	351	326	351	158
Berkshire					
£	51.19	58.24	63.83	70.31	74.77
Number of cases	801	970	611	689	485
Buckinghamshire					
£	40.54	46.90	50.79	55.33	63.18
Number of cases	455	586	351	515	317
Cambridgeshire					
£	41.80	41.32	47.02	48.06	61.42
Number of cases	599	522	510	338	339
Cheshire					
£	25.25	27.45	32.48	36.02	42.40
Number of cases	871	1,184	805	959	661
Cleveland					
£	31.80	35.54	38.99	39.78	42.00
Number of cases	444	370	249	545	189
Cornwall					
£	53.83	55.71	56.75	58.83	59.89
Number of cases	554	466	439	326	338
Cumbria					
£	32.13	30.85	33.18	36.74	38.44
Number of cases	540	673	526	573	452
Derbyshire					
£	34.79	35.06	39.24	40.73	43.71
Number of cases	2,063	1,888	1,481	1,474	1,1900
Devon					
£	48.00	50.95	54.58	56.67	59.94
Number of cases	1,348	874	773	945	688
Dorset					
£	46.65	50.89	54.01	59.13	63.14
Number of cases	1,398	1,060	1,212	966	819
Durham					
£	31.49	32.79	35.97	38.61	42.62
Number of cases	347	338	276	265	183 71.56
East Sussex					
£	58.42	63.59	65.58	69.79	
Number of cases	2,205	2,126	1,636	1,694	1,251
Essex					
£	45.00	48.49	53.25	55.66	59.37
Number of cases	2,207	2,028	1,812	1,708	1,579
Gloucestershire					
£	46.37	49.26	54.59	58.10	62.26
Number of cases	534	458	389	454	354

AVAILABLE

Average weekly registered fair rent paid by regulated private tenants in England, 1994–95 to 1998–99

	1994–95	1995–96	1996–97	1997–98	1998–99
Greater Manchester					
£	29.19	29.95	34.73	36.22	39.48
Number of cases	3,444	3,338	2,340	2,534	2,067
Hampshire					
£	49.25	53.24	59.26	62.21	65.73
Number of cases	2,164	1,717	878	1,629	1,672
Hereford and Worcester					
£	39.30	40.10	44.21	47.14	49.52
Number of cases	780	515	416	616	539
Hertfordshire					
£	49.05	59.71	60.84	67.16	70.67
Number of cases	1,402	1,060	1,076	863	793
Humberside					
£	34.71	37.22	39.10	41.29	42.85
Number of cases	1,862	1,737	1,217	1,336	964
Isle of Wight					
£	43.60	47.77	49.86	55.56	54.61
Number of cases	211	62	61	135	95
Kent					
£	53.04	57.24	60.75	64.18	68.12
Number of cases	3,074	2,506	2,490	2,306	1,942
Lancashire					
£	32.25	33.96	37.37	40.61	42.94
Number of cases	965	840	664	632	536
Leicestershire					
£	36.56	39.94	42.96	45.72	47.51
Number of cases	1,569	1,227	1,210	1,002	973
Lincolnshire					
£	33.85	36.67	38.31	41.58	42.16
Number of cases	581	512	432	467	403
Merseyside					
£	25.76	26.42	33.90	38.35	42.56
Number of cases	5,239	4,477	3,962	3,060	2,916
Norfolk					
£	39.82	41.94	44.18	47.46	49.68
Number of cases	1,223	1,168	957	1,057	877
Northumberland					
£	31.19	32.77	37.76	38.93	42.84
Number of cases	530	552	370	592	384
Northampton					
£	37.11	40.40	43.04	45.54	50.02
Number of cases	440	301	350	264	281
North Yorkshire					
£	41.49	42.07	46.96	50.84	53.53
Number of cases	1,056	946	860	824	754
Nottinghamshire					
£	40.19	42.80	46.76	48.63	50.83
Number of cases	1,869	1,623	1,631	1,415	1,206
Oxfordshire					
£	59.02	60.43	68.97	74.49	81.70
Number of cases	588	552	524	565	443
Shropshire					
£	—	44.99	45.56	46.96	50.39
Number of cases	—	49	253	365	266
Somerset					
£	44.25	45.60	51.90	53.82	59.17
Number of cases	570	340	197	373	288
South Yorkshire					
£	30.07	31.13	33.10	34.94	37.06
Number of cases	2,843	1,697	1,982	1,985	1,674
Staffordshire					
£	31.15	34.14	38.83	39.06	41.05
Number of cases	1,216	1,065	1,040	866	870
Suffolk					
£	37.13	39.34	43.07	44.58	48.70
Number of cases	1,200	1,039	970	877	925
Surrey					
£	62.54	67.23	74.13	82.34	87.30
Number of cases	1,596	1,475	1,429	1,083	1,099
Tyne and Wear					
£	29.72	31.08	35.24	37.06	40.41
Number of cases	1,930	1,762	1,551	1,588	1,166
Warwickshire					
£	33.44	36.73	43.16	45.58	48.62
Number of cases	664	423	134	636	449
West Midlands					
£	37.04	37.88	42.14	45.70	47.23
Number of cases	4,716	3,593	2,804	3,220	2,587
West Sussex					
£	54.46	61.94	64.57	70.42	74.32
Number of cases	1,232	935	826	757	639
West Yorkshire					
£	33.56	36.12	38.05	40.84	43.16
Number of cases	3,354	2,740	2,571	2,306	2,018
Wiltshire					
£	49.40	49.55	54.83	57.55	63.25
Number of cases	516	444	452	411	158
English regions					
London					
£	53.06	57.96	63.38	67.75	74.87
Number of cases	24,443	24,174	19,649	19,955	16,854

Average weekly registered fair rent paid by regulated private tenants in England, 1994–95 to 1998–99

	1994–95	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*
North East					
£	30.43	32.13	36.09	38.07	41.26
Number of cases	3,251	3,022	2,446	2,990	1,922
North West and Merseyside					
£	27.67	28.54	34.23	37.43	41.33
Number of cases	11,059	10,512	8,297	7,758	6,632
Yorkshire and Humberside					
£	33.62	35.99	37.92	40.40	42.66
Number of cases	9,115	7,120	6,630	6,451	5,410
East Midlands					
£	25.83	26.91	31.32	31.60	34.19
Number of cases	6,522	5,551	5,104	4,622	4,053
West Midlands					
£	35.98	37.35	41.80	44.92	46.66
Number of cases	7,376	5,645	4,647	5,703	4,711
Eastern					
£	42.69	46.34	50.44	52.95	57.25
Number of cases	7,217	6,168	5,651	5,194	4,671
South East					
£	54.25	59.24	64.26	67.92	72.11
Number of cases	12,326	10,929	8,806	9,376	7,943
South West					
£	47.75	51.19	54.86	58.13	62.05
Number of cases	5,650	4,378	4,011	4,043	3,187
England					
£	43.27	46.98	51.38	54.86	59.48
Number of cases	86,959	77,499	65,241	66,089	55,383

Source:

Rent Officer Statistics

Landfill

Mr. Bill O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to commission research into the potential health effects of landfill sites; and if he will make a statement. [113288]

Mr. Mullin: Last year the Government commissioned the Small Area Health Statistics Unit (SAHSU) at Imperial College to carry out a national study to determine whether there is any pattern of adverse health effects around landfill sites. The results are expected later this year. A further programme of research was announced last year. I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given on 7 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 487W.

Lord Levy

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on which dates Lord Levy has had meetings with *(a)* Ministers and *(b)* senior officials in his Department since 1 May 1997, giving in each case the purpose of the meetings; and if he will make a statement. [113501]

Mr. Mullin *[holding answer 7 March 2000]:* None.

Thames Gateway Regeneration Area

Mr. Paul Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list (1) the size of sites designated as previously developed vacant land sites within the three relevant Government regions in the Thames Gateway Regeneration area; [114069]

(2) the *(a)* size and *(b)* number of potential dwellings on sites designated as previously developed land which are allocated in a local plan (i) for any use and (ii) as having planning permission for housing that exist in each of the Government regions in the Thames Gateway Regeneration area; [114070]

(3) the size of sites designated as previously developed land which *(a)* have redevelopment potential, but have no planning allocation or permission and *(b)* require some form of remediation work within the relevant Government regions in the Thames Gateway Regeneration area. [114071]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Thames Gateway area is made up of parts of a number of boroughs and districts within the London, South East and East of England Government Office regions. The information is not therefore available in either the form or detail requested. However, the table provides an extract from the Supplementary Table on the National Land Use Database website (www.nlud.org.uk). It shows, for the core districts in the existing, non-extended Thames Gateway area, total amounts of previously developed vacant land, derelict land and land occupied by vacant buildings reported by each local authority. The portions allocated for housing use in the local plan or with planning permission for housing area are also shown. Not all of this land will be available for redevelopment. The table additionally shows amounts of land currently in use with allocation for redevelopment for any use or with planning permission for housing. The figures refer to the time of the survey in 1998, and have not been adjusted for some cases where the coverage was partial (as indicated by the footnotes). The estimates are a "snapshot" for 1998 and take no account of future supply of previously developed land.

Previously developed land that is unused or may be available for redevelopment[1] by land type and Planning Authority: England 1998

hectares

Planning Authority[2]	*Previously developed vacant land* Area	*of which proposed for housing*	*Derelict land and buildings* Area	*of which proposed for housing*	*Land occupied by vacant buildings* Area	*of which proposed for housing*	*Land currently in use with planning allocation for any use or planning permission for housing* Area	*of which proposed for housing*
Thames Gateway								
Thurrock UA	18	7	206	[6]84	—	[6]—	10	10
Barking and Dagenham	2	1	19	—	[6]5	—	7	—
Bexley	10	10	10	—	3	3	8	7
Greenwich	46	1	155	53	4	—	30	14
Havering	40	[6]—	34	[6]—	1	[6]—	13	1
Newham	95	[4]29	32	4	9	5	342	7
Dartford	271	9	76	—	69	29	297	5
Gravesham	4	[7]—	8	5	2	1	3	2
Swale	8	4	46	[4]1	6	[4]2	61	59
The Medway Towns UA	1	1	77	4	5	1	996	34

[1] Ungrossed totals as reported by the authority. Comprises previously developed vacant and derelict land: vacant buildings (excluding single dwellings except where they could be developed into 10 or more dwellings); land or buildings currently in use, which are allocated in the local plan for any developed use, have planning permission for housing or with known potential for redevelopment.
[2] Local authority, district or unitary authority.
[3] Completion is less than 85 per cent.
[4] Figures have been revised against the May 1999 Supplementary Table because of duplicate sites; amendments made by the Local Authority; data resubmitted by the Local Authority after the May 1999 Supplementary Table; changes to assumptions used by the DETR to aggregate data.
[5] Partial returns.
[6] Nil or less than half the final digit shown.
[7] Completion figures have not been provided.

Planning Policy

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what guidance he is issuing to local planning authorities about the balance between *(a)* industrial and commercial development and *(b)* housing on brownfield sites. [114154]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Our newly published planning policy guidance for housing, PPG3, requires authorities to review their land allocations for employment and other uses to see whether they may be better used for housing.

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what guidance he is issuing to local planning authorities about height restrictions on new housing build in *(a)* urban, *(b)* suburban and *(c)* rural areas. [114153]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Planning Policy Guidance note 3, "Housing", requires local planning authorities, when considering design and layout to have regard not just to any immediate neighbouring buildings but the townscape and landscape of the wider locality. They are expected to adopt policies which create places and spaces with the needs of people in mind, which are attractive, have their own distinctive identity but respect and enhance local character.

The Government do not intend that PPG3's requirement to make more efficient use of land for housing should result in a return to 1960s-style high rise residential development.

Household Waste

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will issue guidance to local authorities asking them to collect household waste more frequently than once a fortnight. [113686]

Mr. Mullin: Under section 45 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990, waste collection authorities have a duty to collect household refuse. How this duty is discharged is a matter for local decision.

Gatwick Airport

Sir Paul Beresford: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he has received from BAA the results of their feasibility study into a second main runway at Gatwick; and if he will make a statement. [114346]

Mr. Mullin: BAA did not complete their study, which the previous Administration had asked them to undertake, of less environmentally damaging runway options, such as a close parallel runway at Gatwick. We announced on 19 January 1998, *Official Report*, column 37, that we had asked BAA to put this work on hold so that we could review the issue in the light of the integrated transport White Paper.

The then Minister of Transport, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hamilton, North and Bellshill (Dr. Reid), announced on 11 March 1999, *Official Report*, columns 360–61, a study of airport issues in the south-east and east of England. This study will include consideration of runway capacity.

Sir Paul Beresford: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the status of the agreement between the then Government and Crawley Borough Council which prohibits the building of a second runway at Gatwick Airport until 2019. [114345]

Mr. Mullin: The agreement the hon. Member refers to is between the local authority, West Sussex County Council, and the airport owners, the then British Airports

Authority. It was agreed in August 1979, under the terms of section 52 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1970.

Water Industry Safety

Liz Blackman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what account Ofwat took of minimum staffing levels required in respect of safety when setting its revised price controls for the water industry; and if he will make a statement. [114131]

Mr. Mullin: The Director General of Water Services has a statutory duty to ensure that companies can finance the proper carrying out of their functions. These functions include obligations enforced by the Health and Safety Executive. The handling of the price review is a matter for the Director. His report "Final Determinations: Future water and sewerage charges 2000–05" includes a full account of the price review process.

Heathland Habitats (Dorset)

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 8 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 670W, if he will place in the Library a copy of the guidance issued by English Nature to its local teams in September 1999. [114321]

Mr. Mullin: A copy of the Guidance will be placed in the Library within the next ten days.

Roads (Nottinghamshire)

Mr. Kenneth Clarke: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress has been made with the studies of improvements to the A453 between Kegworth and Clifton; when the results will be published; and if he will make a statement on the future of road links between the M1 motorway and the city of Nottingham. [114323]

Mr. Hill: The current study of the A453 corridor is part of the national programme of multi-modal studies to consider movements by all modes within specific corridors. In the East Midlands, consultants have been appointed for two studies (one on the A453 and the second on the M1 corridor, including routes into Kegworth). Work began in December 1999. The conclusions of both studies will be presented to the East Midlands Regional Planning Forum next year. The Secretary of State will then consider the Planning Forum's recommendations in the light of the studies' results.

The A453 is one of the three trunk road links between the M1 and the City of Nottingham. All fall within the remit of the studies. I cannot anticipate the study outcomes but, in accordance with the Government's integrated transport policies, they will relate to transport by all modes.

Bristol Road, Stonehouse

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will take steps in conjunction with the British Railways Board and the Shadow Strategic Rail Authority to ensure that the land at Bristol Road, Stonehouse, is withdrawn from the next round of land sales. [112991]

Mr. Hill: The property at Stonehouse was included in the 60-day minimum Notice of Intention to market the site that was issued on 10 November 1999. BRB/sSRA will, in accordance with the marketing process announced by the Department in September 1999, take account of the representations made in response to that Notice when deciding how to sell the site.

Fishing Vessels

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many fishing vessels were prohibited from putting to sea following safety inspections by officials of the Maritime and Coastguard Agency in each of the past five years; and if he will make a statement. [112766]

Mr. Hill: The numbers of fishing vessels prohibited from putting to sea following safety inspections by officials of the Maritime and Coastguard Agency in each of the past five years are as follows:

Year	*Number*
1994–95	26
1995–96	48
1996–97	55
1997–98	46
1998–99	49

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the range of penalties that can be imposed on the owners of fishing vessels for *(a)* the failure to maintain vessels in a seaworthy condition and *(b)* neglect of safety equipment; and if he will make a statement. [112767]

Mr. Hill: Owners of fishing vessels can be prosecuted for offences under the Merchant Shipping Act 1995.

The owner of a dangerously unsafe fishing vessel can be fined a maximum of £50,000 by magistrates and face an unlimited fine and/or two years in prison if convicted in the Crown court.

The owner of a fishing vessel is also liable for the unsafe operation of the vessel and faces the same penalties.

In addition the owner of a fishing vessel faces a maximum fine of £5,000 before magistrates and an unlimited fine in the Crown court if his vessel contravenes any of the fishing vessel construction rules which include maintaining rules on safety equipment.

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many officials are employed by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency to carry out inspections of fishing vessels in relation to *(a)* their seaworthiness and *(b)* the adequacy and maintenance of their safety equipment; and if he will make a statement. [112768]

Mr. Hill: The Maritime and Coastguard Agency currently employs 16 marine surveyors to carry out safety inspections of fishing vessels. A further 41 coastguard officers are qualified to carry out basic safety checks on the under 12 metre fleet, and a further 17 are undergoing or awaiting training.

Public Transport Personnel (Violent Attacks)

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action his Department is taking to combat violence against public transport personnel. [112606]

Mr. Meacher: I am very concerned about all work-related violence. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has published a range of guidance on violence at work and I have asked the Health and Safety Commission (HSC) to consider options for further action which would make a significant impact on preventing assaults, verbal threats and abuse in the workplace, particularly for higher-risk occupations.

In relation to the public transport sector, my Department has published guidance on how bus operators can reduce the risk of violence on their bus services, including the fitting of alarms and two-way radios on vehicles. The guidance has been widely circulated and well received throughout the industry.

The HSC's Railway Industry Advisory Committee (RIAC) held a conference on violence at work in the railway sector on 8 July 1999. As a result, RIAC are developing a national co-ordinated plan in partnership with industry to reduce assaults.

More generally, our programme of measures to improve personal security in the public transport system—including, for example, the Secure Stations Scheme launched in 1998—emphasises the need for transport operators to improve the personal security of both staff and passengers.

Housing Spending

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the Government's total spending on housing in each of the years *(a)* 1993–94, *(b)* 1994–95, *(c)* 1995–96, *(d)* 1996–97, *(e)* 1997–98 and *(f)* 1998–99; and what it will be in *(x)* 1999–2000 and *(y)* 2000–01. [114416]

Mr. Mullin: The information requested is as follows:

£ million

Year	*Amount*
1993–94	7,742.0
1994–95	7,166.3
1995–96	6,631.9
1996–97	5,418.5
1997–98	5,814.4
1998–99	5,577.8
1999–2000	5,898.3
2000–01	6,579.4

Housebuilding Statistics

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will publish the housebuilding figures announced on 7 March broken down by county. [114413]

Mr. Raynsford: On 20 March we will be publishing for consultation full details of proposed changes to the Regional Planning Guidance for the South-East. The consultation will include an illustrative distribution of housing provision to county level.

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many new *(a)* private houses and *(b)* social houses have been built in each of the years (i) 1993–94, (ii) 1994–95, (iii) 1995–96, (iv) 1996–97, (v) 1997–98 and (vi) 1998–99; and how many are planned for (x) 1999–2000 and (y) 2000–01. [114394]

Mr. Raynsford: The number of permanent dwellings completed in England are as follows:

Calendar year	*Private houses*	*Social houses*
1993	116,700	31,200
1994	122,700	32,000
1995	125,500	31,700
1996	121,600	27,600
1997	128,000	21,200
1998	121,200	20,200
1999 (provisional)	122,300	17,600

Information on the numbers of houses built in 1999–2000 or expected to be built in 2000–01 is not available.

South East England Development Agency

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what environmental objectives have been set for SEEDA. [114397]

Ms Armstrong: The Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) have a statutory duty to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development in the UK, where it is relevant to their areas to do so.

The RDAs, including SEEDA, presented their regional strategies to Ministers on 26 October last year. SEEDA's strategy, "Building a World Class Region", contains a chapter on "World Class Environment". This chapter sets out SEEDA's region-wide programme for addressing environmental needs, and contains a set of strategic priorities and objectives.

A copy of SEEDA's strategy is available in the Library of the House.

School Places (West Sussex)

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what undertakings he has received from the Department of Education and Employment regarding the provision of additional schools and school places over the next 15 years to cater for the increased housing requirement in West Sussex. [114407]

Mr. Raynsford: We will be consulting SERPLAN and others on the distribution of housing within the region, including for West Sussex, during the forthcoming consultation period. When regional planning guidance for the south-east is finalised later this year it will provide a planning framework which will assist decisions about the

provision of supporting infrastructure, including the provision of additional schools and school places which are the responsibility of the local education authority. Where an authority can demonstrate growth in the need for school places, it may apply for capital funding.

Housing Green Paper

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to publish his housing green paper. [114427]

Mr. Mullin: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Planning on 10 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 832W.

Official Visits Abroad

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list his official visits abroad since May 1997; and what is their total cost. [114383]

Ms Armstrong: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister on 17 June 1999, *Official Report*, column 196W. The Government will publish similar information on ministerial visits for the period 1 April 1999 to 31 March 2000 later this year.

Council House Sales

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many council house sales have been completed in each of the last 20 years. [114395]

Mr. Mullin: The available information is in the table.

Number of local authority and New Town dwellings sold: England[1]

Year	*Total sales*
1979–80	55,400
1980–81	71,500
1981–82	132,100
1982–83	185,600
1983–84	126,000
1984–85	95,300
1985–86	89,500
1986–87	88,800
1987–88	116,200
1988–89	161,000
1989–90	168,500
1990–91	127,800
1991–92	70,900
1992–93	69,600
1993–94	84,200
1994–95	87,400
1995–96	79,100
1996–97	57,700
1997–98	77,800
1998–99	117,800

[1] Includes all sales and transfers, but excludes those from local authorities to Housing Action Trusts and from New Towns to local authorities.

Source:

DETR Housing Activity P1(B) (quarterly) and Housing Investment Programme (annual) returns.

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many council houses he estimates will have been sold to tenants in the current financial year. [114396]

Mr. Mullin: Latest information on sales show that nearly 24,000 dwellings were sold into owner-occupation in England during the first six months of 1999–2000. It is not possible to predict accurately how many outstanding applications will be completed in the second half of the year.

Habitation Density

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what density of habitation for housebuilding will result for each region of England from his Policy Statement in response to the Crow report on 7 March. [114405]

Mr. Raynsford: More than half of all new housing in England is built at less than 20 dwellings per hectare. Planning Policy Guidance note 3, "Housing", requires local authorities to avoid such developments which make inefficient use of land and encourages more efficient use of land by developing new housing at 30 to 50 dwellings net per hectare net. PPG3 applies to all planning authorities in England.

Development Statistics

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what balance of brownfield and greenfield development he expects to take place in each of the English regions in the next 15 years as a result of his statement on 7 March. [114412]

Mr. Raynsford: The national target is that by 2008, 60 per cent. of additional housing should be provided on previously developed land or through conversions of existing buildings. Each region should propose, as part of its draft regional planning guidance, its own target to contribute to this national figure. Most have now done so. However, apart from in the south-east and East Anglia, these proposed targets have not yet been tested through the public examination process. My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister announced on 7 March that the target for the south-east region outside of London should be 60 per cent. London already achieves over 80 per cent. of residential development on recycled land or through conversions, and we expect that to continue. Announcement on the RPG for East Anglia will be made on 20 March.

Housebuilding (South-east)

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions to what extent the housebuilding requirement for the south-east of England as set out in his statement on 7 March will differ from that recommended by SERPLAN. [114404]

Mr. Raynsford: Allowing for housing completions between 1991 and 1996, SERPLAN proposed a "baseline provision" of 660,000, with a higher "indicative range" to be provided through the structure plan process of 696,000 to 718,000 additional dwellings in the region outside of London between 1996 and 2016. In London the provision for the same period was 462,000 to 512,000 dwellings, allowing for completions. The Government's proposal

would be for an annual rate of provision of 43,000 dwellings outside of London and 23,000 within London. That would amount to 860,000 and 460,000 respectively for the same period. However, my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister made clear in his announcement on 7 March that we do not believe in fixed 20-year housing requirements. Instead, there will be a more flexible approach with the level of housing provision for the region adjusted in the light of monitoring. Such reviews will take place at least every five years.

Affordable Housing (South-east)

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what his definition is of affordable housing as applied to the south-east region. [114426]

Mr. Raynsford: For the purposes of planning policy, affordable housing is defined in Circular 6/98 as

> low cost market and subsidised housing (irrespective of tenure, ownership—whether exclusive or shared—or financial arrangements) that are available to people who cannot afford to rent or buy houses generally available on the open market.

Housebuilding (West Sussex)

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many new homes will need to be built in West Sussex in *(a)* the next 15 years and *(b)* over each of the next five years as a result of his housebuilding policy announcement on 7 March. [114402]

Mr. Raynsford: On 20 March we will be publishing, for consultation, the full details of our proposed changes to regional planning guidance for the South-East. These will include an illustrative breakdown of housing to county areas within the region to achieve the overall level of 43,000 new homes a year outside London announced on 7 March. This will include an annual rate of provision for West Sussex. We will be seeking the views of the local authorities in the region, through SERPLAN, and those of other interested parties, on that distribution.

Housebuilding (Brownfield Sites)

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what tax incentives he has recommended to the Chancellor to encourage more housebuilding on brownfield sites. [114403]

Mr. Raynsford: In his Pre-Budget Report, the Chancellor announced that the Government were considering fiscal instruments to support their policies for sustainable urban development. Decisions on taxation are a matter for the Chancellor.

Water Supply (West Sussex)

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has had with the water companies about ensuring the increased provision of water supplies to West Sussex homes following his announcement on 7 March on the need for more houses. [114401]

Mr. Mullin: Under the supervision of the Environment Agency, each water company produced in April 1999 a water resources plan, showing how it would maintain an adequate balance between supply and demand in its area for the next 25 years. The Environment Agency published its assessment of these plans in a report to my right hon. Friends the Deputy Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Wales in June 1999.

Following guidance issued by the Environment Agency on 28 February 2000, each water company will review its plan annually and will report the outcome to the Environment Agency in September each year. In that way, each water company will show how it proposes to respond to any changes which may influence its water resources plan. The Environment Agency will report to Ministers its assessment of these annual reviews.

Medical Services (West Sussex)

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what undertakings he has received from the Department of Health regarding the provision of additional hospital and other medical services over the next 15 years to cater for the increased housing requirement in West Sussex. [114408]

Mr. Raynsford: We will be consulting SERPLAN and others on the distribution of housing within the region, including for West Sussex, during the forthcoming consultation period. When regional planning guidance for the South East is finalised later this year it will provide a planning framework which will assist decisions about the provision of supporting infrastructure, including additional hospital and other medical services.

Housing Demand (South-east)

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what advice he has given to local authorities when drawing up their own five year local plans as to the effect of the Government's five-year reviews of housing demand in the South East of England. [114398]

Mr. Raynsford: When finalised later this year regional planning guidance will set the overall level of housing provision for the region and provide a distribution to constituent structure plan and unitary development plan authorities. This will be expressed as an annual rate to be applied throughout the plan period. At a local plan level PPG3, published on 7 March, advises that sufficient sites should be shown on the proposals map to accommodate at least the first five years (or the first two phases) of housing development proposed in the plan. If the rate of provision at the regional level changes as a result of the monitoring and review process, local authorities will need to consider whether consequential adjustments have to be made through reviews of development plans.

Crow Report

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he has taken to investigate the leaks regarding the Government's response to the Crow report to which he referred in his announcement in the House on 7 March. [114409]

Mr. Raynsford: My Department is conducting an investigation into the leak of information in the normal way.

Single Person Occupancy

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what measures he intends to put in place to discourage single person occupancy of new households over the next 20 years. [114406]

Mr. Raynsford: The latest household projections for England for the period 1996–2021 indicate that 71 per cent. of new households are likely to be formed by single persons. Planning Policy Guidance note 3 therefore advises local authorities to adopt policies which take full account of changes in housing needs in their areas and which will widen the range of housing opportunities to allow these to be met. It is not for the Government to encourage or discourage any particular size of household.

Gas-powered Vehicles

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on his Department's policy on the development of liquefied petroleum gas-powered vehicles in rural areas. [113932]

Mr. Hill: We are committed to developing a sustainable market for alternatively fuelled vehicles, which can offer benefits in terms of emissions of local air pollutants and greenhouse gases. Liquefied petroleum gas powered vehicles offer most benefits when they are used in urban areas, particularly when used by commercial operators instead of diesel. Of course the climate change benefits that LPG vehicles can bring are as welcome in the countryside as they are in our towns and cities. However, our priority for LPG vehicles is to encourage their use in urban areas, for instance, through the use of fiscal measures and the Energy Saving Trust's Powershift programme. We also want to see the development of a publicly accessible LPG refuelling infrastructure in these areas.

We do recognise that a properly strategic refuelling infrastructure that operators can rely on will require LPG refuelling stations in some rural areas, particularly near major trunk roads, so the infrastructure has national coverage. This will enable the climate change benefits gas-powered vehicles can bring to be further realised.

National Air Traffic Services

Dr. Strang: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the level of capital investment by National Air Traffic Services Ltd. in each year for which figures are available from 1 April 1996. [114005]

Mr. Mullin: I refer my right hon. Friend to the answer given to the hon. Member for Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale (Mr. Moore) on 2 March 2000, *Official Report*, columns 333–34W.

Countryside and Rights of Way Bill

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to include measures to modernise the rights of way network in the Countryside and Rights of Way Bill; and if he will make a statement. [112568]

Mr. Meacher: The Countryside and Rights of Way Bill which was introduced on 3 March includes several measures to improve the rights of way network. I have also announced that the Government will bring forward additional rights of way measures during the Bill's passage.

DEFENCE

KFOR

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the current strength of KFOR deployed in Kosovo. [114258]

Mr. Spellar: The strength of KFOR deployed in Kosovo on 9 March is 39,096.

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the current strength of KFOR; and which countries are contributing forces to the operation, indicating how many men each contributes. [114257]

Mr. Spellar: As at 9 March 2000 the strength of KFOR was 44,939. This figure includes 5,843 personnel based in FYROM, Greece and Albania. The number of men and women contributed to KFOR, by nation, are as listed.

	Number
NATO Nations	
Belgium	1,146
Canada	1,382
Czech Republic	180
Denmark	752
France	4,860
Germany	5,685
Greece	1,186
Hungary	307
Iceland	2
Italy	5,970
Luxembourg	2
The Netherlands	1,615
Norway	1,261
Poland	756
Portugal	341
Spain	1,226
Turkey	1,088
United Kingdom	3,368
United States	6,065
Non NATO Nations	
Argentina	111
Austria	470
Azerbaijan	34
Bulgaria	39
Estonia	10
Finland	812
Georgia	34
Ireland	99
Jordan	104
Latvia	10
Lithuania	30
Morocco	347

	Number
Russia	3,141
Slovakia	39
Slovenia	6
Sweden	826
Switzerland	133
Ukraine	240
United Arab Emirates	1,262

Training Parachute Jumps

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the number of training parachute jumps undertaken by Army personnel in each of the past five years. [114255]

Mr. Spellar: The total number of recorded parachute training jumps undertaken by Army personnel in the last five years is set out in the table.

Year	Number of descents
1995	32,639
1996	29,558
1997	27,389
1998	27,385
1999	29,221
Total	146,192

Catterick Garrison

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the cost of the new garages, workshops and hard standing for main battle tanks at Catterick Garrison. [113750]

Mr. Spellar: The cost of garages, workshops and hardstanding for the main battle tanks at Catterick Garrison, known as Megiddo Lines, was £13.7 million.

Helicopter Support Authority

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement about the future location of the defence helicopter support organisation. [113756]

Mr. Spellar: There are no plans to move the Defence Helicopter Support Authority from its current location at Yeovilton. The DHSA will become part of the Equipment Support (Air) Business Unit from 1 April 2000 within the Defence Logistics Organisation.

Armed Forces Personnel Administration Organisation

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* those targets of the Armed Forces Personnel Administration Agency for 1998–99 which (i) were and (ii) were not achieved, giving the factors affecting the outcome in each case and *(b)* action taken by the agency to improve target achievement performance in 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [111765]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Armed Forces Personnel Administration Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the right hon. and learned Member.

Letter from Terence S. Lord to Mr. Menzies Campbell, dated 13 March 2000:

I am writing in response to your request to the Secretary of State for Defence for information with regard to AFPAA targets which were not achieved for 1998–1999 and the action taken to improve target achievement performance for 1999–2000. As Chief Executive of the Armed Forces Personnel Agency (AFPAA), I have been asked to reply.

The information requested is contained in the AFPAA Annual Report (HC631) under the section entitled 'Performance against Key Targets 1998–1999', a copy of which is in the Library of the House. For ease of reference, a copy of the aforementioned section of the Annual Report is attached.

You will note that the Agency achieved all its key/milestone targets (in most cases exceeding 1998–1999 performance targets and achieving those set for 1999–2000), except the formulation of a plan to validate the completeness and accuracy of military records of service and subsequently to introduce sample validation, which was only partially achieved. The validation of personnel records is a necessary precursor to the introduction of the new pay system for the Armed Forces, which is now due for delivery by 1 April 2001, and the creation of a tri-Service Corporate Personnel Database (CPD).

While plans were formulated and detailed discussions were held with the Agency's customers (the Service Principal Personnel Officers), the sampling methods necessary to enable the checks to be carried out were not completed to original targets. The proliferation of single-Service legacy systems (those inherited on the formation of the Agency) rendered the validation task and the introduction of appropriate sampling methods far more complex than had been originally forecast. Consequently, this work has been carried forward into the current Financial Year.

As you might imagine, this is a high priority for AFPAA at the moment and plans are being addressed with both our customers and our private partner, Electronic Data Systems (Defence) Limited, with the intention of completing the initial data cleansing later this year, and thereafter introducing a programme of rolling data validation.

I hope that this information is useful to you.

Defence Intelligence and Security Centre

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* those targets of the Defence Intelligence and Security Centre for 1998–99 which (i) were and (ii) were not achieved, giving the factors affecting the outcome in each case and *(b)* action taken by the agency to improve target achievement performance in 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [111749]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Intelligence and Security Centre. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the right hon. and learned Member.

Letter from G. G. Holton to Mr. Menzies Campbell, dated 13 March 2000:

In response to Parliamentary Question 1156K. The Defence Intelligence and Security Centre achieved 4 out of its 5 key targets during financial year 1998–1999. On the attached we have highlighted each key target, indicating if the key target was met or not and provided a short summary for each.

The DISC did not achieve key target 4. Although the endorsed training programme was delivered the Agency did overspend during the course of the financial year. We have explained the main reasons for this and have attributed the fact to problems that were experienced in setting up the Departments largest tri-service training agency. We have now put in place a rigorous financial monitoring system to ensure that our resource management is more closely scrutinised.

Finally, we would like to draw your attention to the recently published Agency Annual Report and Accounts for 1998–99, which sets out a summary of our achievements and future challenges that lie ahead for the Agency, a copy of which is attached. Further copies have been placed in the House of Commons Library.

Defence Codification Agency

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* those targets of the Defence Codification Agency for 1998–99 which (i) were and (ii) were not achieved, giving the factors affecting the outcome in each case and *(b)* action taken by the agency to improve target achievement performance in 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [111732]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Codification Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the right hon. and learned Member.

Letter from K. A. Bradshaw to Mr. Menzies Campbell, dated 13 March 2000:

1. I am replying to your Question to the Secretary of State for Defence about achievement of Defence Codification Agency (DCA) key targets as the matter falls within my area of responsibility. I have numbered the replies to match your questions.

a. (1) Achieved: Attain a 10% reduction in Agency running costs (achieved 15.3%), reduction in unit cost of codification to under £51 (achieved £41.40), attain a 5% reduction of post codification challenges (achieved 5%). There were no significant factors affecting the target achievement.

(2) Not achieved: Meet timescales for UK codification as agreed in SLAs/CSAs (target 85% achieved 80%), meet timescales for International Codification requests (target 95% achieved 92%), new items codified using source data (target 75% achieved 73%). The implementation shortfall of the revised Codification IT system (ISIS2) contributed significantly to these targets not being achieved.

On 1 April 1999, the Defence Codification Agency ceased to exist and was subsumed with the Logistic Support Services Agency. The ISIS2 database has now been fully implemented and performance shortfalls have been eliminated.

2. The above information has been extracted from the Defence Codification Agency Annual Report and Accounts 1999, a copy of which is held in the House of Commons Library reference HC720.

Defence Postal and Courier Services Agency

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* those targets of the Defence Postal and Courier Services Agency for 1998–99 which (i) were and (ii) were not achieved, giving the factors affecting the outcome in each case and *(b)* action taken by the agency to improve target achievement performance in 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [111754]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Postal and Courier Services Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the right hon. and learned Member.

Letter from B. J. Cash to Mr. Menzies Campbell, dated 13 March 2000:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about those targets of the Defence Postal and Courier Services Agency which were and were not achieved in 1998/99, factors affecting these outcomes and actions taken to improve performance in 1999/2000. This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief Executive of the British Forces Post Office, as the Defence Postal and Courtier Services Agency is now named.

The Defence Postal and Courier Services Agency was set four Key targets, all of which it achieved.

a. To achieve a 2% improvement in the range of postal and courier services provided.

b. To achieve independent assessment of DPCSA using the British Quality Foundation (BQF) Business Excellence Model (BEM) by 31 Mar 99, to enable subsequent measurement of business improvements.

c. To exceed an average 95.85% satisfaction of Customers' postal and courier requirements.

d. To exceed an average 3% improvement in unit cost per output.

Factors affecting the outcomes were:

a. DPCSA launched an initiative to stock part of the Royal Mail Post Shop range at all Forces Post Offices world-wide, to enable customers to have access to, amongst other products, packaging materials approved by the Post Office.

b. DPCSA devoted considerable resources to BEM assessment, and focused on putting forward an entry into the United Kingdom National Quality Award.

c. The Agency exceeded its postal and courier Quality of Service requirements against a background of a major Operational deployment to Kosovo. Despite the difficulties endemic in Operational support, and the deployment of Agency personnel to the Theatre, careful management of the postal network and the employment of civilian casual staff ensured that the target was met.

d. Despite the increased mail volumes generated by the Kosovo deployment, the Agency's overall costs did not increase in real terms, which led to a reduction in the unit costs of output.

Although all targets were achieved in 1998/99, BFPO has more stringent Quality of Service targets for 1999/2000, and is required to deliver a further 3% reduction in the unit cost of output. All parts of the Agency are under scrutiny to improve efficiency, and Quality of Service is monitored by me on a weekly basis, to ensure that BFPO is on target to meet its targets.

Fuller details of the Agency's achievements last year can be found in the annual report for 1998/99, which is held in the library of the House.

Floods (Mozambique)

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many helicopters his Department has offered for use in Mozambique to the Department for International Development; what financial charge he has made in respect of this offer to the Department for International Development; and what other offers of assistance his Department has made to the Department for International Development. [113460]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 7 March 2000]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answers I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) on 8 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 710W and my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Smith) on 8 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 710W with regard to how many helicopters my Department has offered and the financial charge to the Department for International Development.

MOD officials discussed with their colleagues in the Department for International Development the additional option of deploying a small number of Royal Marines and their equipment to Mozambique. Since large numbers of boats and boat handlers were already due to arrive in Mozambique, the Department for International Development did not pursue this offer.

SSBN Force

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the future size of the SSBN force. [113908]

Mr. Hoon: I have nothing to add to the position set out in the Strategic Defence Review (Supporting Essay Five, paragraph 6).

Kosovo

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will place in the Library all procurement assessment details and requests carried out by MOD staff in relation to Kosovo. [104834]

Mr. Hoon: Details of some of the equipment procured for use in Kosovo are classified and I am withholding information on them under exemption 1 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information. I will, however, place in the Library a list of unclassified equipment procured for use in Kosovo.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Carter Center, Atlanta

Mr. Colman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the *(a)* projects carried out in each year since 1992 and *(b)* work in progress under part or full funding by his Department by the Carter Center, Atlanta, United States of America. [112749]

Mr. Battle: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has not in fact funded any projects carried out by the Carter Center, Atlanta, but the Carter Center is DFID's key partner in global efforts to eradicate guinea worm.

India (Bonded Labour)

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the Indian Government's response to the concerns the Minister of State raised on the issue of bonded labour during his visit in November. [113588]

Mr. Hain: We continue to raise the issue of bonded labour with the Indian Government and the Indian Human Rights Commission, both nationally and at state level.

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports he has received (1) on the release of bonded labourers from the villages of Kili-Nahal-Singh-Wala and Buraj Mehma in Punjab State, India; and what prosecutions were initiated against landlords in respect of bonded labourers; [113590]

(2) regarding the attempted abduction of bonded labourers from the human rights organisation, Volunteers for Social Justice, on 7 February; and what reports he has received on the action that has been taken by the Indian authorities to bring to justice the instigators of this attack and ensure the safety of human rights workers at Volunteers for Social Justice. [113589]

Mr. Hain: We are aware of these cases. Our High Commission in New Delhi has written about them to the Chair of the Punjab State Human Rights Commission and has also raised them with the Indian National Human Rights Commission.

Chinese President (State Visit)

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what advice his Department's officials gave to the police regarding the Chinese state visit. [113743]

Mr. Battle: I refer the hon. Member to the answers given to my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) on 28 October 1999, *Official Report*, column 993W, and to the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) on 28 October 1999, *Official Report*, columns 993–94W.

Millenium Civil Society Forum

Mr. Gapes: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the plans of the United Nations Millennium Summit and General Assembly to make use of the report to be produced by the Millennium Civil Society Forum in May. [114087]

Mr. Hain: A formal decision has still to be taken on the linkage between the Millenium Civil Society Forum and the Millenium Summit and Assembly. The Forum's report should be a valuable input to the Summit and Assembly. With our European Union partners, the Government are pressing for the fullest possible Millenium Forum representation at these events.

Atomic Energy Counsellor (Japan)

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is the nature of the contractual appointment of a BNFL employee as the atomic energy counsellor in the British Embassy in Japan; what payment is made annually by BNFL in respect of this appointment; and when the arrangements with BNFL covering this embassy post were agreed. [114084]

Mr. Hain: The appointment of a BNFL employee on secondment to the post of Atomic Energy Counsellor at the British Embassy in Tokyo is in line with the usual contractual arrangements for such secondments. These are that he functions as a fully integrated member of the Embassy, works solely to objectives set by the Government, is bound by Diplomatic Service Regulations relating to conduct and discipline, and is answerable to the Ambassador and ultimately my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary.

There is no payment to the FCO in respect of this appointment, but BNFL does meet the costs associated with it. These are around £500,000 annually. This arrangement has been in place for 33 years and was last reviewed with BNFL upon the appointment of the present incumbent in 1997.

Pakistan

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what examination of prison

conditions and the length of detention without trial has been undertaken by United Kingdom officials in Pakistan. [113820]

Mr. Hain: We are concerned that detainees can be held without charge for up to 90 days. We are raising this with the Pakistani authorities and are considering a further demarche together with our EU colleagues.

Official examinations of prisons are prohibited by the Pakistani authorities. We take up complaints about prison conditions, for example by British prisoners, with the Pakistani authorities.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what contacts United Kingdom representatives have had with human rights and civil liberties groups in Pakistan since the military take over; and if he will make a statement. [113814]

Mr. Hain: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave in reply to him on 8 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 141W.

Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what actions have been taken by his Department to encourage India and Pakistan to accede to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty; and if he will make a statement. [113813]

Mr. Hain: Having the G8 and EU Presidency, the UK played a leading role in co-ordinating the international response to the Indian and Pakistani nuclear tests. We continue to take every opportunity to urge both countries to take all the steps set out in United Nations Security Council resolution 1172, including acceding to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons as Non-Nuclear-Weapon States.

Zimbabwe

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to review the relations between the United Kingdom and Zimbabwe. [114176]

Mr. Hain: We have recalled our High Commissioner for consultations.

James Mawdsley

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the imprisonment of James Mawdsley in Burma; and what representations he has made to the Burmese Government. [114379]

Mr. Hain: British Embassy officials have visited James six times. The last visit took place on 9 February. James has told us that he is well. Our Ambassador in Rangoon regularly raises James's case with the Burmese authorities, most recently with the Deputy Foreign Minister on 1 March. Baroness Scotland, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, also called in the Burmese Ambassador to express our concerns about the case in September 1999.

In particular, we have protested about:

the failure of the Burmese authorities to inform us of his arrest;
the delay over consular access;
the denial of legal representation;
the length of the sentence;
mistreatment in prison;
lack of access to reading and writing material;
length of recreation time;
delay in getting the trial transcript;
delays in receiving food parcels, letters and books.

We will continue to do everything we can to help James. We are in frequent contact with his family.

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on his latest assessment of the situation of James Mawdsley, imprisoned in Burma. [114006]

Mr. Hain: British Embassy officials have visited James six times. The most recent visit took place on 9 February. James has told us that he is well. We have raised with the Burmese authorities complaints he has had about his treatment.

We do not comment on the legal aspects of charges levelled against British nationals overseas. We do all we can to ensure they have access to legal representation and receive a fair trial.

China

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the results were of the recent EU and People's Republic of China human rights dialogue with regard to Tibet; and if he will make a statement. [114260]

Mr. Battle: The last round of the EU/China Human Rights dialogue took place in Lisbon on 25 February. The Presidency called on the Chinese Government to enter into a dialogue with the Dalai Lama on the future of Tibet, and raised the case of Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, the Dalai Lama's choice as Panchen Lama; restrictions on freedom of religious expression; and the preservation of the Tibetan cultural identity. They also called for better access to Tibet for non-governmental organisations and journalists. The EU/China discussions did not, however, lead to concrete results: specifically, the Chinese gave no commitment on a dialogue with the Dalai Lama, nor on access to Gedhun Choekyi Nyima whose parents, they stated, did not want to expose him to media attention.

EU Ministers will review the human rights dialogue and the situation in China, including Tibet, at the General Affairs Council on 21 March. At our most recent round of bilateral talks on human rights, it was agreed that the All Party Group could visit Tibet.

Iraq

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what approach was made to him by the makers of the ITV television programme shown on Monday 6 March on Iraq; and if he will make a statement. [114170]

Mr. Robin Cook: John Pilger asked me to appear in the programme. My officials offered him a ministerial interview to be broadcast at the end of the programme to respond to the points raised. He refused.

During the programme itself, Pilger claimed this meant I was seeking editorial control. On the contrary, I was not prepared to allow him to edit my right of reply.

The TV companies are required to provide balanced coverage. It is normal practice for programmes to provide a right of reply when broadcasting criticisms of government policy. Though I am unsurprised, I regret that Pilger and Carlton TV were not prepared to do so.

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is the latest policy of Her Majesty's Government towards sanctions on Iraq. [114171]

Mr. Hain: The UN Security Council resolutions provide the framework for the Government's policy on Iraq and sanctions. Our position has always been that sanctions can be lifted only when Iraq complies with its obligations under those resolutions, including disarmament. The latest resolution, SCR 1284, which the UK was key in driving through the Security Council, sets out a clear path towards the lifting of sanctions, by allowing for their suspension while the disarmament programme is underway. I urge Saddam Hussein to accept it.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Farmed Sea Bass

Ms Atherton: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the labelling of farmed sea bass. [113079]

Mr. Morley: The Food Safety Act 1990 and the Food Labelling Regulations 1996 generally require that labelling should not falsely describe a food or be likely to mislead as to its nature, substance or quality. These provisions are to be supplemented by new European rules, which come into force on 1 January 2002. These will specifically require an indication of the production method (caught at sea or in inland waters or farmed) to be given for all fish offered for sale to the final consumer. They will also have to indicate the agreed sales name for the species and, in the case of sea fish, the catch area.

Genetically Modified Seeds

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what genetically modified seeds he plans to add to the National Seed List; and if he will make a statement. [111967]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 7 March 2000]:* Applications for the addition of plant varieties to the National List are considered against the requirements of the Seeds (National Lists of Varieties) Regulations 1982 (as amended) which implement EC directives. These regulations require that varieties must be distinct, uniform and stable (DUS) and, for agricultural species, have a value for cultivation and use (VCU) in the UK. Before genetically modified plant varieties may be proposed for addition to the National List, Ministers also require that a marketing consent has been promulgated under Directive 90/220/EEC on the Deliberate Release into the Environment of Genetically Modified Organisms, and, where appropriate, authorisation has been given under the Novel Foods Regulation, No. 258/97/EEC.

Ministers are currently considering making a proposed decision about the addition to the National List of a genetically modified forage maize variety (CHARDON LL). The variety in question has completed the normal two years of National List tests and trials, and the trait involved has a marketing consent under Directive 90/220/EEC and an authorisation under the Novel Foods Regulation No. 258/97/EEC. As required under the National List regulations, once a proposed decision has been made by Ministers, it will be published in the Plant Varieties and Seeds Gazette together with the procedure for making representations against such a proposed decision.

However, the Government's recent agreement with SCIMAC (representing the seeds, farming and biotechnology industries in the UK), precludes the general commercialisation of GM maize until 2003 at the earliest, subject to the results of the UK farm-scale evaluation programme.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on how many occasions ministers in his Department have held meetings with ministers and officials of the Irish Government since 17 June 1999, indicating the dates and locations, the ministers involved, and the names of the Irish ministers and officials at each meeting. [113089]

Mr. Nick Brown: There have been no formal meetings between MAFF Ministers and Irish Ministers since 17 June 1999. Informal contacts have taken place in the margins of EU Agriculture Councils, on 19 July, 15 November, 14 December 1999 and 24 January 2000, and Fisheries Councils on 26 October, 22 November and 16 December 1999.

Drift Nets

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list by coastal area the number of *(a)* dolphins, *(b)* whales and *(c)* basking sharks caught by coastal drift nets within six miles of the UK coast for each year since 1992; and if he will make a statement. [113274]

Mr. Morley: This information is not available. Inshore drift nets are not considered to represent a significant threat to these species.

SOCIAL SECURITY

War Pensions

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people are in receipt of war and war widows' pensions in *(a)* Bolton, North-East parliamentary constituency and *(b)* Bolton. [111579]

Mr. Bayley: The administration of war pensions is a matter for the Chief Executive of the War Pensions Agency, Mr. Gordon Hextall. He will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Gordon Hextall to Mr. David Crausby, dated 8 March 2000:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking how many people are in receipt of war and war widows' pensions in (a) Bolton North East parliamentary constituency and (b) Bolton.

I am sorry to advise you that this precise information is not readily available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost. The war pensions computer system does not separate details of war pensioners into Parliamentary constituencies or local authority areas.

However, the computer system does provide statistics showing the numbers of war disablement pensioners and war widows resident in Welfare Office regions. Pensioners and widows living in Bolton fall within the Preston welfare region, which also covers Blackburn, Preston, part of Wigan and some parts of Greater Manchester.

The statistics held for the area that includes Bolton are:

War disablement pensioners—6953

War widows—858

If I can be of further assistance then please do not hesitate to contact me.

Funeral Expenses

Mr. Pond: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is the average length of time taken between receipt of invoice and payment of funeral expenses by the Social Fund. [113634]

Angela Eagle: The administration of benefits is a matter for Peter Mathison, Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Chris Pond, dated 10 March 2000:

The Secretary of State has asked me to respond to your recent question asking about the average length of time taken between receipt of invoice and payment of funeral expenses by the Social Fund.

The Benefits Agency (BA) does not record the date of receipt of funeral invoices in connection with claims for funeral payments, as an invoice or bill is not required in every case. For example, applications made in advance of the funeral may be determined using a "contract" between the customer and the Funeral Director.

We do however collect information about length of time taken from the date the application is received in the office to the date a decision is issued. This data does not distinguish between decisions making a full award, a partial award or a refusal. The Performance Indicator for Funeral Payments is that 90% of applications should be determined within 35 days. For the period April 1999-February 2000 BA received 62,557 Funeral Payment applications. 60,411 (96.57%) of these applications were determined within 35 days.

I hope this is helpful.

Mr. Pond: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the cost of increasing the amount allowable for funeral expenses under the Social Fund to *(a)* £800 and *(b)* £1,000. [113632]

Angela Eagle: The Social Fund Funeral Payment scheme aims to cover the reasonable cost of a simple, dignified funeral. Therefore, under current legislation, where an eligible person is deemed to have good reason for taking responsibility for funeral expenses, the scheme allows for the fees levied by the burial authorities and crematoria (in so far as it is necessary to incur them), specified travel expenses and up to £600 for any other funeral expenses. If this £600 for other funeral expenses were to be increased to £800 or £1,000, it is estimated that the net programme expenditure would increase by £7.4 million and £12.8 million respectively.

Mr. Pond: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what proportion of applications to the Social Fund for funeral expenses are refused *(a)* in whole and *(b)* in part. [113633]

Angela Eagle: Statistics compiled so far for 1999–2000 indicate that of the total number of claims made to the Social Fund for Funeral Payments, 37 per cent. are wholly refused and 56 per cent. result in a partial award.

Independent Tribunal Service

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he issues guidelines to Chairmen of Independent Tribunal Service hearings; what is the recommended time for them to provide appellants with written explanations for decisions; what is the average time currently taken; and if he will make a statement. [113733]

Angela Eagle: We do not issue guidelines to Chairmen of the Appeals Service (formerly the Independent Tribunal Service) tribunals. The President of appeal tribunals, Judge Michael Harris, is responsible for the functions of appeal tribunals. We cannot intervene in the matters for which the President is responsible.

Judge Harris is working to develop standards for all areas of interlocutory work, including provision of written explanations for decisions and he will write to the hon. Member when these are in place.

The average time for an appellant to receive a written explanation for the decision of a tribunal is 5.3 weeks. The average time for the Chairman to provide the written reasons is 4.0 weeks. This is calculated from the date that the Chairman received the appellant's request to the date that the reasons were passed to the administrative clerk.

Source:

100 per cent. download from the Appeals Service Generic Appeals Processing System. The figures are based on requests for reasons received between 1 August 1998 and 31 July 1999.

Mr. Woolas: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what was the cost of the administration of the Benefits Agency Independent Tribunal Service in the last year for which figures are available. [113474]

Angela Eagle: The Independent Tribunal Service was not part of the Benefits Agency.

The cost of the administration of the Independent Tribunal Service (now the Appeals Service) for the 1998–99 financial year was £55.890 million.

Housing Benefit (Verification Framework)

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if a recent letter from the police regarding investigation of a burglary at a property is acceptable proof of identification to comply with the housing benefit verification framework. [113774]

Angela Eagle: The relevance or weight given to any piece of evidence in support of a claim is a matter for the local authority concerned. The Verification Framework requires local authorities to look at the whole picture presented by a claimant when establishing identity. It would not be appropriate for this Department to direct local authorities as to the weight they should give to a particular piece of evidence, which may or may not be relevant depending on the wider circumstances of the case.

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will extend the definition of hostels for the purposes of implementation of the housing benefit verification framework to other organisations providing accommodation for the vulnerable and socially excluded. [113650]

Angela Eagle: The definition of hostel that exists ensures that most bona fide direct access, short stay accommodation for the homeless is covered. The special rules for hostels are designed to ensure that this type of accommodation is available to the socially excluded. For all other types of accommodation the Verification Framework is sufficiently flexible to allow genuine claimants to satisfy its requirements and receive their benefit entitlement. In very exceptional documented cases the local authority can decide to make payment even when the Verification Framework standard has not been met.

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he has published a list of acceptable proofs of identification to comply with the housing benefit verification framework. [113773]

Angela Eagle: The Verification Framework initially contained a prescriptive list of documents that could be accepted as evidence of identity; each claimant was required to provide two of the documents on that list. It soon became apparent that this was not the best way to establish identity in many cases. Such rules particularly disadvantaged the vulnerable and socially excluded.

Revised guidance was issued to all local authorities in July 1999. This guidance stresses the importance of looking at the whole picture presented by a claimant and their circumstances. It allows local authorities to build a picture to support a person's claim using different sources of evidence. The new guidance deliberately does not contain a prescriptive list of acceptable documentary evidence.

The Verification Framework does provide guidance as to the level of confidence that can be applied to various commonly submitted documents relating to ID.

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what guidance he gives landlords about what they should do if a potential tenant is unable to produce any forms of identification acceptable to local authority housing benefit officers to comply with the verification framework. [113772]

Angela Eagle: The verification framework sets standards for local authorities to follow in establishing entitlement to Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State does not give guidance to landlords on identity requirements as decisions on letting property are distinct from decisions on benefit entitlement. Where a person is unsure whether or not they might get Housing Benefit, it is advisable for them to make inquiries of their local authority before entering into an agreement to pay rent.

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what guidance he gives local authorities on telling potential tenants what are accepted proofs of identification to comply with the housing benefit verification framework. [113771]

Angela Eagle: The verification framework requires local authorities to make it clear on their claim forms what documentary evidence the claimant will need to supply. However, when establishing identity there is no specific list of documents which claimants must supply. Indeed, to have such a list would cause problems for those claimants who are most vulnerable, as they are least likely to have specific documents.

The framework requires local authorities to look at each case on its merits when examining supporting evidence. Where a claimant has little or no documentary evidence of identity, the local authority should give consideration as to why that is when considering how to progress the case.

Income Support

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what measures he proposes to encourage the take-up of income support unclaimed by those already in receipt of the state pension but entitled to additional benefit. [113176]

Mr. Rooker: We are committed to taking action to find more effective ways of encouraging eligible pensioners to claim their benefit entitlement. We will shortly be announcing our plans to encourage pensioners to take up their entitlement to the minimum income guarantee.

Hospital Downrating

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what, in the latest financial year for which figures are available, were the total savings accruing from hospital downrating. [113074]

Mr. Bayley: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

Estimated savings from hospital downrating, by benefit, 1998–99

£ million

Benefit	*Estimated savings*
Retirement pension	55
Incapacity benefit/severe disablement allowance	45
Disability living allowance (mobility component)	5

Notes:

1. Savings estimates are based on samples of administrative data. It is assumed that the weeks of each sample are typical of the financial year as a whole. Figures are rounded to the nearest £5 million.
2. Estimates for income-related benefits (Income Support, Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit) not available. In November 1999 there were an estimated 1,000 Income Support claimants who had been in hospital for between 4 and 52 weeks, and 2,000 claimants who had been in hospital for over 52 weeks.
3. Disability Living Allowance mobility savings arise from transitionally protected Higher Rate Mobility cases.

4. Disability Living Allowance (other than transitionally protected cases), Attendance Allowance and Invalid Care Allowance estimates are not included as these benefits generally cease after four weeks or less in hospital.

Fraud

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what action he is taking in respect of those area directorates where fraud in income support and jobseeker's allowance increased in the last area benefit review; and if he will make a statement. [114003]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 10 March 2000]:* The Benefits Agency's Area Directorates have plans in place which help them to direct their resources effectively to areas of greatest risk. The plans are regularly reviewed to see how effective areas are in paying benefits accurately and securely and appropriate adjustments are made. We are paying close attention to those areas where levels of fraud and error have risen.

National Insurance

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when his Department began the programme to check the veracity of national insurance numbers; when the programme is expected to end; how many numbers *(a)* have so far been checked and *(b)* remain to be checked; and how many of the numbers so far checked have been identified as bogus. [113630]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 9 March 2000]:* A programme to check the correctness of accounts held on the Departmental Central Index (DCI) was set up on 6 November 1995 and is currently expected to run until March 2001. Since the start of the programme all accounts held on DCI have been continually scanned.

By May 1999 of the 81 million National Insurance accounts currently held on the Departments computer index about 1 million (1.23 per cent.) had certain types of anomalies (e.g. incorrect address format, two accounts showing the same identity details etc). These were further checked and about 750,000 (0.93 per cent.) were found to be inaccurate.

These can be broken down into 645,000 (0.8 per cent.) which were identified as duplicate cases caused by faulty information or inputting error and have since been deleted and approximately 100,000 cases which have been investigated and corrected.

Of the total in only 11 cases has it been established that the account was deliberately created in order to establish a false identity and fraudulently gain access to benefits. We are currently re-running the initial scans and designing new scans to identify any further "at risk" accounts on the index.

Child Support

Mr. Rooney: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what would be the cost in 2002–03 of introducing a £10 child maintenance disregard for *(a)* parents with care on Income Support or income-based Jobseeker's Allowance and *(b)* parents with care on Income Support or income-based Jobseeker's Allowance where maintenance has been assessed under the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill. [114372]

Angela Eagle: The reformed child support scheme, including the introduction of a £10 maintenance premium (or disregard) in Income Support or income-based Jobseeker's Allowance, will come into effect for new cases by April 2002. Existing cases will be moved across at a later date, once the new arrangements are seen to be working well. On this basis, the net costs of the child maintenance premium, taking account of offsetting savings from the abolition of the Child Maintenance Bonus, will be around £20 million in 2002–03. If all existing cases were to qualify for the premium from April 2002, the additional net first year costs would be around £65 million.

Mr. Rooney: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many non-resident parents will pay more maintenance under the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill for each of the weekly income bands *(a)* £0 to £99, *(b)* £100 to £149, *(c)* £150 to £199, *(d)* £200 to £249, *(e)* £250 to £299 and *(f)* £300 to £400. [114373]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the table. Changes in assessment for existing cases will be phased in.

Non-resident parents in work who would have a higher maintenance assessment under the reformed child support scheme.

Net weekly income	*Caseloads*
£0 to £99	20,000
£100 to £149	50,000
£150 to £199	60,000
£200 to £249	35,000
£250 to £299	15,000
£300 to £400	10,000

Notes:

1. New scheme maintenance modelled on August 1998 5 per cent. scan of Child Support Computer System.
2. Caseloads calibrated to forecast 'A' day levels (April 2002).
3. Figures are rounded to the nearest 5,000.

HEALTH

Breast Implants

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how often and when the Independent Review Group meets to consider published scientific information relating to breast implants and health issues; and if he will list its membership. [110097]

Mr. Denham: The Independent Review Group continues to meet twice a year to review any new evidence on possible health risks associated with silicone gel breast implants or the issues relating to pre-operative patient information.

The current members of the Independent Review Group are as follows:

Professor R. D. Sturrock—The McLeod Arthritis Research Campaign Professor of Rheumatology, University of Glasgow (Chairman)

Professor J. R. Batchelor—Emeritus Professor of Immunology, Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine on the Campus of Hammersmith Hospital

Dr. J. Evans—Consultant Plastic Surgeon, Derriford Hospital

Mrs. V. Harpwood—Senior Lecturer, Cardiff Law School, University of Cardiff

Professor D. R. London—Emeritus Professor of Medicine, University of Birmingham; Registrar of the Royal College of Physicians

Mr. T. Milward—Consultant Plastic Surgeon, Leicester Royal Infirmary

Ms C. Rayner—Patients Association

Professor A. J. Silman—Arthritis Research Campaign Professor of Rheumatic Disease Epidemiology, University of Manchester Medical School

Professor J. P. Sloane—Professor of Pathology, University of Liverpool

Dr. J. Evans was suspended from the IRG pending an investigation by Derriford Hospital NHS Trust. She was suspended in order to maintain public confidence in the group and its work pending the results of the investigation.

Otahara Syndrome

Mr. Viggers: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many cases of Otahara Syndrome (Early Infantile Epileptic Encephalopathy) are known in the United Kingdom; whether there is a specialist unit for its treatment; and what *(a)* support groups and *(b)* charities have been formed to assist sufferers and their families. [110065]

Mr. Hutton: Epilepsy is the commonest chronic neurological disorder affecting between 400,000 and 420,000 people—one in 200 of the United Kingdom population and including 100,000 children.

There is no epidemiological information available on the number of children with Otahara Syndrome and we are not aware of any specialist units for the treatment of this condition. Treatment is usually via the prescription of anticonvulsants.

It is for health authorities and primary care groups to plan and arrange the services available to people in their care. However, complex epilepsy is included in the comprehensive list of specialised services in the Health Service Commissioning in the New National Health Service. This means that regional offices will need to give special consideration to commissioning services for people with complex epilepsy.

We are not aware of any support groups or charities formed specifically to assist people with Otahara Syndrome and their families. However, support and advice is available from the members of the Joint Epilepsy Council such as the British Epilepsy Association and The National Society for Epilepsy.

Pharmacists

Mr. Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the current situation in respect of recruiting and retaining pharmacists in the NHS. [112446]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 1 March 2000]:* We are taking a number of steps which will help to address the issue of recruitment and retention of pharmacists. The potential impact on the pharmacy work force of the move to a four-year pharmacy degree, against a background of growing demand for pharmacists, was recognised early on. The in-take of pharmacy students has increased each year in the last six years, with 20 per cent. more new students in 1998 as compared with 1993. In addition there was special recognition for hospital pharmacists in the 1999 pay round.

The Government are also modernising services and modernising employment practice in the National Health Service: developing more supportive, flexible and family friendly working practices; extending and improving investment in lifelong learning and professional development; tackling violence and racism in the workplace; involving staff in the way services are delivered and in the changes and developments that affect their working lives.

In addition, we are developing the interactive service "NHS Careers" which will cover pharmacists in due course.

Pay Review Body

Mr. Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what will be the percentage increase in the NHS pay bill as a result of implementing the Pay Review Body report on nursing, midwives and health visitors. [112447]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 1 March 2000]:* To implement the recent recommendations on pay made by the Review Body for Nursing Staff, Midwives, Health Visitors and Professions Allied to Medicine will increase the pay bill of the NHS by 1.5 per cent.

Long-term Care

Laura Moffatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people in the West Sussex Health Authority area receive long-term round the clock nursing care at home funded by the NHS. [112474]

Mr. Hutton: There are currently two patients in West Sussex receiving 24-hour nursing care at home funded by the health authority. Individual patients are assessed and a decision made by the West Sussex Health Authority's Commissioning for Individual Packages (CIP) Panel. The systems for managing the commission of individual packages of care are open to internal and external audit.

Beta Interferon

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations he has received about the secondary waiting list for multiple sclerosis sufferers in need of beta interferon; and if he will make a statement. [113348]

Mr. Denham: The Department receives a high volume of correspondence on multiple sclerosis and beta interferon, some of which mentions waiting for assessment by a neurologist.

Information on waiting times for patients with multiple sclerosis is not collected but, nationally, the average waiting time of patients seen for a first outpatient

appointment in neurology following general practitioner was 10.6 weeks (or 74 days) during October to December 1999–2000 (the latest data available).

Shropshire Health Authority

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the adequacy of Shropshire Health Authority's allocation for 1999–2000, with reference to population growth. [113345]

Mr. Denham: The 1999–2000 allocation for Shropshire Health Authority is £247.65 million. This represents a cash increase of £15.15 million or 6.51 per cent. This is above the national average increase of 6.50 per cent. for health authorities without health action zones.

In addition, the 2000–01 allocation for Shropshire Health Authority is £265.68 million. This represents a cash increase of £17.13 million or 6.89 per cent. This is above the national average increase of 6.69 per cent. for health authorities without health action zones.

For 1999–2000 Shropshire Health Authority's resident population increased by 0.80 per cent. compared to the national average of 0.48 per cent.

The objective of resource allocation is to distribute funds fairly based on the relative healthcare needs of populations. In doing so, account is taken of the latest available data, including changes to populations.

Dentistry

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the adequacy of NHS dentistry in Hereford; and if he will make a statement. [113481]

Mr. Hutton: We are aware that there is a problem of access to National Health Service dentistry in Herefordshire and have taken positive steps to address this problem. Four Investing in Dentistry grants have been approved totalling £100,000, guaranteeing promises of a further 8,000 NHS patient registrations. A proposal for a "phone and go" dental access centre in Herefordshire is currently being considered by the NHS Executive. If successful the dental access centre should be operational by the end of the year.

Medical and Dental Regulation

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will introduce legislation to transfer responsibility for the regulation of the medical and dental professions from the Privy Council to Parliament. [113427]

Mr. Denham: The responsibility for setting the regulatory framework lies with Parliament. This has been discharged through the passing of the Medical Act 1983 and the Dentist Act 1983 and subsequent primary and secondary legislation.

Parliament already has sufficient powers to call the General Medical Council (GMC) and the General Dental Council to account before the Health Select Committee which met on the 2 March 2000 to consider the role of the GMC.

We are discussing with the regulatory bodies the need to modernise the arrangements for accountability. It is important that these arrangements are fit for the purpose and retain the confidence of the public, the professions, Government and Parliament.

Medical Laboratory Science Officers

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much it costs on average to train a person as a medical laboratory science officer. [113193]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* Given the multiple training routes for the pre-registration and post-registration training and the variable duration of study, it is not possible to provide a meaningful figure for the average cost of training a person as a medical laboratory scientific officer.

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the salary level for each grade of medical laboratory science officer in the NHS; and how many employees there are on each pay level. [113201]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* National terms and conditions of service for medical laboratory scientific officers provide five grade pay scales.

The current minimum and maximum of each grade pay scale is:

£

Grade	*Minimum*	*Maximum*
Effective 1 December 1998:		
Trainee MLSO	7,476	9,796
MLSO1	11,812	17,486
MLSO2	16,169	23,931
MLSO3	22,127	27,998
MLSO4	25,885	(32,753)

The estimated number of MLSOs by grade, directly employed by the NHS in England, rounded to the nearest 1,000, is:

Grade	
Trainee MLSO	1,000
MLSO1	6,000
MLSO2	3,000
MLSO3	2,000
MLSO4	'

Note:
' Less than 500; greater than zero

Improvement to pay, backdated to 1 April 1999, remains available.

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many tests were performed by NHS medical laboratory science officers; and what was the ratio of tests per worker in each of the last 10 years. [113198]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* It is recognised that the workload in pathology laboratories is increasing but detailed information on the number of tests done by particular staff groups is not held centrally.

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what qualifications and training are required for a medical laboratory science officer grade 1; and what requirements exist for such staff to retrain on an annual basis. [113196]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* Medical Laboratory Science Officer 1s are graduates. They are state registered through the Council for Professions Supplementary to Medicine. To become state registered they need to possess an accredited first degree and to have undergone approved vocational training. The length of vocational training required depends on the entry degree and the ability of the individual.

Some MLSOs undertake programmes of continuing professional development that are approved by the Institute of Biomedical Science. These are not mandatory and there is no definite requirement, as yet, for staff to retrain on an annual basis.

NHS Pay

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the average starting pay for *(a)* clinical psychologists, *(b)* clinical scientists, *(c)* speech and language therapists and *(d)* health advisers on sexually transmitted diseases working in the NHS. [113202]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* The pay of clinical psychologists, clinical scientists and speech and language therapists is negotiated in the Scientific and Professional Staffs Whitley Council. The Council's agreement provides for staff to be appointed to any point on the appropriate grade pay scale. The pay scales are:

Clinical psychologists
Clinical psychologist grade A
£14,949 minimum to £34,065 maximum—effective from 1 December 1998.
Clinical scientists
Clinical scientist grade B
£18,734 minimum to £35,087 maximum—effective from 1 April 1999.
Speech and language therapists
Speech and language therapist grade 1
£14,237 minimum to £14,806 maximum—effective from 1 April 1999

There are no nationally agreed pay scales for health advisers on sexually transmitted diseases working in the NHS. We do not collect information about their starting pay centrally.

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent assessment he has made of staff morale in the professions working in the NHS who are not covered by the NHS pay review body. [113197]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* As part of the national Human Resource strategy "Working Together—Securing a quality workforce for the NHS" we have asked National Health Service trusts to carry out a staff attitude survey by April 2000.

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the professions within the NHS that are not covered by the NHS Pay Review Body. [113204]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* National Health Service staff groups not covered by the remit of the pay review bodies are Administrative and Clerical, Ancillary, Ambulance (staff and officers), Maintenance, Professional and Technical (B), and Scientific and Professional.

Rothbury Community Hospital, Northumberland

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects work to start on the building of the new Rothbury community hospital, Northumberland. [113796]

Mr. Denham: No start date can be given for the scheme at present as it is dependent on the outcome of ongoing Private Finance Initiative negotiations.

Patients' Rights

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make lay representatives available within hospitals to give guidance to patients on their rights. [113611]

Mr. Denham: Greg Dyke's report, "The New NHS Charter: A Different Approach", recommended that most large hospital trusts should have a patient representative. In response to this recommendation the Department is currently investigating possible models for patient representation in the National Health Service.

Patient Referral

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if patients have the right to be referred to more than one consultant to obtain a second or further opinion. [113858]

Mr. Denham: It is accepted professional practice among doctors that patients have the right to a second opinion. This is enshrined in guidance the General Medical Council has issued which includes the need for doctors to respect the rights of patients to a second opinion.

Ethical Investment Policy

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) when regulations on ethical investment policy for hospital trusts and health authorities will be likely to come into force; and if they will restrict investment in companies connected with the arms trade; [114219]

(2) if he will list those hospital trusts and health authorities which invest pension funds and donations in companies known to have connections with the arms trade. [114218]

Mr. Denham: Health authorities do not invest Exchequer funds in companies. National Health Service trusts can invest surplus funds only in institutions approved by the NHS Executive, and from 1 April 2000 will be able to invest only in the Office of the Paymaster General.

NHS trusts and health authorities do not hold pension funds. Contributions to the NHS Pension Scheme are paid to the Exchequer, which meets the cost of scheme benefits as required.

Charitably-donated funds are administered by trustees, who are responsible for investment decisions concerning these funds. Trustees operate within charity legislation, and Health Ministers properly have no powers to influence trustees' decisions.

Drug Addicts

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will publish estimates of the number of known or registered drug addicts per 100,000 people in *(a)* the United Kingdom, *(b)* the United States of America and *(c)* the Netherlands. [114221]

Ms Stuart: The information requested is not available centrally.

Based on the number of drug misusers reported to Regional Drugs Misuse Databases as presenting to services for treatment in England during the six month period ending 31 March 1999, there were 58 problem drug misusers per 100,000 people in England. Figures for the United States of America and the Netherlands are not available centrally, but information may be available from the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, which is based in Portugal.

Fruit and Vegetables

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what advice his Department is giving the public on the peeling and topping of carrots before they are consumed; what is the reason for that advice; and what are the methods used to communicate the advice; [114418]

(2) what advice his Department is giving the public on peeling apples before they are consumed; and what is the reason for that advice and the methods used to communicate the advice; [114348]

(3) which fruits and vegetables apart from apples and carrots his Department is advising the public to peel before consuming; what is the reason for that advice; and what are the methods used to communicate the advice. [114347]

Ms Stuart: Studies recommended by the independent Advisory Committee on Pesticides have found variable levels of pesticide residues in some fruit and vegetables. In response to these findings, the following advice from the Deputy Chief Medical Officer was issued in Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) News Release 83/97 and in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food/Department of Health Food Safety Information Bulletin for December 1998:

> "washing fruit and vegetables before consumption is always a sensible precaution to ensure it is clean. Peeling is a matter of consumer choice, but is a sensible additional precaution when preparing fruit and vegetables for small children"

This precautionary advice remains relevant and is used by Government Departments in responding to inquiries about pesticide residues in food.

Overseas Ministerial Visits

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the overseas ministerial visits that have taken place since May 1997, indicating the purpose of each visit. [112770]

Ms Stuart: Between May 1997 and March 2000 Department of Health Ministers have made 36 overseas visits in an official capacity as listed. All travel complied with the requirements of the Ministerial Code and the Civil Service Management Code.

Minister	*Country*	*Date*	*Purpose*
Minister of State for Public Health	Netherlands/ Luxembourg	3–6 June 1997	Visit to European Union Health Council
Parliamentary Under- Secretary of State (Commons)	Belgium	4–5 June 1997	Visit to European Parliament
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Commons)	Austria	16–18 June 1997	Attendance at Council of Europe XVth Conference of Family Ministers and other engagements
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Commons)	Belgium	23–25 October 1997	Attendance at Young People's Conference on Sexual Health
Minister of State for Public Health	France	24 November 1997	Meeting with French Health Minister
Minister of State for Public Health	Belgium	3–4 December 1997	European Union Health Council Meeting
Secretary of State	Denmark	26 February- 1 March 1998	Visit to World Health Organisation and other engagements
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Lords)	USA	4–7 March 1998	Attendance at External Advisory Panel for Health, Nutrition and Population
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Commons)	Belgium	8–10 March 1998	European Union Health Council meeting
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Commons)	Belgium	24–26 March 1998	European Union Health Council meeting
Secretary of State	Belgium	22 April 1998	Visit to European Parliament to address Health Committee
Minister of State for Public Health	Belgium	22 April 1998	Visit to European Parliament to address Health Committee
Minister of State for Public Health	Luxembourg	29–30 April 1998	Meeting of the European Union Health Council
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Lords)	France	11 May 1998	Meeting of the Club of Three sub group
Minister of State for Public Health	Switzerland	12–13 May 1998	Attendance at World Health Assembly
Secretary of State	Germany	3–4 June 1998	Attendance at Social Services Conference
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Commons)	Sweden	16–17 June 1998	Attendance at presentation of the FINSAM Project and other engagements
Secretary of State	France	22–23 June 1998	Representing HM Government at England *vs* Romania World Cup match
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Commons)	Australia	9–20 July 1998	Fact finding mission on mental health issues
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Commons)	Sweden	23–25 September 1998	Keynote speech at 50th anniversary Swedish social services conference
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Commons)	Germany	3–5 October 1998	British Council seminar
Secretary of State	South Africa	3–18 October 1998	Combined official visit to South Africa to support Department for International Development projects and pursue bilateral health relations
Secretary of State	USA	21–23 October 1998	Attendance at International Symposium on Healthcare and other engagements

Minister	Country	Date	Purpose
Minister of State for Public Health	Belgium	12 November 1998	Meeting of European Union Health Council
Secretary of State	Barbados	15–18 November 1998	Attendance at Commonwealth Health Ministers Conference
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Commons)	Japan	25–29 November 1998	British Healthcare industry export promotion
Minister of State for Public Health	France	14–16 January 1999	Meeting with French Ministers for Health and Women and attendance at Franco-British Colloque events
Secretary of State	Denmark	9–11 April 1999	Meeting with senior officials from the European Office of the World Health Organisation
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Lords)	Italy	26–27 May 1999	Conference on emergency services and reanimation
Minister of State for Public Health	Luxembourg	7–8 June 1999	European Union Health Council Meeting
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Commons)	France	17 June 1999	European Social Services Conference
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Lords)	Malaysia	5–9 October 1999	British Healthcare industry export promotion
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health	Turkey	10–11 October 1999	Conference on Diabetes Care and Research in Europe
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Commons)	USA	10–12 October 1999	International Initiative seminar on Building Strong Communications to Support Families
Parliamentary Under- Secretary of State for Health	Finland	12–13 October 1999	Representing United Kingdom at European Union Presidency meeting
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health	Belgium	17–18 November 1999	European Union Health Council Meeting

Correspondence

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the hon. Member for Walsall, North will receive a reply to his letter of 31 January regarding a constituent Ref. POH(6)5608/39. [114351]

Ms Stuart: My noble Friend Lord Hunt of Kings Heath announced on 9 February that insulin pen needles would be available on general practitioner prescription from 1 March, and a reply will be sent to my hon. Friend very shortly.

Controlled Drug Stocks

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to seek an amendment of the law to permit hospital operating department practitioners lawfully to possess a stock of such controlled drugs as they may lawfully administer. [113558]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I have been asked to reply.

We have no plans to amend the misuse of drugs legislation to authorise operating department practitioners (ODPs) to possess a stock of controlled drugs.

The Misuse of Drugs Regulations 1985 authorise certain health professionals to order, supply, possess or prescribe controlled drugs in the practice of their professions. They include doctors, dentists, pharmacists, nurses and midwives, all of whom are subject to statutory regulation. ODPs—which are not a statutorily regulated profession—are not authorised to supply or possess controlled drugs. The 1985 Regulations also authorise any person other than a doctor to administer to a patient, in accordance with the directions of a doctor, any drug specified in schedule 2, 3 or 4 of the regulations.

Where a doctor, nurse or midwife supplies or possesses a controlled drug other than in the practice of their professions, the regulatory bodies are able to investigate and take appropriate action. Statutory regulatory bodies can also, if necessary, remove individuals from the professional register. This helps to ensure that health professionals employed within the NHS or private health care sector do not represent a risk to patients, colleagues or themselves.

We do not consider that the 1985 Regulations should be amended to authorise ODPs to supply and possess controlled drugs unless that group becomes subject to statutory regulation.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

University Funding

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what percentage increase in spending on universities he has provided for in the forthcoming financial year; and if he will make a statement. [113887]

Mr. Wicks: In the 2000–01 financial year, the Government have made an extra £253 million available to the higher education sector. This is a 4.9 per cent. increase in cash terms. Over the period 1998–99 to 2001–02, funding for the higher education sector will increase by 11 per cent. in real terms.

Class Sizes

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many children in *(a)* secondary, *(b)* junior and *(c)* nursery schools are in classes of over 30; and what the totals were in each of the previous five years. [113888]

Ms Estelle Morris: The available information on class sizes in maintained primary and secondary schools in England for January and September is shown in the following table. The latest class size count was carried out in September 1999 for infant classes and found a further reduction in the numbers of infant pupils in classes of over 30. Information about classes in maintained nursery schools is not collected by the Department.

Provisional national estimates of class sizes in maintained primary and secondary schools in England for January 2000 are expected to be published in a Statistical First Release in April.

Numbers of pupils in classes with 31 or more pupils in maintained primary and secondary schools in England: 1995–1999

	Primary schools[1]			Secondary schools[1]		
	1 Teacher	*2 or more teachers*	*Total*	*1 Teacher*	*2 or more teachers*	*Total*
Position as at January:						
1999	1,277,250	119,249	1,396,499	312,974	36,114	349,088
1998	1,410,762	122,979	1,533,741	282,633	33,156	315,789
1997	1,344,231	121,559	1,465,790	245,420	38,749	284,169
1996	1,260,551	128,581	1,389,132	234,536	48,640	283,176
1995	1,155,715	129,885	1,285,600	201,210	57,435	258,645

[1] Includes middle schools

Numbers of pupils in infant classes with 31 or more pupils in maintained primary schools in England: 1998–99

	Number
Position as at September	
1999	165,557
1998	346,288

New Deal

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will state the number and percentage of participants in the New Deal for 25 years and over in *(a)* Great Britain, *(b)* Scotland and *(c)* Wales who have returned to (i) Jobseeker's Allowance, (ii) other benefits and (iii) unsubsidised employment through the New Deal; and if he will list the areas in Scotland where a larger percentage then the (A) Great Britain and (B) Scottish average figure have moved on to one of the categories in (i) to (iii) including the number and percentage in each area and for each category. [111281]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 22 February 2000]:* The information requested is as follows:

(i) Percentage of participants in the New Deal 25+ returning to Jobseeker's Allowance

	Percentage
Scotland	32
Wales	28
Great Britain	29

Scottish Units of Delivery with a larger percentage of participants in the New Deal 25+ who have returned to JSA, than the GB average

	Left New Deal for JSA	*As a percentage of New Deal starts*
Tayside	707	36
Ayrshire	952	38
Borders	68	30
Dumfries and Galloway	311	36
Dumbarton	466	37
Fife	493	37
Grampian	253	38
Moray, Strathspay and Badenoch	82	32
Renfrewshire	519	34
West Lothian	79	30
Caithness and Sutherland	116	31
Inverness and Nairn	97	33
Orkney	34	35

Scottish Units of Delivery with a larger percentage of participants in the New Deal 25+ who have returned to JSA, than the Scotland average

	Left New Deal for JSA	*As a percentage of New Deal starts*
Tayside	707	36
Ayrshire	952	38
Dumfries and Galloway	311	36
Dumbarton	466	37
Fife	493	37
Grampian	253	38
Renfrewshire	519	34
Inverness and Nairn	97	33
Orkney	34	35

(ii) Percentage of New Deal 25+ participants who leave and claim other benefits

	Percentage
Scotland	8
Wales	8
Great Britain	7

Scottish Units of Delivery with a larger percentage of participants in the New Deal 25+ who have returned to other benefits, than the GB average

	Left New Deal for other benefits	*As a percentage of New Deal starts*
Tayside	158	8
Dumbarton	108	9
Forth Valley	31	15
Grampian	61	9
Lanarkshire	174	10
Renfrewshire	129	8
Argyll and The Islands	39	9
Caithness and Sutherland	28	8
Inverness and Nairn	28	9
Lochaber	9	13
Western Isles	9	16
Orkney	9	9
Ross and Cromarty	18	9
Shetland	5	12
Skye and Lochalsh	12	11

Scottish Units of Delivery with a larger percentage of participants in the New Deal 25+ who have returned to other benefits, than the Scotland average

	Left New Deal for other benefits	*As a percentage of New Deal starts*
Dumbarton	108	9
Forth Valley	31	15
Grampian	61	9
Lanarkshire	174	10

Scottish Units of Delivery with a larger percentage of participants in the New Deal 25+ who have returned to other benefits, than the Scotland average

	Left New Deal for other benefits	*As a percentage of New Deal starts*
Argyll and The Islands	39	9
Inverness and Nairn	28	9
Lochaber	9	13
Western Isles	9	16
Orkney	9	9
Ross and Cromarty	18	9
Shetland	5	12
Skye and Lochalsh	12	11

(iii) Percentage of New Deal participants who leave for unsubsidised jobs

	Percentage
Scotland	10
Wales	13
Great Britain	13

Scottish Units of Delivery with a larger percentage of participants in the New Deal 25+ who have returned to unsubsidised jobs, than the GB average

	Left New Deal for unsubsidised jobs	*As a percentage of New Deal starts*
Forth Valley	42	20
West Lothian	36	14
Inverness and Nairn	40	14
Western Isles	8	14
Orkney	15	15
Ross and Cromarty	34	18
Shetland	7	17
Skye and Lochalsh	16	15

Scottish Units of Delivery with a larger percentage of participants in the New Deal 25+ who have returned to other benefits, than the Scotland average

	Left New Deal for unsubsidised jobs	*As a percentage of New Deal starts*
Edinburgh, East and Mid Lothian	239	13
Forth Valley	42	20
Grampian	70	11
Lanarkshire	194	11
West Lothian	36	14
Argyll and The Islands	53	12
Caithness and Sutherland	42	11
Inverness and Nairn	40	14
Western Isles	8	14
Orkney	15	15
Ross and Cromarty	34	18
Shetland	7	17
Skye and Lochalsh	16	15

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will state the percentage of participants in the New Deal for 18 to 24 year olds in *(a)* Great Britain *(b)* Scotland and *(c)* Wales who have received (i) subsidised employment and (ii) education and training through the New Deal; and if he will list the areas in Scotland where a smaller percentage than the (1) Great Britain and (2) Scottish average figures have these options, including the number and percentage of participants for each of these areas.

[111278]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 22 February 2000]:* The information requested is shown in the tables. For subsidised employment and education and training we have used the numbers for the Employment and Full Time Education and Training Options respectively.

Employment option:

Percentage of New Deal starts who join the Employment option

	Percentage
Scotland	9
Wales	11
Great Britain	7

Scottish units of delivery with a smaller percentage of participants in the New Deal (18–24 year olds) who have received subsidised Employment than the Great Britain average

	Employment option starts	*Percentage of New Deal starts joining the Employment option*
Glasgow	508	6
Grampian	88	5
Renfrewshire	145	5
Lochaber	5	6

Scottish units of delivery with a smaller percentage of participants in the New Deal (18–24 year olds) who have received subsidised Employment than the Scotland average

	Employment option starts	*Percentage of New Deal starts joining the Employment option*
Dumbarton	128	7
Fife	269	8
Forth Valley	198	8
Glasgow	508	6
Grampian	88	5
Renfrewshire	145	5
West Lothian	78	7
Caithness and Sutherland	18	7
Lochaber	5	6

FTET option:

Percentage of New Deal starts who join the FTET option

	Perception
Scotland	15
Wales	14
Great Britain	16

Scottish units of delivery with a smaller percentage of participants in the New Deal (18–24 year olds) who have received education and training through the New Deal than the Great Britain average

	FTET option starts	*Percentage of New Deal starts joining the FTET option*
Tayside	591	14
Ayrshire	511	12
Borders	89	13
Edinburgh, East and Mid Lothian	429	12
Grampian	203	12
Moray, Strathspay and Badenoch	47	10
Lanarkshire	942	15
Renfrewshire	371	13
West Lothian	127	12
Argyll and The Islands	37	8
Inverness and Nairn	59	15
Lochaber	6	7
Orkney	6	9
Shetland	8	13
Skye and Lochalsh	7	8
	6,760	15

Scottish units of delivery with a smaller percentage of participants in the New Deal (18–24 year olds) who have received education and training through the New Deal than the Great Britain average

	FTET option starts	*Percentage of New Deal starts joining the FTET option*
Tayside	591	14
Ayrshire	511	12
Borders	89	13
Edinburgh, East and Mid Lothian	429	12
Grampian	203	12
Moray, Strathspay and Badenoch	47	10
Renfrewshire	371	13
West Lothian	127	12
Argyll and The Islands	37	8
Lochaber	6	7
Orkney	6	9
Shetland	8	13
Skye and Lochalsh	7	8

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will state the percentage of participants in the New Deal for 18 to 24-year-olds in *(a)* Great Britain, *(b)* Scotland and *(c)* Wales who have gone through to the follow-through stage of the New Deal; and if he will list the areas in Scotland where a larger percentage than the (i) Great Britain and (ii) Scottish average figures have gone on to the follow-through stage. [111277]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 22 February 2000]:* The information requested is as follows:

Percentage of New Deal participants who join Follow-Through

	Percentage
Scotland	20
Wales	20
Great Britain	17

Scottish Units of Delivery with a larger percentage of participants (18 to 24-year-olds) who have gone through to the follow-through stage of the New Deal, than the GB average

Tayside
Ayrshire
Borders
Dumfries and Galloway
Dumbarton
Edinburgh, East and Mid Lothian
Fife
Forth Valley
Glasgow
Moray, Strathspay and Badenoch
Lanarkshire
Renfrewshire
West Lothian
Caithness and Sutherland
Inverness and Nairn
Western Isles
Ross and Cromarty

Scottish Units of Delivery with a larger percentage of participants (18 to 24-year-olds) who have gone through to the follow-through stage of the New Deal, than Scotland Average

Tayside
Ayrshire
Borders
Dumfries and Galloway
Fife
Forth Valley
Moray, Strathspay and Badenoch

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the impact of the New Deal scheme in reducing youth unemployment in *(a)* Shrewsbury and Atcham and *(b)* Shropshire. [111069]

Ms Jowell: To the end of December 1999, 155 young people in Shrewsbury and Atcham and 1,037 in Shropshire had found jobs through the New Deal. Over the year to the end of January 2000, the numbers of young people who had been unemployed for six months or more fell by 59 per cent. in Shrewsbury and Atcham and 33 per cent. in Shropshire. This confirms that the New Deal is equipping young people with the skills and attributes that they need to compete successfully in the labour market. Indeed 146 young people in Shrewsbury and Atcham and 592 people in Shropshire have benefited from training and work experience opportunities on the other options.

Statemented Children

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what changes have been made to the consent arrangements in respect of placing individual children with a statement in non-approved independent schools since the publication of the Green Paper, entitled "Excellence for all Children: Meeting Special Education Needs". [113916]

Jacqui Smith: My Department will shortly consult on proposals for the placement of children with statements of special educational needs in independent schools. Earlier consultation had been intended, but we wished to ensure that our proposals for this sector would reflect relevant recommendations arising from the recently published report of the Tribunal of Inquiry into the abuse of children in care in North Wales.

Our intention will be to ensure that children are placed only in schools that can both meet their educational needs and safeguard their welfare.

Standard Spending Assessment

Mr. Ronnie Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will estimate the standard spending assessment in *(a)* cash and *(b)* real terms for primary and secondary pupils for (i) England and (ii) Northumberland county council for each year from 1990 to 2000; and what is his estimate for 2000–01. [114140]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information requested is shown in the following tables.

Standard Spending Assessment

£

Year/Cash figures	*Northumberland*	*England*
1990–91		
Per primary pupil	1,435	1,539
Per secondary pupil	2,036	2,176
1991–92		
Per primary pupil	1,641	1,766
Per secondary pupil	2,377	2,549
1992–93		
Per primary pupil	1,743	1,873
Per secondary pupil	2,544	2,724
1993–94		
Per primary pupil	1,784	1,921
Per secondary pupil	2,587	2,775
1994–95		
Per primary pupil	1,838	1,968
Per secondary pupil	2,566	2,741
1995–96		
Per primary pupil	1,825	1,981
Per secondary pupil	2,421	2,630
1996–97		
Per primary pupil	1,935	2,053
Per secondary pupil	2,582	2,728
1997–98		
Per primary pupil	2,016	2,130
Per secondary pupil	2,638	2,782
1998–99		
Per primary pupil	2,120	2,248
Per secondary pupil	2,765	2,918
1999–2000		
Per primary pupil	2,240	2,372
Per secondary pupil	2,877	3,031
2000–01		
Per primary pupil	2,332	2,474
Per secondary pupil	3,014	3,175

Real Terms using 1998–99 prices

£

Year	*Northumberland*	*England*
1990–91		
Per primary pupil	1,848	1,982
Per secondary pupil	2,622	2,803
1991–92		
Per primary pupil	1,991	2,142
Per secondary pupil	2,883	3,091
1992–93		
Per primary pupil	2,046	2,199
Per secondary pupil	2,987	3,198
1993–94		
Per primary pupil	2,041	2,197
Per secondary pupil	2,958	3,174
1994–95		
Per primary pupil	2,072	2,219
Per secondary pupil	2,894	3,091
1995–96		
Per primary pupil	2,000	2,171
Per secondary pupil	2,654	2,882
1996–97		
Per primary pupil	2,055	2,180
Per secondary pupil	2,741	2,896
1997–98		
Per primary pupil	2,082	2,199
Per secondary pupil	2,724	2,873
1998–99		
Per primary pupil	2,120	2,248
Per secondary pupil	2,765	2,918
1999–2000		
Per primary pupil	2,190	2,320
Per secondary pupil	2,814	2,964
2000–01		
Per primary pupil	2,225	2,360
Per secondary pupil	2,875	3,030

Notes:

1. The figures were calculated using the Treasury GDP deflators published 22 December 1999.
2. 1998–99 has been used as the base year for calculations.

School Places (West Sussex)

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many extra pupils he expects to enter West Sussex schools over the next 15 years. [114393]

Ms Estelle Morris: This information is not collected by my Department. The latest projections from individual local education authorities, submitted as part of their annual returns on surplus places, relate to 2002–03 for primary pupil numbers and 2005–06 for secondary pupil numbers.

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the likely impact of additional housebuilding in West Sussex on provision of school places over the next 15 years. [114392]

Ms Estelle Morris: It is for local education authorities to plan and keep under review the supply of school places in the light of proposed housing development, so as to ensure that there is sufficient provision to meet demand. Regional planning guidance for the South-East will be finalised later this year and this will assist West Sussex Local Education Authority in its planning decisions. Where an LEA can demonstrate growth in need for school places it may apply to the Department for capital funding.

Ofsted

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what guidance he has issued on the appointment of Ofsted inspectors; how many Ofsted inspectors have been appointed in total; and how many of these are members of an ethnic minority. [114164]

Ms Estelle Morris: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has not issued any guidance on the appointment of inspectors. The other parts of the question were answered by Chris Woodhead in a written reply to the hon. Member on 28 February 2000. Copies of the letter are in the Libraries.

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the individuals employed or used by Ofsted to undertake inspections of schools, other educational establishments and education authorities, indicating with what private consultancies each is associated. [113659]

Ms Estelle Morris: This is a matter for HM Chief Inspector of Schools and I have therefore asked Chris Woodhead to write to my hon. Friend and to place a copy of his letter in the Library.

Child Care Costs

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will estimate the average weekly cost of full-time child care provision for a child aged *(a)* zero to two and *(b)* two to five (i) in a nursery place and (ii) with a registered childminder; and what variations exist between average child care costs in each setting in each region in England and Wales. [110548]

Ms Hodge: The Department does not have information on child care payments in the detailed form requested.

DfEE Research Report No. 176 "Parents' Demand for Childcare" includes analysis of weekly household child care payments. For households with pre-school children only, the average (mean) weekly child care payment among those who paid some money for child care was £68. Fourteen per cent. of these households had weekly child care payments over £100.

This analysis covers a range of households, many of which will be using small amounts of paid child care, and includes non-working households. It also covers a range of child care types.

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he will reply to the question tabled by the hon. Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North on 14 February (ref. 110548) relating to child care provision. [113925]

Ms Hodge: *[holding answer 10 March 2000]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the reply above.

PE and Sport

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what action he is taking to ensure that students on teacher training courses acquire the skills to teach PE and sport to a high standard; and if he will make a statement. [113657]

Ms Estelle Morris: We recognise the need to ensure that initial teacher training (ITT) equips trainees with the confidence and skills they need to deliver a broad and balanced curriculum in all the foundation subjects, including PE. We are addressing issues in relation to PE and sport through our wider reforms to improve the quality and flexibility of ITT provision. The Teacher Training Agency (TTA) is also addressing training in PE and sport as part of its review of the ITT Curriculum and Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) Standards.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what action he is taking to ensure Ofsted monitors the quality, range and overall level of provision for PE and sport provided by primary and secondary schools. [113658]

Ms Estelle Morris: The requirements for the inspection of schools are a matter for HM Chief Inspector. I have therefore asked Chris Woodhead to write to my hon. Friend and to place a copy of his reply in the Library.

School Exclusions

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many pupils were excluded from school *(a)* in total and *(b)* as a percentage of the school population for each of the past 10 years. [113278]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* The number of permanent exclusions from maintained schools (except Special Schools) submitting returns under the voluntary National Exclusions Reporting System which covered the period from April 1990 to April 1992 was 2,910 in year one and 3,833 in year two.

My Department first began collecting data on permanent exclusions from maintained schools in England in relation to the school year 1994–95 and the latest available data relate to the school year 1997–98. The available figures are shown in the table.

Information on permanent exclusions for the academic year 1998–99 is currently being collected and national estimates are expected to be published in a Statistical First Release in May.

Number and percentage of pupils who were permanently excluded from maintained primary and secondary schools and special schools[1] in England: 1994–95 to 1997–98

	Number of permanent exclusions	*Percentage of school population[2]*
1997–98	12,298	0.16
1996–97	12,668	0.17
1995–96	12,476	0.17
1994–95[3]	11,084	0.15

[1] Includes both maintained and non-maintained special schools.

[2] The number of permanent exclusions expressed as a percentage of the number (headcount) of full-time and part-time pupils of all ages.

[1] The number of permanent exclusions was estimated to take account of a small number of schools that did not provide any information on their permanent exclusions (excluding dually registered pupils in special schools) in January of the academic year.

Equal Opportunities

Ms Drown: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many *(a)* inquiries and *(b)* requests for assistance were received by (i) the Equal Opportunities Commission and (ii) the Commission for Racial Equality in each of the last two years, in respect of (1) all areas and (2) further education; and how many requests for assistance were taken up in each case. [113493]

Ms Hodge: In 1998, the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) handled 34,857 inquiries and considered 225 requests for assistance in all areas. The EOC supported 81 of these cases. The EOC does not hold separate data on the number of inquiries and requests for assistance for Further Education cases.

In the same year the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) dealt with approximately 7,000 inquiries and received 1,657 requests for assistance, of which 43 were from the Further Education sector (including Sixth Form Colleges). The CRE provided some form of representation in 378 cases, including six Further Education cases.

Details of inquiries and assistance for 1999 for both equality bodies will be available later this year after the publication of their respective Annual Reports.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Crime (Slough)

16. **Fiona Mactaggart:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent discussions he has had with the chief constable of the Thames Valley police about tackling crime in Slough. [112588]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I have had no recent discussions with the chief constable of the Thames Valley police on this subject.

Local Elections

17. **Ms Ward:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what election pilot projects for the forthcoming local elections have been approved; and if he will make a statement. [112589]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Forty-two pilot schemes have been provisionally approved by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary.

Of these, 16 involve early voting, eight involve all postal ballots, six involve electronic voting or counting, four involve extension of postal vote entitlement, four involve a mobile polling facility, two involve extension of hours of poll, one involves weekend voting and one involves freepost arrangements.

Safe Cells

18. **Mr. Bob Russell:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many safe cells will be installed in prisons in the next financial year. [112590]

Mr. Boateng: All new prisons are required to provide cells which reflect the design requirements of the Prison Service's new improved standard cell or "safe cell".

All future new prisons will similarly be required to reflect the design requirements of the Prison Service's new improved standard cell.

Youth Offenders (Greater Manchester)

19. **Ms Coffey:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent discussions he has had with the Greater Manchester police force about known youth offenders. [112591]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Through the Youth Justice Board for England and Wales we have been discussing with the police and other agencies in Greater Manchester their involvement as one of the Board's nine pathway areas, which will act as examples of good practice in work with young offenders. The Board is investing more than £5 million over three years in Greater Manchester from its development fund for this purpose.

Passports (Compensation)

20. **Mr. Syms:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much compensation has been paid to holiday makers who were unable to obtain passports during the summer of 1999; and if he will make a statement. [112592]

Mrs. Roche: In 1999, the Passport Agency paid around £124,000 in compensation to customers who missed holidays as a result of delays last summer in issuing their passports.

Stop and Search

21. **Mr. Efford:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the effectiveness of stop and search in the prevention and detection of crime. [112593]

Mr. Charles Clarke: We strongly support the proper use of stop and search as an essential tool in the prevention and detection of crime, as did the report of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry, published in February 1999. However, it is essential that these powers are used fairly, to command the confidence of all sections of the community. We have commissioned a wide-ranging programme of research to help broaden understanding of stop and search and how it can be improved. This includes a project focusing on the value of stop and search as a tool to detect and prevent crime.

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the impact on his policy of Article 5 of the ECHR on his policy on the detention element involved in police stop and search operations. [114377]

Mr. Charles Clarke: We believe that the police power of stop and search is compatible with the Convention, provided of course that it is exercised lawfully.

Crime Reduction (Five-year Targets)

22. **Mr. Linton:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he plans to publish the final

five-year targets for crime reduction for each police authority; and what measures he intends to take to help police authorities reach their targets. [112594]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Police authorities are required to publish their Best Value Performance Plans by 31 March each year. These will include their crime reduction targets. The Crime Reduction Strategy published on 29 November sets out in detail the Government's approach to reducing crime.

Security Services (Parliamentary Oversight)

23. **Mr. Mackinlay:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on parliamentary oversight of the Security Services and the Metropolitan police following the implementation of the Greater London Authority Act 1999. [112595]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Oversight of the Security Service is provided for by the Security Service Act 1989 and the Intelligence Services Act 1994.

For the Metropolitan police, the Greater London Authority Act 1999 sets up a new, independent Police Authority that will be responsible for securing an efficient and effective police force and for holding the Metropolitan police to account.

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will have a continuing responsibility for the national and international functions of the Metropolitan police. He will also continue to have responsibility for the promotion of an efficient and effective police service in England and Wales, of which the Metropolitan police is a significant part. He will be accountable to Parliament in exercising those duties.

Domestic Violence

24. **Mrs. Brinton:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps the Government are taking to tackle domestic violence. [112596]

25. **Ms Christine Russell:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what measures the Government are taking to tackle domestic violence. [112597]

Mr. Boateng: We have:

run a successful 'Break the Chain' campaign specifically against domestic violence;

published a joint Home Office/Women's Unit document 'Living without Fear: an integrated approach to tackling violence against women';

taken steps to improve the collection of statistics by introducing better definition of what should be counted as a domestic violence incident;

announced a specific initiative within the Crime Reduction Programme on violence against women: the major component of this is the provision of at least £4.5 million for the funding of projects to reduce both physical and sexual domestic violence; and

issued new guidance to the criminal justice and other agencies that deal with the survivors of domestic violence.

Asylum Seekers

26. **Mr. Burns:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the additional responsibilities local authorities will have to look after asylum seekers from 1 April. [112598]

Mrs. Roche: Local authorities will have no additional statutory responsibilities to look after asylum seekers from 1 April.

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum seekers were being housed in each of the London borough council authorities on 1 March. [113430]

Mrs. Roche: The latest available information is given in the table and shows the number of asylum seekers supported by each London Borough Council authority. All of those receiving support from these local authorities are also being accommodated.

Number of asylum seekers being supported by each London Borough Council authority in the week ending 18 February 2000

Borough	*Total number of asylum seekers*	*Unaccompanied minors*[1]	*Single adults*[2]	*Number of families*[3]	*Number of people in families*
Barking and Dagenham	2,540	110	830	530	1,590
Barnet[4]	1,400	50	260	330	1,090
Bexley	420	80	100	60	240
Brent	1,880	50	560	430	1,270
Bromley[4]	520	40	170	90	310
Camden	1,790	80	420	370	1,300
Corporation of London[4]	170	—	90	20	70
Croydon	920	140	170	180	610
Ealing[4]	1,240	—	400	250	850
Enfield[4]	1,970	60	420	550	1,490
Greenwich[4]	1,910	50	860	360	1,000
Hackney	2,420	—	920	480	1,500
Hammersmith and Fulham[4]	2,340	160	650	460	1,530
Haringey[4]	5,040	350	1,210	1,050	3,480
Harrow[4]	760	40	160	150	560
Havering	660	110	290	70	250
Hillingdon	2,000	440	800	230	750
Hounslow[4]	960	30	230	270	710
Islington[4]	2,360	220	1,280	460	860
Kensington and Chelsea	1,820	110	810	280	910
Kingston-upon-Thames	300	20	80	60	210
Lambeth[4]	2,940	150	1,040	580	1,750
Lewisham	2,450	90	1,000	430	1,370
Merton[4]	910	—	260	190	660
Newham	5,870	70	1,270	1,350	4,530

Number of asylum seekers being supported by each London Borough Council authority in the week ending 18 February 2000

Borough	*Total number of asylum seekers*	*Unaccompanied minors*[1]	*Single adults*[2]	*Number of families*[3]	*Number of people in families*
Redbridge[4]	2,180	220	730	380	1,230
Richmond-upon-Thames[4]	1,670	220	690	220	750
Southwark	3,060	190	1,130	570	1,740
Sutton	570	50	250	90	270
Tower Hamlets	750	10	270	140	470
Waltham Forest	2,270	—	1,160	500	1,110
Wandsworth[4]	980	20	200	220	760
Westminster	2,300	140	740	430	1,420
Total	59,350	3,320	19,420	11,750	36,610

[1] Unaccompanied children under 17
[2] A significant proportion of the single adults live in other areas of the country but the accommodation is organised by London local authority
[3] Families include cases with only dependant adults
[4] Updated figures not yet reported, figures taken from previous report

Drugs and Crime

27. **Mr. Khabra:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the links between the commission of crime and the illegal trade in hard drugs. [112599]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Research carried out for the Home Office has clearly established the link between drugs, particularly heroin and crack/cocaine, and crime. The Drug Testing of Arrestees research programme suggests that about one third of all property crime is committed in order to buy these drugs.

The Government are determined to break the link between drugs and crime. Initiatives in hand include piloting the Drug Treatment and Testing Order with a view to national roll-out later this year. £20 million is also being invested in a joint funding initiative with the police to speed up the development of arrest referral schemes. Proposals are also being developed to extend drug testing across the criminal justice system in order to identify drug misusing offenders, get them into treatment where appropriate and monitor their progress.

Immigration

29. **Ms Oona King:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the progress of efforts to reduce the backlog of outstanding immigration cases at the Immigration and Nationality Directorate. [112601]

Mrs. Roche: New, streamlined procedures have been developed to speed up the consideration of all immigration (i.e. non-asylum) applications, and management changes introduced to maximise operational efficiency. Over 70 per cent. of new applications are now being decided under fast track procedures, most of them within a week. A dedicated team is tackling the backlog of general and settlement casework, at present concentrating on marriage cases.

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many applications were made for UK nationality at the Immigration and Nationality Office in Croydon during 1999. [112580]

Mrs. Roche: All applications for British citizenship are dealt with by the Integrated Casework Directorate in Liverpool. The number of applications received during 1999 is estimated at 76,500.

Police Numbers (West Mercia)

30. **Mr. Paterson:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on police numbers in West Mercia. [112602]

Mr. Charles Clarke: At the end of September 1999, the West Mercia Constabulary had 1,979 police officers. Following the passage of the Police and Magistrates' Court Act 1994, the actual number of police officers at any one time is a matter for the Chief Constable to determine within the available resources.

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary announced the allocation of additional police posts under the Crime Fighting Fund in a reply given to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Elmet (Mr. Burgon) on 9 February 2000, *Official Report*, columns 172–74W. As a result, the West Mercia Police Authority will receive sufficient funding for 89 police posts over the next three years in addition to the planned recruitment over that period.

Political Asylum

31. **Mr. Fabricant:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people are currently seeking political asylum in the United Kingdom. [112603]

Mrs. Roche: At the end of January 2000, there were 104,890 people seeking asylum in the United Kingdom whose applications remained undecided.

Crime Fighting (Derbyshire)

32. **Mr. Barnes:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received following the recent allocation of funding to the Derbyshire Constabulary from the Crime Fighting Fund. [112604]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I have received no representations about the allocation of funding to Derbyshire Constabulary from the Crime Fighting Fund.

UK Visas

33. **Mr. Gardiner:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he has determined the amounts of the financial bond to be applied in the experimental pilots for UK visas. [112605]

Mrs. Roche: No. The amount of the bond was one of the issues on which comments were sought in the consultation paper issued last year. Responses to the consultation are currently being assessed.

Probation Service

34. **Mr. Kidney:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on progress in his plans for reforming the Probation Service. [112607]

Mr. Boateng: The Government plan to create a unified service for England and Wales, which will have a national headquarters and 42 local boards. Provision for the structural changes needed to achieve this will be included in the forthcoming Criminal Justice and Court Services Bill. We expect these changes to create a service which is better able to play its part in protecting the public and reducing re-offending. The new service will concentrate on enforcing community sentences so that they command public confidence, and will use offender programmes—the What Works programmes—which have a proven record in reducing re-offending behaviour. Work on improving enforcement and implementing What Works is already well under way.

Young Offenders

35. **Mr. Blizzard:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to prevent re-offending by young people awaiting trial. [112608]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Youth Justice Board for England and Wales is investing more than £18 million over three years from its development fund to strengthen the local provision of bail support and supervision schemes. From 1 April, local authorities, working in partnership with other agencies in youth offending teams, will be placed under a duty under section 38 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 to ensure such provision is available.

Crime Fighting (New Technology)

36. **Mr. Woolas:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what measures he is taking to ensure that new technology is properly used in the fight against crime. [112609]

Mr. Charles Clarke: We are taking a comprehensive range of measures to ensure that new technology is used more effectively to tackle crime.

The newly formed Property Crime Reduction Action team is taking forward work with industry to encourage the comprehensive electronic tagging or "chipping" of goods. The ability to track and trace goods effectively will have far-reaching implications for commerce and crime reduction.

Under the £153 million Closed Circuit Television Initiative, over £48 million has currently been allocated to some 280 schemes in England and Wales. All proposals are closely scrutinised to ensure Closed Circuit Television will contribute effectively to crime reduction as part of a wider local crime reduction strategy, and that the technology is used fairly and lawfully.

We are developing proposals for the greater use of automatic number plate recognition systems by police forces.

The Police Scientific Development Branch of the Home Office provides technical, operational and policy support and also experimental development and research for all United Kingdom Police forces and the Home Office.

We are improving the use of Information Technology systems by the Police Service. The National Strategy for Police Information Systems (NSPIS) is a vehicle to enable better procurement and use of Information Technology. A major part of the NSPIS programme is the production of national software for police use. The Police Information Technology Organisation is developing the common data and technical architectures needed to support that software. These are being designed to ensure interworking between forces, inter-operability between systems in different forces and standard interfaces between police systems and those elsewhere within the criminal justice system.

The Police Information Technology Organisation is also rolling out a £120 million national automated fingerprint system (NAFIS) which will be capable of supporting a database of over 54 million ten-print sets and two million crime scene marks. It will be possible to process over 5,000 ten-prints and 5,000 scene of crime marks each day and make over one million fingerprint comparisons every second. The roll out will be completed by April 2001. We are also investing an extra £34 million over the next two years to expand the DNA database.

We are funding a project to assess the effectiveness of applying enhanced forensic science techniques to scenes of crime in identifying and successfully prosecuting those involved. That complements the expansion of the DNA database.

The Government will legislate when parliamentary time allows to give the police bulk access, through the Police National Computer (PNC), to the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency's driver records. Steps are also in hand to give the police ready access through the PNC to the Motor Insurance Industry database of insured drivers (which would become operational in 2001) and to computerised MOT records (which should be available from late 2002).

We are funding the Foresight Crime Prevention Panel which is identifying future opportunities for using advances in technology to reduce crime. It will publish a consultation document later this month.

The Council of Europe is currently negotiating a cybercrime convention (most provisions are already in United Kingdom law) in which the United Kingdom is now a leading player. This is due for completion in December 2000. The United Kingdom is also working with its G8 partners in the High-tech Crime sub-group, looking at innovative and novel solutions to internet crime.

Ballot Arrangements

37. **Mr. Gordon Prentice:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will introduce

legislation to regulate the procedures and modus operandi of organisations which make arrangements for ballots. [112610]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: No. Organisations are responsible for their own ballot procedures.

Rural Crime

38. **Charlotte Atkins:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what action his Department is taking to combat the increase in rural crime. [112611]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Both the level of crime and the fear of crime remain lower in rural areas than in urban or inner-city areas, but this does not mean that there is room for complacency.

The key to tackling rural crime lies in partnerships. The Crime and Disorder Act 1998 provisions relating to the establishment of crime reduction partnerships, the conduct of audits and the drawing up of strategies enable specific rural concerns to be addressed with the involvement of all the interested parties, including the rural community and rural voluntary organisations. In addition, the Best Value duty, placed on police authorities from April, will involve wide local consultation and provide a framework for the review of all police activities, including how they respond to the concerns of rural communities..

To recognise the additional demands in tackling rural crime, the police funding formula includes a sparsity element. The position of rural police forces has improved steadily since 1997; in the current financial year their budgets will increase on average by 3.6 per cent., compared with around 2.7 per cent. for the metropolitan forces. The ring-fenced Crime Fighting Fund to provide money for extra police officers on the ground will also benefit rural forces.

Other funding provision includes a number of successful bids in the first round of Closed Circuit Television funding which cover rural areas, and rural bids will feature specifically in the second round. Targeted policing initiatives funded within the Crime Reduction Programme may also cover rural areas. The Home Office Joint Funding Initiative will match-fund the police service and other local partners in the setting up of Arrest Referral Schemes and the purchase of drug treatment. This is expected to have a significant impact on rural crime committed to support drug misuse and on fear of crime.

A number of "Watch" schemes are of particular relevance to the countryside, including Farm, Horse, Country and Poacher Watch. There are over 500 Farm Watch schemes covering offences from theft of equipment to rustling, and the Plant Theft Action Group of the Vehicle Crime Reduction Action Team is developing work to improve security for farm equipment by bringing it more up to the standard that already exists for cars.

Police Training (Hendon)

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police cadets have begun training at Hendon on each of the courses commencing since 1 January; and what is the capacity of each course. [112600]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner informs me that the Metropolitan Police Cadet Corps was disbanded in 1993. Two police officer recruit courses have commenced at Hendon since 1 January; 103 recruits began training on 4 January and 58 on 7 February. Numbers for courses do not have to be limited, because the deployment of Hendon's resources is flexible.

Crime Reduction Partnerships

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what reports he has received about the contribution made by *(a)* social services departments, *(b)* health authorities and *(c)* local education authorities to meetings of crime reduction partnerships; and if he will make a statement. [114364]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Crime and Disorder Act 1998 requires the council and police in every area to work in partnership with a wide range of other agencies, including health authorities, to develop and implement a strategy to reduce crime and disorder in the area. The Act required the first strategies to be in place by April 1999.

The essence of these arrangements is that different agencies should work together in a single partnership and together contribute to the common goal of reducing crime and maintaining safety and good order. We have not called for reports on the contributions made by any specific services, although the Report of the Statutory Partnership Task Force last year drew attention in the course of its survey of a representative sample of 12 partnerships to particular instances of the contributions made by, for example, health and education services.

Disclosure of Evidence Requirements

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what reports he has received from police forces about the effect of requirements as to the disclosure of evidence upon the efficient use of police manpower; and if he will make a statement. [114363]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Fair disclosure to an accused of unused prosecution material is an inseparable part of a fair trial. The present disclosure provisions in the Criminal Procedure and Investigations Act 1996 came into effect on 1 April 1997. As part of its general responsibility to evaluate new legislation the Government have commissioned an independent research study to evaluate all aspects of the working of the disclosure provisions. This will include an examination of the resource implications for the police as well as prosecutors in carrying out their disclosure responsibilities. The research began at the end of January and will be completed by early next year.

Prison Staff (Assaults)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many assaults on prison staff there were in each of the London prisons in 1999. [113602]

Mr. Boateng: Official statistics on assaults in prisons are provided by the Research, Development and Statistics Directorate of the Home Office. These are based on proven adjudications of assault dealt with by prison disciplinary procedures and the information is provided in the table. There is no central collation of information

concerning cases of assaults by prisoners that were pursued through the courts. This could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Number of proven adjudications on offences of assault on a member of prison staff, January to December 1999[1]

Prison establishments in Greater London	*Number of proven offences*
Belmarsh	86
Brixton	66
Downview	2
Feltham	109
High Down	65
Holloway	111
Latchmere House	—
Pentonville	128
Wandsworth	60
Wormwood Scrubs	46
Total	673

[1] Provisional

Animal Experiments

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prosecutions there were under the Animal Scientific Procedures Act 1986 in 1999; and if he will make a statement. [113601]

Mr. Charles Clarke: There were no prosecutions during 1999.

Updated advice on infringements, offences and penalties will be provided in the extended Home Office Guidance on the Operation of the 1986 Act, which I plan to bring to the House shortly. Sections 22, 23 and 24 of the Act set out the offences and penalties. Infringements vary in gravity from major offences to minor technical breaches of licence and certificate conditions and a range of sanctions is available to the Secretary of State from which the measures best suited to preventing a recurrence can be selected.

At an early stage in the investigation of a suspected breach of the controls, the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Inspectorate review whether a criminal offence has been committed and whether its gravity is likely to justify referral for prosecution. This depends on its origins, scale and consequences for animal suffering. Thus, deliberate infringements will be viewed more seriously than those due to negligence, ignorance, confusion or adherence to inappropriate instructions from those in authority over the alleged guilty party; repeated failures will generally be viewed more seriously than single incidents; and any unnecessary animal suffering will significantly increase the gravity of any infringement.

PCCGs

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what criteria he is proposing for a police/community consultative group working well; and if such criteria will be agreed in consultation with PCCGs. [113645]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Under section 96 of the Police Act 1996, the responsibility outside London for consulting local people on their priorities for policing and for securing their co-operation with the police in crime prevention rests with the police authority. From 3 July 2000, the responsibility in the Metropolitan Police District for ensuring this happens will pass to the Metropolitan Police Authority. In making arrangements for public consultation, the police authority must consult the Chief Officer of police for that police area. It is for the police authority to determine what criteria it will use to assess whether and to what extent individual Police Community Consultative Groups (PCCGs) help it to fulfil its statutory responsibility. In assessing the effectiveness of all its arrangements for public consultation, including the use of PCCGs, the police authority will, from 1 April, be under the duty of securing Best Value.

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if a dedicated member of the Metropolitan Police Authority will be responsible for the development strategy of police/community consultative groups. [113646]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Under section 96 of the Police Act 1996, as amended by paragraph 103, schedule 27 of the Greater London Authority Act 1999, the statutory responsibility for consulting Londoners in the Metropolitan Police District will from 3 July 2000 fall to the Metropolitan Police Authority. This duty falls on the police authority collectively. It will be a matter for that authority as to whether its members are encouraged to specialise in particular areas of the Metropolitan Police Authority's statutory functions such as community consultation. However, under section 101 of the Local Government Act 1972, the Metropolitan Police Authority will not be able to delegate a statutory responsibility to an individual member.

Prisoner Suicides

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prisoners committed suicide in cells in magistrates courts in the last year for which figures are available. [113731]

Mr. Boateng: There were five self-inflicted deaths in cells in magistrates courts in 1999. The two inquests held to date have concluded with verdicts of misadventure and suicide.

Juveniles (Representation)

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what guidelines he has issued to prisons and young offender units on the rights of representation for juveniles in internal disciplinary adjudications, with special reference to the Human Rights Act 1998. [113917]

Mr. Boateng: General guidance on access to legal representation for all prisoners is set out in the Prison Service's discipline manual, a copy of which is available in the Library. This was issued in 1995 and takes account of the European Convention on Human Rights.

Racial Incidents

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the recorded number of racial incidents reported in the Metropolitan Police authority area during 1999. [113836]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis has advised me that 22,105 racial incidents were reported within the Metropolitan Police District during the calendar year 1999.

Public Safety Radio Communications

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his oral answer to the hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) of 17 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 541, what estimate he has made of the amount, for each police force in England and Wales and for each year of the project, to be deducted from the central police grant to be spent on the Public Safety Radio Communications Project. [109239]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 8 February 2000]:* The table contains the core service charges for the Public Safety Radio Communications Project (PSRCP) for each police force in England and Wales for each year of the project. As had previously been announced, these core service costs will be funded centrally by means of deduction from total police grant provision.

We are doing all we can to ensure that the police have adequate resources to play their key part in tackling crime and disorder and improving community safety. Over the three-year period, commencing from the 1999–2000 financial year, the police service will receive an additional £1.24 billion in central Government funding. This is a significant increase for the police at a time when the Government need to maintain firm control over public expenditure. The Public Safety Radio Communications annual service charges will be reduced by the £50 million that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has obtained from the Capital Modernisation Fund specifically for the PSRCP. Consideration of the financial pressures on forces will also be taken into account in the overall level of resources to be provided for the police service in future years as part of the year 2000 Spending Review.

PSRCP core service charge

England and Wales prices

Thousand

Force	*Customer price in £000*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*	*2002–03*	*2003–04*	*2004–05*	*2005–06*	*2006–07*	*2007–08*	*2008–09*
Avon and Somerset Constabulary	2,959	—	—	1,110	2,959	2,959	2,959	2,959	2,959	2,959	2,959
Bedfordshire Police	1,101	—	—	—	413	1,101	1,101	1,101	1,101	1,101	1,101
Cambridgeshire Constabulary	1,303	—	—	—	1,140	1,303	1,303	1,303	1,303	1,303	1,303
Cheshire Constabulary	1,897	—	—	—	—	711	1,897	1,897	1,897	1,897	1,897
City of London Police	1,036	—	—	—	—	389	1,036	1,036	1,036	1,036	1,036
Cleveland Constabulary	1,455	—	—	—	—	909	1,455	1,455	1,455	1,455	1,455
Cumbria Constabulary	1,067	—	—	—	934	1,067	1,067	1,067	1,067	1,067	1,067
[illegible]yshire Constabulary	1,762	—	—	881	1,762	1,762	1,762	1,762	1,762	1,762	1,762
Devon and Cornwall Constabulary	3,032	—	—	1,263	3,032	3,032	3,032	3,032	3,032	3,032	3,032
Dorset Police	1,223	—	—	—	459	1,223	1,223	1,223	1,223	1,223	1,223
Durham Constabulary	1,413	—	—	177	1,413	1,413	1,413	1,413	1,413	1,413	1,413
Dyfed-Powys Police	915	—	—	—	574	918	918	918	918	918	918
Essex Police	2,851	—	—	—	358	2,861	2,861	2,861	2,861	2,861	2,861
Gloucestershire Constabulary	1,111	—	—	594	1,111	1,111	1,111	1,111	1,111	1,111	1,111
Greater Manchester Police (GMP)	6,601	—	1,100	6,601	6,601	6,601	6,601	6,601	6,601	6,601	6,601
Gwent Constabulary	1,209	—	—	—	756	1,209	1,209	1,209	1,209	1,209	1,209
Hampshire Constabulary	3,426	—	—	—	—	2,141	3,426	3,426	3,426	3,426	3,426
Hertfordshire Constabulary	1,703	—	—	—	1,064	1,703	1,703	1,703	1,703	1,703	1,703
Humberside Police	1,999	—	—	250	1,999	1,999	1,999	1,999	1,999	1,999	1,999
Kent County Constabulary	3,235	—	—	—	—	—	2,830	3,235	3,235	3,235	3,235
Lancashire Constabulary	3,166	—	3,166	3,166	3,166	3,166	3,166	3,166	3,166	3,166	3,166
Leicestershire Constabulary	1,787	—	—	1,638	1,787	1,787	1,787	1,787	1,787	1,787	1,787
Lincolnshire Police	1,096	—	—	—	—	959	1,096	1,096	1,096	1,096	1,096
Merseyside Police	4,214	—	—	—	—	2,634	4,214	4,214	4,214	4,214	4,214
Metropolitan Police Service	30,925	—	—	—	—	11,597	30,925	30,925	30,925	30,925	30,925
Norfolk Constabulary	1,463	—	—	—	—	—	1,280	1,463	1,463	1,463	1,463

PSRCP core service charge

England and Wales prices

Thousand

Force	*Customer price in £000*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*	*2002–03*	*2003–04*	*2004–05*	*2005–06*	*2006–07*	*2007–08*	*2008–09*
North Wales Police	1,320	—	—	—	165	1,320	1,320	1,320	1,320	1,320	1,320
North Yorkshire Police	1,365	—	—	1,024	1,365	1,365	1,365	1,365	1,365	1,365	1,365
Northamptonshire Police	1,137	—	—	—	—	142	1,137	1,137	1,137	1,137	1,137
Northumbria Police	3,697	—	—	462	3,697	3,697	3,697	3,697	3,697	3,697	3,697
Nottinghamshire Constabulary	2,215	—	—	—	—	1,938	2,215	2,215	2,215	2,215	2,215
South Wales Constabulary	2,889	—	—	—	1,806	2,889	2,889	2,889	2,889	2,889	2,889
South Yorkshire Police	2,983	—	—	—	—	1,865	2,983	2,983	2,983	2,983	2,983
Staffordshire Police	2,006	—	—	—	—	—	1,756	2,006	2,006	2,006	2,006
Suffolk Constabulary	1,196	—	—	1,196	1,196	1,196	1,196	1,196	1,196	1,196	1,196
Surrey Police	1,517	—	—	—	—	948	1,517	1,517	1,517	1,517	1,517
Sussex Police	2,939	—	—	—	367	2,939	2,939	2,939	2,939	2,939	2,939
Thames Valley Police	3,957	—	—	—	3,462	3,957	3,957	3,957	3,957	3,957	3,957
Warwickshire Constabulary	923	—	—	—	—	115	923	923	923	923	923
West Mercia Constabulary	1,979	—	165	1,979	1,979	1,979	1,979	1,979	1,979	1,979	1,979
West Midlands Police	6,721	—	—	—	—	2,520	6,721	6,721	6,721	6,721	6,721
West Yorkshire Police	5,048	—	—	—	—	4,417	5,048	5,048	5,048	5,048	5,048
Wiltshire Constabulary	1,145	—	—	—	1,002	1,145	1,145	1,145	1,145	1,145	1,145
Percentage sub total	127.000	0.000	4.431	20.441	44.587	86.989	126.152	127.000	127.000	127.000	127.000

PSRCP core service charge

England and Wales prices

Thousand

Force	*2009–10*	*2010–11*	*2011–12*	*2012–13*	*2013–14*	*2014–15*	*2015–16*	*2016–17*	*2017–18*	*2018–19*	*2019–20*
Avon and Somerset Constabulary	2,959	2,959	2,959	2,959	2,959	2,959	2,959	1,849	—	—	—
Bedfordshire Police	1,101	1,101	1,101	1,101	1,101	1,101	1,101	1,101	688	—	—
Cambridgeshire Constabulary	1,303	1,303	1,303	1,303	1,303	1,303	1,303	1,303	163	—	—
Cheshire Constabulary	1,897	1,897	1,897	1,897	1,897	1,897	1,897	1,897	1,897	1,186	—
City of London Police	1,036	1,036	1,036	1,036	1,036	1,036	1,036	1,036	1,036	648	—
Cleveland Constabulary	1,455	1,455	1,455	1,455	1,455	1,455	1,455	1,455	1,455	546	—
Cumbria Constabulary	1,067	1,067	1,067	1,067	1,067	1,067	1,067	1,067	133	—	—
Derbyshire Constabulary	1,762	1,762	1,762	1,762	1,762	1,762	1,762	881	—	—	—
Devon and Cornwall Constabulary	3,032	3,032	3,032	3,032	3,032	3,032	3,032	1,789	—	—	—
Dorset Police	1,223	1,223	1,223	1,223	1,223	1,223	1,223	1,223	765	—	—
Durham Constabulary	1,413	1,413	1,413	1,413	1,413	1,413	1,413	1,237	—	—	—
Dyfed-Powys Police	918	918	918	918	918	918	918	918	344	—	—
Essex Police	2,861	2,861	2,861	2,861	2,861	2,861	2,861	2,861	2,504	—	—
Gloucestershire Constabulary	1,111	1,111	1,111	1,111	1,111	1,111	1,111	417	—	—	—
Greater Manchester Police (GMP)	6,601	6,601	6,601	6,601	6,601	6,601	5,501	—	—	—	—
Gwent Constabulary	1,209	1,209	1,209	1,209	1,209	1,209	1,209	1,209	453	—	—
Hampshire Constabulary	3,426	3,426	3,426	3,426	3,426	3,426	3,426	3,426	3,426	1,285	—
Hertfordshire Constabulary	1,703	1,703	1,703	1,703	1,703	1,703	1,703	1,703	639	—	—
Humberside Police	1,999	1,999	1,999	1,999	1,999	1,999	1,999	1,749	—	—	—
Kent County Constabulary	3,235	3,235	3,235	3,235	3,235	3,235	3,235	3,235	3,235	3,235	404
Lancashire Constabulary	3,166	3,166	3,166	3,166	3,166	3,166	—	—	—	—	—
Leicestershire Constabulary	1,787	1,787	1,787	1,787	1,787	1,787	1,787	149	—	—	—

PSRCP core service charge

England and Wales prices

Force	*2009–10*	*2010–11*	*2011–12*	*2012–13*	*2013–14*	*2014–15*	*2015–16*	*2016–17*	*2017–18*	*2018–19*	*Thousand 2019–20*
Lincolnshire Police	1,096	1,096	1,096	1,096	1,096	1,096	1,096	1,096	1,096	137	—
Merseyside Police	4,214	4,214	4,214	4,214	4,214	4,214	4,214	4,214	4,214	1,580	—
Metropolitan Police Service	30,925	30,925	30,925	30,925	30,925	30,925	30,925	30,925	30,925	19,328	—
Norfolk Constabulary	1,463	1,463	1,463	1,463	1,463	1,463	1,463	1,463	1,463	1,463	183
North Wales Police	1,320	1,320	1,320	1,320	1,320	1,320	1,320	1,320	1,155	—	—
North Yorkshire Police	1,365	1,365	1,365	1,365	1,365	1,365	1,365	341	—	—	—
Northamptonshire Police	1,137	1,137	1,137	1,137	1,137	1,137	1,137	1,137	1,137	995	—
Northumbria Police	3,697	3,697	3,697	3,697	3,697	3,697	3,697	3,235	—	—	—
Nottinghamshire Constabulary	2,215	2,215	2,215	2,215	2,215	2,215	2,215	2,215	2,215	277	—
South Wales Constabulary	2,889	2,889	2,889	2,889	2,889	2,889	2,889	2,889	1,083	—	—
South Yorkshire Police	2,983	2,983	2,983	2,983	2,983	2,983	2,983	2,983	2,983	1,119	—
Staffordshire Police	2,006	2,006	2,006	2,006	2,006	2,006	2,006	2,006	2,006	2,006	251
Suffolk Constabulary	1,196	1,196	1,196	1,196	1,196	1,196	1,196	—	—	—	—
Surrey Police	1,517	1,517	1,517	1,517	1,517	1,517	1,517	1,517	1,517	569	—
Sussex Police	2,939	2,939	2,939	2,939	2,939	2,939	2,939	2,939	2,572	—	—
Thames Valley Police	3,957	3,957	3,957	3,957	3,957	3,957	3,957	3,957	495	—	—
Warwickshire Constabulary	923	923	923	923	923	923	923	923	923	808	—
West Mercia Constabulary	1,979	1,979	1,979	1,979	1,979	1,979	1,815	—	—	—	—
West Midlands Police	6,721	6,721	6,721	6,721	6,721	6,721	6,721	6,721	6,721	4,201	—
West Yorkshire Police	5,048	5,048	5,048	5,048	5,048	5,048	5,048	5,048	5,048	631	—
Wiltshire Constabulary	1,145	1,145	1,145	1,145	1,145	1,145	1,145	1,145	143	—	—
Percentage sub total	127.000	127.000	127.000	127.000	127.000	127.000	122.569	106.559	82.433	40.011	0.838

Police (Human Rights)

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the impact on his policy of Article 3 of the European Convention on his policy concerning Human Rights on the use by police officers of handcuffs. [114376]

Mr. Charles Clarke: We believe that the use of handcuffs by the police, in accordance with the relevant provisions of domestic law and the applicable Home Office guidelines, is compatible with the convention.

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the impact of Article 6 of the ECHR on his policy relating to actions against the police for negligence in the investigation and suppression of crime. [114378]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Government's view on this matter is set out in a letter sent from the Home Office to all police forces and police authorities on 4 March 1999, a copy of which is in the Library. That letter advises that, on the basis of the interpretation of Article 6 adopted by the European Court of Human Rights in the case of Osman *v.* United Kingdom, police forces should exercise considerable caution before applying to have claims for negligence struck out on the basis of public policy immunity.

Metropolitan Police Service

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was *(a)* the recruitment intake target for and *(b)* the actual number of joiners to the Metropolitan Police Service on the intake start dates, (i) 2 May 1999, (ii) 6 June 1999, (iii) 11 July 1999, (iv) 15 August 1999, (v) 19 September 1999, (vi) 24 October 1999, (vii) 28 November 1999 and (viii) 4 January 1999; and what are the latest intake start dates for which figures are available. [114375]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information requested is in the table, provided by the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis.

	Intake start date	*(a) Recruitment intake target*	*(b) Actual number of joiners*
(i)	2 May 1999	130	145
(ii)	6 June 1999	130	86
(iii)	11 July 1999	130	90
(iv)	15 August 1999	130	110
(v)	19 September 1999	130	103
(vi)	24 October 1999	130	87
(vii)	28 November 1999	130	94
(viii)	4 January 2000	130	101
	7 February 2000	130	57

Note:

The provisional intake targets are outlined at the beginning of each financial year. This takes into account anticipated wastage and the desire to maintain officer numbers. The 1999–2000 recruitment target was 1,300 officers (i.e. 130 per intake).

The Commissioner tells me that a final intake for 1999–2000 is planned to start on 13 March with 75 recruits.

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many officers left the Metropolitan Police Service in *(a)* the first and *(b)* the second year of service in (i) 1996, (ii) 1997, (iii) 1998 and (iv) 1999. [114374]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information requested is in the table, provided by the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis.

		(a) Officers leaving in the first year of service	*(b) Officers leaving in the second year of service*
(i)	1996	45	28
(ii)	1997	50	29
(iii)	1998	128	30
(iv)	1999	152	30

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what were *(a)* the police establishment numbers and *(b)* the actual police numbers in the London Borough of Southwark, on 1 April in each year from 1980. [113823]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The practice of setting establishment numbers for police forces in England and Wales ended in 1994–95. The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis tells me that information about police establishment numbers at borough level is not available, nor is information about actual police numbers in the years 1980–89. Actual police numbers as at 31 December in each year from 1990 are in the table:

Year	*Strength*
31 December 1990	902
31 December 1991	886
31 December 1992	816.65
31 December 1993	849.78
31 December 1994	871.47
31 December 1995	902.86
31 December 1996	878.16
31 December 1997	860.51
31 December 1998	876.43
31 December 1999	851.8

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the revenue cost of *(a)* Rotherhithe, *(b)* Tower Bridge, *(c)* Southwark, *(d)* Walworth, *(e)* Camberwell, *(f)* Peckham and *(g)* East Dulwich police stations in each year for the years 1990–1991 to 1999–2000. [113822]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Receiver for the Metropolitan Police District tells me that the information requested for the financial year 1994–95 is not held centrally. Figures for 1994–95 onwards are in the table:

	1994–95	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*[1]
Camberwell	80,902	133,860	83,907	153,123	73,096	27,604
Walworth	347,834	167,662	201,727	174,155	177,345	109,987
Peckham	225,157	324,641	278,532	315,916	264,646	112,740
Rotherhithe	178,522	409,652	63,455	48,877	89,139	28,548
Southwark	392,504	248,290	269,820	245,814	215,681	57,935
Tower Bridge	153,141	218,268	76,731	76,161	51,713	19,602
East Dulwich	144,413	107,658	129,629	185,580	156,632	71,904

[1] Expenditure only up to November 1999

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the cost of capital works to *(a)* Rotherhithe, *(b)* Tower Bridge, *(c)* Southwark, *(d)* Walworth, *(e)* Camberwell, *(f)* Peckham and *(g)* East Dulwich police stations, in each year from 1990–91 to 1999–2000. [113821]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Receiver for the Metropolitan Police District tells me that the information requested is not available for the financial year 1990–91. Figures for 1991–92 to 1999–2000 are shown in the table.

Police station capital expenditure 1990–91 to 1999–2000

Year	*Camberwell*	*Walworth*	*Peckham*	*Rotherhithe*	*Southwark*	*Tower Bridge*	*East Dulwich*
1991–92	—	61,000	—	—	—	—	—
1992–93	10,000	2,400,000	10,000	10,000	10,000	10,000	10,000
1993–94	—	2,052,000	—	—	—	4,701	7,147
1994–95	—	6,192	715	3,744	138,021	16,625	730
1995–96	1,600	15,295	50,005	1,637	29,934	1,541	—
1996–97	—	—	4,991	—	—	—	1,287
1997–98	9,325	—	15,274	600	41,489	—	3,582
1998–99	—	61,000	2,496	96	1,116,975	—	—
1999–2000	307,000	—	—	—	1,513,161	—	—

Press Office

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many applications there have been for positions on the new Home Office Press Office news team. [113824]

Mr. Straw: The Government Communications and Information Service Development Centre received a total of 108 applications to date.

Illegal Drugs

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will publish estimates of the quantity of illegal drugs consumed in the United Kingdom by type of drug in the last five years. [114223]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information requested is not available. Some exploratory research on sizing the drugs market was carried out by the Office for National Statistics in 1998 as part of a broader European-wide project on estimating the contribution of illegal activities to national budgets. Further research has been commissioned by the Home Office to measure the size of the United Kingdom drugs market, to help support the Government's Drugs Strategy. This project should provide better information on drugs consumption. An initial report is due to be made to the Home Office by July.

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* prosecutions and *(b)* cautions there were for people accused of possessing drugs by (i) class of drug and (ii) police authority, in the most recent year for which figures are available. [114222]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Information on the number of prosecutions made and cautions given for illegal possession of drugs in 1998 in England and Wales, by class of drug and police force area, is given in the table.

Number of persons prosecuted and cautioned for illegal possession of drugs, by class of drug and police force area, England and Wales 1998

Police force	Prosecutions	Cautions	Class A Total	Prosecutions	Cautions	Class B Total	Prosecutions	Cautions	Class C Total
England									
Avon and Somerset	652	152	804	814	880	1,694	23	6	29
Bedfordshire	132	24	156	603	347	950	8	0	8
Cambridgeshire	240	27	267	580	579	1,159	21	3	24
Cheshire	661	36	697	1,328	760	2,088	34	4	38
Cleveland	354	64	418	451	614	1,065	40	7	47
Cumbria	223	100	323	673	481	1,154	14	2	16
Derbyshire	205	34	239	605	615	1,220	44	4	48
Devon and Cornwall	331	94	425	1,555	1,264	2,819	28	8	36
Dorset	217	1	218	605	289	894	12	2	14
Durham	115	3	118	409	45	454	22	0	22
Essex	309	66	375	1,167	977	2,144	17	1	18
Gloucestershire	189	77	266	427	773	1,200	3	2	5
Greater Manchester	995	291	1,286	2,485	2,620	5,105	93	4	97
Hampshire	363	28	391	2,080	1,089	3,169	27	2	29
Hertfordshire	159	46	205	654	487	1,141	7	1	8
Humberside	221	20	241	730	478	1,208	80	5	85
Kent	230	36	266	1,727	1,168	2,895	28	6	34
Lancashire	742	133	875	2,320	1,618	3,938	71	5	76
Leicestershire	203	9	212	896	511	1,407	11	0	11
Lincolnshire	139	8	147	796	378	1,174	18	2	20
Merseyside	787	198	985	2,953	2,030	4,983	21	71	92
Metropolitan Police[1]	3,966	1,378	5,344	10,506	15,899	26,405	83	48	131
Norfolk	227	11	238	831	439	1,270	13	0	13
Northamptonshire	157	17	174	418	535	953	4	0	4
Northumbria	357	92	449	1,990	2,100	4,090	106	22	128
North Yorkshire	321	35	356	810	406	1,216	28	5	33
Nottinghamshire	513	15	528	1,357	564	1,921	34	3	37
South Yorkshire	1,079	206	1,285	1,646	730	2,376	53	6	59
Staffordshire	613	8	621	967	711	1,678	29	4	33
Suffolk	135	45	180	631	632	1,263	9	8	17
Surrey	108	21	129	575	655	1,230	10	1	11
Sussex	305	72	377	967	842	1,809	19	6	25
Thames Valley	569	33	602	1,758	493	2,251	23	0	23
Warwickshire	72	14	86	307	357	664	4	0	4
West Mercia	295	114	409	743	1,234	1,977	7	4	11
West Midlands	1,064	202	1,266	3,683	3,002	6,685	44	7	51
West Yorkshire	2,519	288	2,807	3,618	1,289	4,907	63	4	67
Wiltshire	124	20	144	413	351	764	2	0	2
Total	19,891	4,018	23,909	55,078	48,242	103,320	1,153	253	1,406
Wales									
Dyfed-Powys	252	47	299	1,256	1,025	2,281	61	4	65
Gwent	444	25	469	817	1,165	1,982	15	6	21
North Wales	229	53	282	1,002	785	1,787	10	7	17
South Wales	252	42	294	2,355	1,198	3,553	74	6	80
Total	1,177	167	1,344	5,430	4,173	9,603	160	23	183

[1] Including City of London

Note:

As a person may be prosecuted or cautioned for more than one class of drug, columns for different classes of drug cannot be added together to produce sub-totals or totals

Source:

Home Office Research Development and Statistics Directorate

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Asylum and Immigration

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what recent research he has commissioned into the asylum and immigration processes undertaken by his Department; what work has been done in respect of such research by outside consultants; what conclusions such research has reached; and if he will make a statement. [114205]

Jane Kennedy: No research on asylum and immigration procedures has been commissioned or published, and no work has been done in respect of research by outside consultants.

Compensation Payment Defaulters

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will ensure that the courts have the right of access to names and addresses held by other Government Departments and agencies in order that those who default on compensation payments can be traced. [113729]

Jane Kennedy: Section 94 of the Access to Justice Act 1999 will allow the Lord Chancellor to designate by order any relevant public authority from which courts may request this information. Before such an order can be made, administrative arrangements need to be in place. The Benefits Agency is the public authority which is most likely to hold the names and addresses of defaulters so my officials have already commenced discussions with colleagues at the Department of Social Security with a view to establishing a workable and effective system as soon as possible. We will then consider which other public authorities would be most likely to be able to help.

Magistrates Courts (Safe Cells)

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many safe cells were installed in magistrates courts in the last year for which figures are available; how many will be installed in the coming financial year; and if he will make a statement. [113730]

Jane Kennedy: No cells to the HM Prison Service improved standard cell design were installed in magistrates courts in 1999–2000 or are planned to be installed in 2000–01.

Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 14 March 2000

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Sports Colleges

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if grammar schools are eligible for sports college status. [114474]

Ms Estelle Morris: I can confirm that the specialist schools programme is open to applications from all types of maintained secondary schools—whether or not their admissions arrangements are selective. Schools which are designated Sports, Arts, Language or Technology Colleges are expected to work closely with a "family of schools" to spread the benefits to pupils beyond their own school boundaries and to the wider community.

LEA Funding (Worcestershire)

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much funding was awarded to Worcestershire local education authority in each year from 1997–98 to 1999–2000 in respect of *(a)* reduction in infant class sizes, broken down by (i) revenue and (ii) capital, *(b)* the National Grid for Learning, *(c)* literacy programmes, *(d)* numeracy programmes, *(e)* books for schools, *(f)* truancy initiatives, *(g)* schools security, *(h)* standards fund school effectiveness grant, *(i)* excellence in cities, *(j)* New Deal for schools, *(k)* voluntary-aided schools capital grant, *(l)* energy efficiency, *(m)* music programmes, *(n)* year 6 booster classes and *(o)* Education SSA. [113914]

Ms Estelle Morris: The figures requested are shown in the table. For Standards Fund grants, the figures include both the Government's and the local education authority's contributions where appropriate. The figures shown for Education Standard Spending Assessment also include provision for the Authority's contribution to the Standards Fund. For 1997–98, figures are given for Hereford and Worcester.

Allocations to Worcester Education Authority 1997–98 to 1999–2000 (Hereford and Worcester in 1997–98) [1]

£

Initiative	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*
(a) Reduction of infant class sizes:			
(i) revenue	n/a	—	548,000
(ii) capital	n/a	—	1,156,000
(b) National Grid for Learning (Standards Fund)	n/a	1,125,048	900,000
(c) Literacy Programmes (Standards Fund)	—	545,785	631,862
(d) Numeracy Programmes (Standards Fund)	—	4,950	594,700
(e) Books for Schools	359,500	271,100	542,200
(f) Truancy (Standards Fund)	72,900	58,100	224,940
(g) School Security (Standards Fund)	303,000	229,936	247,714
(h) School Effectiveness (Standards Fund)	1,948,200	1,649,787	2,646,633
(i) Excellence in Cities (Standards Fund)	n/a	n/a	n/a
(j) New Deal for Schools	733,000	1,637,302	2,390,990
(k) Voluntary Aided Schools Capital	711,000	975,000	1,137,000
(l) Energy Efficiency	n/a	135,000	n/a
(m) Music Programmes	n/a	n/a	1,051,596
(n) Year 6 Booster Classes	n/a	120,337	434,653
(o) Education Standard Spending Assessment[2]	230,777,000	187,840,000	198,180,000

[1] Worcester was part of Hereford and Worcester LEA prior to 1 April 1998
[2] In 1997–98 £527 million was removed from Education Standard Spending at national level for the Nursery Voucher Scheme
Note:
n/a—not applicable

Education Spending

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what were the *(a)* percentage and *(b)* actual changes in the national education budget for each of the past 10 years. [113194]

Mr. Blunkett *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* Details of the percentage and actual changes in UK education expenditure in real terms for 1994–95 to 2001–02 are given in the table. The figures are taken from table 1.4 of Public Expenditure Statistical Analyses 1999–2000 (Cm 4201). Comparable figures for earlier years could be produced only at disproportionate cost.

As a proportion of GDP, education spending is forecast to increase from 4.7 per cent. in 1996–97 to some 4.9 per cent. in 2001–02.

1997–98 prices

Year	*Education spending (£ billion)*	*Percentage change*	*Actual change (£ billion)*
1994–95	37.8	3.3	1.2
1995–96	37.6	–0.3	–0.1
1996–97	37.1	–1.5	–0.6
1997–98	37.4	0.9	0.3
1998–99	37.4	0.0	0.0
1999–2000	39.3	5.1	1.9
2000–01	41.6	5.9	2.3
2001–02	43.5	4.6	1.9

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what has been the percentage increase in revenue spending on education by Her Majesty's Government in each of the past 10 years. [113886]

Mr. Blunkett *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* Details of changes in UK education spending since 1994–95 were provided in the reply given today to my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Clwyd (Mr. Ruane). Information on the revenue elements of these figures could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

SCOTLAND

Electricity Regulation

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what assessment he has made of the impact of the Utilities Bill on electricity supply and distribution and renewable energy in Scotland; and if he will make a statement. [113610]

Mr. Wilson: This Government are determined to put the interests of consumers first, both north and south of the border. The Utilities Bill contains provisions aimed at facilitating further competition in the electricity and gas markets, and thus are expected to lead to price reductions for consumers. This includes a bar on supply and distribution licences being held by the same legal person. It also allows for the continuation of arrangements ensuring that remote areas of Scotland do not suffer from discriminatory pricing.

The Bill contains a provision for a separate renewables obligation in Scotland which will contribute towards the Government's target of renewable energy providing 10 per cent. of UK electricity supplies by 2010.

Wage Differentials

Mrs. Fyfe: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will meet Ministers in the Scottish Executive to discuss steps to investigate the reasons for the difference between the average weekly wages of women and men in Glasgow. [113214]

Dr. Reid: I meet Scottish Executive Ministers, including the First Minister, on a regular basis and discuss a wide range of issues with them, including action to reduce inequalities such as the gender pay gap. The UK Government are tackling the gender pay gap across Great Britain through a range of measures such as encouraging less gender stereotyping and considering ways of interesting more women in careers in information and communication technology. Other measures to help people, predominantly women, combine work and other responsibilities include the campaign on work/life balance, New Deals for Lone Parents and Partners, the Working Families Tax Credit and childcare tax credit and fairness at work measures such as parental leave, improved maternity leave and rights for part-time workers.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

General Pinochet

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Solicitor-General if he will publish the papers he has concerning the request made to the Attorney-General for permission to pursue a private prosecution of General Pinochet for the death of William Beausire and Father Michael Woodward. [113942]

The Solicitor-General: Applications for Law Officer consent to prosecute Senator Pinochet were received from three firms of solicitors. The offences alleged which required Law Officer consent concerned torture contrary to section 134 of the Criminal Justice Act 1988 and hostage taking contrary to the Taking of Hostages Act 1982. The allegations against Senator Pinochet concerned a number of different victims.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Aberavon (Sir J. Morris) considered applications from the first two firms of solicitors when he was Attorney-General. The last application was considered by myself. The applications were taken seriously and given careful consideration. We received counsel's advice on them. Having done so consent was refused in respect of each application.

It would not be appropriate for me to publish material that others have submitted in support of their applications for Law Officer consent. That is for the solicitors. The reason why consent was declined was explained to the solicitors at the time and outlined in my statement to the House on 2 March 2000, *Official Report*, columns 589–92.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Carter Center, Atlanta

Mr. Colman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list the *(a)* projects carried out since 1997 and *(b)* work in progress under part or full funding by her Department by the Carter Center, Atlanta, United States of America. [112748]

Clare Short: My Department has provided the following funding to the Carter Center.

£2 million over four years (1996–97 to 1999–2000) for a Guinea worm eradication project covering a variety of countries in the West Africa region.

£230,014 towards the cost of Carter Center monitoring of Mozambique 1999 General Elections. This ongoing project will conclude with Carter Center's final election assessment visit to Mozambique.

Polish-British Enterprise Project

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will place in the Library a copy of the letter from Mr. Jeremy Davenport of her Department to the British Council dated 4 December 1994 concerning the outcome of the Polish-British Enterprise Project. [113738]

Clare Short: A copy of the letter is being placed in the Library.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what evaluation her Department made of the leadership of Dr. Brian Burrows on the Polish-British Enterprise Project between 13 and 18 November 1994. [113737]

Clare Short: The first monitoring visit to the project took place from 13–18 November 1994. A number of recommendations concerning project strategy and direction were made in the report which followed and some problems within the project at that time were also highlighted. A copy of the report was provided to Dr. Burrows.

India

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what was the level of financial support given by her Department to projects in India in each year since 1992 and 1993. [113652]

Clare Short: The table lists spending by my Department on projects in India for each year since 1992–93:

£000

Financial year	*Spending on projects*
1992–93	74,719
1993–94	79,231
1994–95	83,795
1995–96	99,774
1996–97	92,393
1997–98	80,896
1998–99	92,275

DEFENCE

Depleted Uranium Shells

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what steps are taken to protect personnel in training and operational areas exposed to discharged depleted uranium ammunition. [112839]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 7 March 2000]:* We do not use depleted uranium during routine training. It is used during trials and has been used in operations. Detailed safety instructions are distributed to all Arms and Services Training Establishments and to all units serving in operational theatres where there may be a risk of exposure to discharged depleted uranium ammunition. MOD trial sites are subject to a comprehensive programme of monitoring, the results of which are published annually.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many rounds of depleted uranium shells were fired by coalition forces during the Gulf War; how many were fired by UK tanks; how many UK tanks carried depleted uranium shells; and if he will make a statement. [113956]

Mr. Spellar: The US Department of Defense has assessed that over 860,000 DU-based ammunition rounds, of varying calibre, were used by US Forces during the 1990–91 Gulf conflict. The MOD's current assessment is that UK tanks fired fewer than 100 DU rounds against Iraqi military forces during hostilities, although additional rounds were fired during earlier work-up training in Saudi Arabia. DU munitions were available in-theatre for the British Main Battle Tanks deployed in combat. These totalled 176 with a further 45 as in-theatre War Reserve.

DU-based tank ammunition was brought into service by the Ministry of Defence because of its unique capability as a kinetic penetrator against the most modern types of Main Battle Tank armour. No satisfactory alternative material currently exists to achieve the levels of penetration required to defeat modern tanks. Although research is being conducted into alternative materials, none have so far demonstrated significant potential. There are, therefore, no plans to remove DU-based ammunition from service. Indeed, if the safety of British troops in any conflict required such a capability against modern Main Battle Tank armour, DU-based ammunition would be deployed and used.

Surplus Nuclear Material

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what quantities of strategic nuclear material have been declared surplus to military requirements in the last 10 years; when, and in what form, the material was transferred to civilian facilities and in which locations; on what date the material was notified to Euratom and IAEA safeguards authorities as non-military; when the first visits were paid by inspection teams from each body respectively to verify the notification; and what costs have been incurred to date in the transfer of status of the nuclear material. [113285]

Dr. Moonie: Details of the defence nuclear materials which are now deemed to be surplus to our requirements are given in paragraph 26 of Supporting Essay 5 of the Strategic Defence Review (Cm 3999), copies of which are in the Library of the House.

During July and August 1998, the following material was brought into safeguards:

Approximately 4.1 tonnes of plutonium stored at the BNFL Sellafield facility; Approximately 9,000 tonnes of depleted natural and low enriched uranium at the BNFL Capenhurst, Chapelcross, Sellafield and Springfields facilities and UKAEA Harwell.

Steps are being taken to move 0.3 tonnes of weapon grade plutonium (in the form of oxide) stored at AWE Aldermaston to Sellafield when it too will be formally reported to Euratom and brought into safeguards. To date, some 73 kilograms of this material have been transferred; the remainder will be moved as soon as is practicable.

In addition to the material referred to above, there have been a number of occasions over the last 10 years where material has been brought into safeguards—notably in 1996 when the Calder Hall reactors and the fuel associated with them came into safeguards. The Department for Trade and Industry are responsible for safeguards issues. However, they have advised that the detailed information requested on the large numbers of these other transfers into safeguards and also inspections by the international safeguards authorities is not collated centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Activities to verify nuclear material which has been brought into safeguards have been added to Euratom's ongoing schedule of routine safeguards inspections at the facilities concerned. These routine inspections are such that there is essentially continuous Euratom presence at Sellafield, weekly inspections at the Springfields location and less frequent inspection visits to the other facilities concerned.

The costs to the Defence Budget of the transfers to date are £524,000 (including VAT) and include the costs of preparation, transports, acceptance of the material at Sellafield and storage.

Astute Class Submarines

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what benefits the equipping of the CM010 optronic masts to the Astute Class nuclear attack submarines will provide; what is the cost of the contract for them; and if he will make a statement. [113912]

Dr. Moonie: The optronics masts to be fitted to the three Astute Class submarines currently on order supersede the conventional optical periscopes fitted to earlier RN submarines. The optronics masts offer significant benefits over conventional periscopes. These include improved hull integrity (strength) as the optronics mast no longer needs to penetrate the hull of the submarine; and greater operational flexibility such as improved target analysis, improved effectiveness in different sea states/weather conditions, improved night vision and the ability to distribute and display images on other systems within the submarine. The optronics masts also offer lower through life costs as they require a lower level of technical expertise and maintenance facilities to support them.

The optronics masts are being procured from Pilkington Optronics Ltd. The contract for the masts was placed by the Ministry's Prime Contractor for the Astute Class submarines (BAE SYSTEMS) following competition. The terms and conditions of the sub-contract, including the price, are "commercial—in confidence" and I am, therefore, withholding this information under exemption 13 of the Government's Code on Open Government.

Gulf War Syndrome

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the long-term effects of smoke inhalation from burning oil wells incurred during and immediately following the Gulf War; and if he will make a statement. [113911]

Mr. Spellar: The Ministry of Defence has examined the possibility that pollution caused by oil well fires during the Gulf conflict could be responsible for the ill-health now being experienced by some UK Gulf veterans. No evidence has so far emerged to suggest that this is the case. In March 1991, when UK Forces were stationed in Kuwait, consideration was given to the health risks from oil well fires. Information supplied by Shell UK stated that Kuwaiti crude oil had a high (2.5 per cent.) sulphur content. Combustion products were said to contain carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxides, sulphur dioxide and particulates which were not carcinogens.

From June to October 1991, the health of personnel serving in 21 EOD Squadron Royal Engineers, who worked in the area affected by smoke, was monitored. A description of this work was published in the Royal Army Medical Corps Journal 1993; 139: 95–97. The results were that exposure to oil fire smoke did not appear to have any effect on respiratory function. No assessment has since been made by the Ministry of Defence of the long-term effects of smoke inhalations in the Gulf.

MOD Property

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 7 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 638W, and his oral answers of 21 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 1219 and 24 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 10, concerning future use of MOD property, what the relationship is between the confidentiality requested by developers and the requirement to provide information to local and national elected representatives. [114417]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* There is no relationship between the confidentiality requested by developers and the requirement to provide information to local and national elected representatives.

It is my Department's policy to inform all purchasers of surplus Ministry of Defence property that the final sale price will be made known to any party who requests that information. A purchaser can, however, refuse consent to the sale price being made public on the grounds of commercial confidentiality and in these instances exemption 7 of the Code on Access to Government Information is invoked.

Discussions on the future use of MOD property take place with local authorities at a much earlier stage and I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces on 24 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 60W, on this point. If a purchaser subsequently refuses consent for the final sale price to be made public, this does not affect these early discussions in any way.

Departmental Staff

Caroline Flint: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what child care provision was made available in the financial year 1998–99 for use by (i) his departmental staff and (ii) employees of executive agencies under the control of his Department; what was the cost to parents of this child care; and how many parents used the facilities. [108833]

Dr. Moonie: The Civil Service, as a whole, is striving for an improved balance between work and family life. I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office on 15 February 2000, *Official Report*, columns 518–19W, which provides further details about the importance of family life policies to the Civil Service Reform programme.

During 1998–99, there were a total of 15 workplace nurseries available to my Departmental staff, with a further two in operation for staff employed in executive agencies. These facilities, together with a number of places purchased in off-site private nurseries, provided some 700 full-time places for children of civilian and, occasionally, Service personnel working in Ministry of

Defence establishments. The monthly cost to parents of a full-time place ranged from approximately £242 to £411 (depending on the location and level of departmental subsidy) for Departmental staff, and from approximately £320 to £340 for staff employed in executive agencies, giving an average monthly cost of £308. In addition, my Department subsidises a number of places in holiday play schemes for children of school age. Information about the number of personnel who used these facilities during 1998–99 is not kept centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Caroline Flint: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence in the last five years, what proportion of women employees in (i) his Department and (ii) executive agencies under the control of his Department, *(a)* returned to work after childbirth, *(b)* returned to work after childbirth before the end of maternity leave, indicating the (1) time-range and (2) mean time, *(c)* returned to work after childbirth on reduced working hours, indicating the average hours worked and *(d)* returned to work after childbirth full-time and subsequently reduced their hours. [109237]

Dr. Moonie: The Civil Service, as a whole, is striving for an improved balance between work and family life. I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office on 15 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 519W, which provides further details about the importance of family life policies to the Civil Service Reform programme.

In respect of my Department, I regret that information on maternity leave and working patterns following maternity leave is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Kosovo (Unexploded Ordnance)

Mr. Tyrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many people have been *(a)* killed and *(b)* injured in Kosovo as a result of unexploded ordnance in the form of bomblets within cluster bombs used by UK forces in Kosovo since the cessation of the campaign there. [112362]

Mr. Spellar: It is not always possible to identify accurately which nation's munitions have been the cause of casualties arising from incidents involving cluster bomblets. Nor is the precise type of munition always identifiable.

The most recent figures provided by NATO assess that cluster bomblets have killed 22 civilians in Kosovo with a further 27 injured. Additionally, a further three military personnel have been killed, with four injured.

KFOR has now cleared more than 8,870 unexploded bomblets from Kosovo. All unexploded ordnance sites in the UK-led sector of Kosovo have now been marked, and 90 per cent. of unexploded cluster bomb munitions cleared.

Precision Guided Weapons

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what types of precision guided weapons are in service with the Royal Air Force. [113746]

Dr. Moonie: There are currently nine guided weapons in service with the RAF: Sidewinder, ALARM, Skyflash, Harpoon, Rapier, Stingray, AMRAAM, PAVEWAY II and PAVEWAY III. All these weapons are capable of being guided precisely to their target.

Sighting Systems

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many striker helmet-mounted sighting systems his Department plans to acquire; at what cost; if they will be used in the Royal Navy; and if he will make a statement. [113910]

Dr. Moonie: Forty-six helmet mounted sighting systems have been procured for Royal Air Force Jaguar GR3A aircraft at a cost of some £3.5 million. There are currently no plans to install the system on Royal Navy aircraft.

Equipment Approval

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the outcome of the meeting of the Equipment Approval Committee on 21 February regarding Air Foyle's plan to use two Antonov AN-24–100 airliners for short-term strategic airlift requirements; and if he will make a statement. [113953]

Dr. Moonie: The Ministry of Defence Equipment Approvals Committee's consideration of the short-term strategic airlift project constitutes advice to Ministers and I am therefore withholding details under Exemption 2 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

European Collaborative Ventures

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will take account of *(a)* the likely effect of the number of aircraft ordered on the overall share of business for British companies generated by the A400M aircraft and *(b)* the risk that United Kingdom firms might be excluded from future European collaborative ventures when reaching a decision between the A400M and the C17 aircraft. [113907]

Dr. Moonie: In reaching conclusions on our future air transport requirements, we will take into account a range of factors, including the industrial and international factors you mention, while at the same time seeking value for money for the taxpayer.

Landmines

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment his Department has made of the threat posed by anti-personnel mines to members of British armed forces deployed in relief efforts in Mozambique. [114369]

Mr. Spellar: My Department has made an assessment of the mine threat to our forces supporting relief operations in Mozambique based on information from a variety of sources, including the UN and Non-Government Organisations dealing with the mine threat left over from the civil war. Based on such information, we have taken a series of steps to make all our forces in Mozambique aware of the hazards, and to advise them on appropriate precautionary measures to minimise the risks.

Training Ammunition

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the amount of training ammunition expended by the *(a)* Army infantry, *(b)* Royal Artillery and *(c)* Navy, expressed as a percentage, in each of the last five years, taking 1995 as 100 per cent. [114254]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* This information is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Housing Executive

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence in the current year's Defence Housing Executive upgrade programme *(a)* what percentage of contractors underbid significantly, *(b)* if he will list the contractors who (i) underbid and (ii) were subsequently dismissed and *(c)* by what percentage retendered prices were higher than the original bids. [113751]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* The Defence Housing Executive is not aware of any contractors who have significantly underbid for contracts in the current year's upgrade programme. There have, however, been instances of such problems relating to sub-contractors for response repair work in some locations. I am obtaining data on these and will write to the hon. Member.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if the reduction in this year's Defence Housing Executive budget for upgrades will be restored in the next financial year. [113753]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* Budget allocations for the coming financial year have yet to be decided, but it is the intention to achieve or better the target date for completion of the upgrade programme by the end of 2005.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will publish the review of the Defence Housing Executive prepared jointly by his Department and the Treasury. [113755]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* A joint Treasury/MOD review of Service housing has recently completed and the report is in the final course of drafting. My Ministerial colleagues in the Treasury and I have not yet had an opportunity to consider its recommendations. There are no plans to publish what is an internal document. However, I would expect the outcome of the review to be announced in due course.

Family Quarters

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what price will be charged to service families for the Defence Housing Executive's contract cleaning scheme on vacating property; where it will be trialled; when it will be available universally; and if he will make a statement. [113757]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* The charges for cleaning Families' Quarters on vacation have yet to be determined and are likely to vary according to location and property size. The trial will be run in all areas where the Defence Housing Executive has managerial responsibility; that is to say, throughout the UK mainland. The trial, which will run from autumn 2000 for 12 months, is designed to identify and iron out any procedural difficulties in order that a cost effective long term contract can be put in place on its completion. Use of the scheme by occupants will be entirely optional. They may, if they choose, continue as now to make their own arrangements for cleaning on moving out.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the return rate for the defence housing executive's customer satisfaction slips; and if he will make a statement. [113752]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* Between June and November 1999 (the latest available figures) the Defence Housing Executive (DHE) had a 15.7 per cent. response rate from customers in Families' Quarters who had requested repairs to their properties. Of these, 91.2 per cent. indicated that they were satisfied with the repairs made.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many married quarters in each grade are available to the Defence Housing Executive; how many service families are entitled to quarters in each grade; and if he will make a statement. [113758]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* The breakdown of family quarters by type is as follows:

	Number
Officers:	
I	73
II	370
III	1,986
IV	3,962
V	5,629
Other ranks	
D	3,842
C	28,807
B	17,034
A	0

All married personnel in the Armed Forces are entitled to a quarter near their place of duty and the allocation of quarters is based partly on rank and partly on family size. Entitlement to a type of quarter changes whenever either of those variables alters. It is therefore not possible to break down the figures to indicate how many Service families are entitled to quarters in each grade.

When seeking to identify demand for future housing stock levels, current demand (which is a reflection of family requirements) is used as an indicator. DHE would not, for example, seek to retain or replace quarters of a type for which current demand was low.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is his policy towards service families left living in service quarters after divorce or separation from the serviceman or woman to whom those quarters had been allocated. [114207]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* In the event of marital breakdown, the Marital Category of the Service person changes from married to single. At this point, unless the Service person has custodial responsibilities for a child, they are no longer entitled to occupy a family quarter and are consequently required

to move into single living accommodation. The estranged family is also required to vacate the family quarter but is given a 93 day notice period in which to do so. The Service person continues to be liable to pay the entitled rate of accommodation charges for the duration of the notice period.

DHE issues a Notice to Vacate at the beginning of the 93 day period and advises the estranged spouse to contact the local authority to inquire about housing. If the estranged spouse remains in the family quarter after the 93 day notice has expired, they become liable to pay Damages for Trespass. This charge is calculated on the basis of prevailing market rents in that particular area. At the 93 day point, DHE will review the particular circumstances and decide whether to apply for a Possession Order.

If the quarter is required for another, entitled, Service family or if the local authority will not consider the estranged family for local authority housing unless they can demonstrate impending homelessness, the DHE will seek a Possession Order.

DHE officials liaise with local authority staff on such cases and it is usually possible for local authorities and DHE to agree a mutually convenient move out date for the family.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will place in the Library a copy of the review of married quarters estates produced by Professor Ian Cole of Sheffield University. [113754]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* Copies of Professor Cole's study on the Ministry of Defence Mixed Estates were placed in the Library of the House in 1998.

RAF Accommodation

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many quarters at *(a)* RAF Halton and *(b)* RAF High Wycombe are the subject of repossession proceedings; how many of those cases involve households with dependent children; and if he will make a statement. [114206]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* There are no extant possession orders—nor are any being sought at RAF High Wycombe. At RAF Halton, there are four extant possession orders and a further ten are being sought. Thirteen of these 14 cases involve dependent children. Evictions from Service Family Quarters are very rare. Issue of a possession order is often, however, a pre-requirement by local authorities to accept responsibility for re-housing families. DHE officials are in regular contact with the local authorities and the Station Welfare representatives to help rehouse these families.

Reserve Forces

Ann Keen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to callout members of the reserve forces to support United Nations operations in Sierra Leone and the Democratic Republic of Congo. [114880]

Mr. Spellar: A call-out order has been made under section 56 of the Reserve Forces Act 1996 to permit members of the reserve forces to be called out for service with the UN monitoring and observer forces in Sierra Leone and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Only a small number are expected to be called out, as and when suitable posts arise, and all will be volunteers for this work.

Strategic Airlift

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will place in the Library a copy of the European Staff Requirement on strategic airlift. [113934]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* The European Staff Requirement for the Future Large Aircraft (now A400M) includes the specific requirements of all seven countries involved in the programme and has security and commercial sensitivities attached to some of the information it contains. I am therefore withholding this information under Exemption 1 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

London Underground Escalators

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how long the London Underground escalators to the Victoria Line from Kings Cross railway station will be out of commission. [113077]

Mr. Hill: These are operational matters for London Underground. They have informed me that in addition to temporary repairs, agreed with HMRI, to bring some of the recently discovered defective escalators back into service quickly, they will start a full programme of work to repair or replace the defective escalators in late May, once redesigned shafts have been manufactured. The programme will be completed in the autumn. Kings Cross is high on London Underground's priorities along with Oxford Circus and Walthamstow Central.

Asbestos-related Deaths

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the total number of deaths from asbestos-related diseases in the UK for each of the last five years for which figures are available broken down by *(a)* region and *(b)* occupation. [113328]

Mr. Meacher: The figures available are set out in the tables. These detail the deaths from mesothelioma and asbestosis in Great Britain between 1993 and 1997 by region and by occupational group. Occupational information is only available for people aged under 75 at the time of death and has only been recorded in the Health and Safety Executive's register of asbestosis deaths since 1995. No information is available for asbestos-related lung cancer because it cannot be medically distinguished from lung cancer from other causes.

A more detailed breakdown of the figures on mesothelioma deaths in Great Britain by occupation and by geographical distribution, published by the Health and Safety Executive, will be placed in the House of Commons Library.

Table 1: Mesothelioma deaths in Great Britain by region

	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997
North	114	112	119	118	145
Yorkshire and Humberside	91	120	120	130	106
North West	111	128	127	121	152
West Midlands	74	82	84	85	99
East Midlands	70	58	79	76	71
South West	103	93	96	116	105
East Anglia	39	38	50	57	50
South East excluding Greater London	228	297	298	291	282
Greater London	140	134	138	137	154
Wales	51	51	53	50	53
Scotland	122	128	150	123	113
Overseas	—	—	3	—	—
Great Britain	1,143	1,241	1,317	1,304	1,330

Table 2: Asbestosis deaths (excluding those also mentioning mesothelioma) in Great Britain by region

	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997
North	35	41	29	36	33
Yorkshire and Humberside	17	21	17	9	14
North West	32	28	30	46	32
West Midlands	6	6	8	5	8
East Midlands	4	8	7	3	5
South West	21	16	16	16	23
East Anglia	1	2	1	3	3
South East excluding Greater London	15	14	12	22	21
Greater London	23	21	18	38	25
Wales	4	4	6	12	8
Scotland	14	12	22	5	16
Overseas	1	1	—	1	1
Great Britain	173	174	166	196	189

Table 3: Mesothelioma deaths aged under 75 in Great Britain by occupational order group

	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997
Professional and related supporting management; senior national and local government managers	27	20	27	26	23
Professional and related in education, welfare and health	24	27	32	21	25
Literary, artistic and sports	5	—	5	6	2
Professional and related in science, engineering, technology and similar fields	39	42	48	44	50
Managerial	75	64	82	70	80
Clerical and related	44	60	57	52	44
Selling	18	19	17	14	18
Security and protective services	8	25	15	16	20
Catering, cleaning, hairdressing and other personal service	31	34	34	31	39
Farming, fishing and related	5	8	8	4	5
Materials processing; making and repairing (excluding metal and electrical)	79	99	94	110	75
Processing, making, repairing and related (metal and electrical)	259	244	261	260	272
Painting, repetitive assembling, product inspecting, packaging and related	43	37	41	42	32
Construction, mining and related not identified elsewhere	46	81	79	74	90
Transport operating, materials moving and storing and related	58	70	68	65	77
Miscellaneous	37	46	49	46	41
Occupation not stated on death certificate	59	61	55	52	47
All occupations	857	937	972	933	940

Table 4: Asbestosis deaths (excluding those also mentioning mesothelioma) aged under 75 in Great Britain by occupational order group

	1995	1996	1997
Professional and related supporting management; senior national and local government managers	1	—	—
Professional and related in education, welfare and health	1	1	—
Literary, artistic and sports	1	—	1
Professional and related in science, engineering, technology and similar fields	—	1	1
Managerial	2	2	6
Clerical and related	1	2	2
Selling	—	—	2
Security and protective services	3	4	2
Catering, cleaning, hairdressing and other personal service	3	9	3
Farming, fishing and related	—	—	3
Materials processing; making and repairing (excluding metal and electrical)	12	5	10
Processing, making, repairing and related (metal and electrical)	32	46	47
Painting, repetitive assembling, product inspecting, packaging and related	1	4	6
Construction, mining and related not identified elsewhere	23	23	17
Transport operating, materials moving and storing and related	9	6	4
Miscellaneous	6	12	5
Occupation not stated on death certificate	6	3	2
All occupations	101	118	111

Dumped Motor Vehicles

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many dumped motor vehicles there were in the Greater London area in 1999; and if he will make a statement. [113605]

Mr. Mullin: The removal of abandoned vehicles in the Greater London area is the responsibility of local authorities under the Refuse Disposal (Amenity) Act 1978 and the Department holds no central records of the number of vehicles identified as abandoned and subsequently removed and disposed of.

Tourist Buses

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what monitoring his Department carries out on emissions from open-topped tourist buses in town and city centres. [113639]

Mr. Hill: The Government do not specifically monitor emissions from open-topped tourist buses. These vehicles only account for a very small proportion of bus journeys, even in towns and cities with a large tourism industry.

The Government, nevertheless, want to encourage more clean, low emission vehicles for public and private bus services in towns and cities. We have introduced fiscal measures to encourage cleaner vehicles and fuels, including a VED concession for buses with very low particulate emissions and a fuel duty differential for ultra low sulphur diesel.

All buses and coaches are already subject to a black smoke emission test, as part of the annual roadworthiness test, and the Vehicle Inspectorate has powers to conduct roadside emission testing of these vehicles. The Government are also currently considering whether local authorities should have similar powers following trials by seven local authorities.

Concessionary Fares

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will estimate the cost of extending the 50 per cent. concessionary fare scheme to 100 per cent., using the same basis as outlined in the national concessionary fares scheme cost assessment (annexe B), in the consultation document, "Implementation of Statutory Minimum Concessionary Fares Commitment". [113582]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 8 March 2000]:* The estimated extra cost, in respect of people of pensionable age, and assuming a minimum charge of £5 for a bus pass, is in the order of £300 million per year for local authorities in England and Wales. This reflects the fact that relatively few local authorities already operate concessionary fare schemes which provide travel at less than half fare.

Nautical Studies

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what steps his Department is taking to encourage nautical education; [113546]

(2) what recent representations he has received regarding the GCSE course and examination in nautical studies; [113548]

(3) what recent discussions he has had with ministerial colleagues regarding the GCSE in nautical studies. [113577]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 8 March 2000]:* The Government attach great importance to encouraging young people to consider a career at sea. DETR provides training support grants through the Support for Maritime Training (SMarT) scheme, proposes to attach a minimum training obligation to the shipping tonnage tax, and strongly supports the educational role played by the Merchant Navy Training Board as the National Training Organisation.

Following representation on behalf of the Hull Trinity House School and the London Nautical School, we are consulting colleagues in the Department for Education and Employment on how best to support nautical education, including GCSE Nautical Studies.

Cycling and Walking

Mr. Bradshaw: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many people within his Department are working full-time on *(a)* cycling and *(b)* walking; and what the figures were in each of the last five years. [113913]

Mr. Hill: A total 11 staff in my Department are employed wholly or almost wholly on matters concerned with cycling and/or walking. All are full-time. This is the same number as a year ago. Figures for earlier years are not available on a comparable basis.

Hedgerows

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the length of hedgerows which have been destroyed during each of the last three years. [114138]

Mr. Meacher: This information is not held centrally. However, a survey of hedgerow stock is being undertaken as part of Countryside Survey 2000 and the results are due to be published around the end of this year. This will provide estimates of the length of hedgerow that has been lost from the countryside since previous surveys in 1990 and 1993, and a baseline for monitoring future changes.

Gatwick Airport

Sir Paul Beresford: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if his Department's south-east and east of England Regional Air Services Study will include an assessment of the northern runway option at Gatwick. [114344]

Mr. Mullin *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* As the then Minister for Transport, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hamilton, North and Bellshill (Dr. Reid), announced on 11 March 1999, *Official Report,* columns 360–61W, the study will examine a wide range of options, including both terminal and runway capacity. The study has started from the position that nothing is ruled in or ruled out. Options will be appraised through a process of successive sifts. Following completion of the study there will be a public consultation on the options arising from it. Until then, it would be premature to comment on the status of any option.

Dangerous Loads

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the safety aspects relating to potentially dangerous loads of the accident on the M3 near Basingstoke on 7 March. [114371]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* The police and HSE are currently investigating this serious incident which occurred near Junction 7 on the M3/on 7 March and involved a lorry carrying butane gas cylinders. I will consider any general implications for amendments to safety regulation once that investigation has been reported.

Estates Renewal Challenge Fund

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) when he will give details of his replacement for the Estates Renewal Challenge Fund; [114415]

(2) what additional money will be available for the replacement of the Estates Renewal Challenge Fund next year. [114414]

Mr. Mullin *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* The Estates Renewal Challenge Fund facilitated the transfer of negative value council housing stock to registered social landlords. Where its housing strategy includes such a transfer, a local authority may now consider funding it through its main housing investment programme and, as my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Planning announced on 7 December 1999, over £2 billion has been allocated for local authority housing investment in 2000–01. The New Deal for Communities programme, the Single Regeneration Budget and the Housing Corporation's Approved Development Programme may also be used to fund negative value transfers.

Brownfield Sites

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what is his estimate of the acreage of brownfield sites available for housing development in *(a)* London and *(b)* the South East Region; [114385]

(2) what register there is of brownfield sites available for housing development in *(a)* London and *(b)* the South East Region. [114384]

Mr. Raynsford *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* Information on previously developed sites in England, which may be available for redevelopment has been collected in Phase 1 of the National Land Use Database. Summary provisional estimates published last May in the DETR/GSS Information Bulletin 500 show the area for each Government Office Region of vacant, derelict and other previously developed land and the amounts which either had planning permission or were judged suitable for housing. The extract table shows the provisional results for the Government Office Regions for South East and London. Final estimates will be published shortly. The estimates are a 'snapshot' for 1998, based on the sites reported by local authorities at the time and may only be a partial appraisal. They take no account of future supply of previously developed land. Urban capacity studies, as required by Planning Policy Guidance Note 3: Housing (issued 7 March), will provide local authorities with a further means of identifying the full scope for reuse of land and buildings for housing.

All previously developed land that is unused or may be available for redevelopment [1], by planned use, suitability for housing and Government Office Region: England 1998

Hectares/numbers

	Government Office Region	
	London	*South East*
Planning allocation or permission [2]:		
Housing	660	1,870
Mixed use	920	1,740
Other	680	2,890
None	570	3,240
All previously developed land that is unused or may be available for redevelopment:	2,820	9,740
of which-Suitable for housing [3]		
Total area	1,720	81,650
Number of dwellings[4]	5,460	119,820

[1] Comprises previously developed vacant and derelict land, vacant buildings (excluding single dwellings except where they could be developed into 10 or more dwellings); land or buildings currently in use, which are allocated in the local plan for any developed use, have planning permission for housing or with known potential for redevelopment

[2] Land that has planning permission or is allocated in a local plan for the use indicated (includes some allocations in draft plans)

[3] Based on sites judged by the local authorities to be suitable for residential development immediately, within 5 years, or suitable with planning or development constraints

[4] Based on existing planning permissions or estimated capacity based on current density assumptions

Ill Health Retirement Guidelines

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will review the ill health retirement guidelines for ME sufferers who are members of the Local government Pension Scheme; and if he will make a statement. [114380]

Ms Armstrong *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* There are no medical guidelines on ill-health retirement for Local Government Pension Scheme members suffering from ME published by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. Decisions on whether or not to retire an employee on medical grounds are for individual local authority employers to take within their available powers.

London Underground (Access)

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if each station on the new Jubilee tube line is fully accessible to disabled people; [114353]

(2) what facilities exist at Westminster tube station for access without assistance to trains by wheelchair users. [114354]

Mr. Hill: London Transport's Unit for Disabled Passengers provides a comprehensive advice and information service for disabled travellers including a guide book entitled "Access to the Underground".

I can confirm that step free access has been provided from the street to Jubilee Line trains at all of the stations between Westminster and Stratford inclusive on the Extended Jubilee Line. (In addition, lift access has been provided to the East London Line at Canada Water, the

Northern Line at London Bridge and the District and Circle Lines at Westminster as part of the Jubilee Line Extension project).

Mobility impaired passengers can travel unassisted at Canada Water, Canary Wharf and North Greenwich stations. At Stratford, West Ham and Bermondsey and Southwark stations lifts can at present only be used by passengers accompanied by staff. Unfortunately the lifts at London Bridge and Waterloo are not yet in service and some at Westminster station are temporarily unserviceable. Detailed plans are in hand to bring these lifts into service.

On Westminster station specifically, once all lifts are back in service, wheelchair users will be able to access trains on the Jubilee line unaided. (Assistance will continue to be available to wheelchair users travelling on the District and Circle Line at Westminster station since there is no level access between train and platform on this line).

Video Conferencing

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what evaluation he has made of the use of video conferencing by his Department to help reduce journeys by car for business purposes; and if he will make a statement on the contribution of video conferencing to reducing car journeys. [114579]

Ms Beverley Hughes: My Department's travel plans promote the use of video conferencing as one of the means to reduce car journeys. DETR(C) has set a target to increase the use of video conferencing by 10 per cent. a year. Use of video conferencing will be included in future annual reports on greening DETR.

Voluntary and Community Transport

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to publish a report on voluntary and community transport. [114483]

Mr. Hill: A major review of voluntary and community transport, commissioned by my Department, was completed last summer and a report of the main findings was published in July and widely disseminated to voluntary transport groups and to local authorities, inviting their comments.

A list of action points has now been identified which affects both central and local Government and the voluntary and community transport sector itself. These points are being addressed.

In parallel the Department is running a series of seminars around the country in conjunction with the Community Transport Association and with local authorities to highlight key issues arising from the review.

Rail Summit

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he has decided the date, time and venue for the proposed rail summit in May; and if he will make a statement. [114482]

Mr. Hill: It is now confirmed that the next National Rail Summit will be held at the QEII centre in London on the 25 May this year.

London Mayoral Election

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what measures he will take to ensure sufficient availability of paper for the central production of the Greater London Mayoral Elections Booklet; and if he will make a statement. [114484]

Mr. Hill: No measures are needed. I am pleased to say that all the necessary paper has been ordered at the request of the Greater London Returning Officer.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

EU Structural Funds

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to the answer of 28 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 134W, on EU structural funds, if he will state in both sterling and euros the amounts allocated to *(a)* Scotland, *(b)* Northern Ireland, (c) Wales and (d) England, the totals in each area of the matching funds required, and (i) the amounts so far agreed and (ii) yet to be found by Her Majesty's Government and other sources. [113728]

Mr. Caborn: The table gives the 1999 EU structural fund allocations for Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales and England for Objective 1, 2 and 5b. Objectives 3, 4, 5a and the Community Initiatives totalling £296 million, 448 million euros, are managed on a UK basis and cannot be attributed by region. The 1999 match funding figures do not include the UK managed funds or the amount yet to be found which is still to be calculated.

1999 Structural Funds

million

	£	*Euros*
Allocations		
Scotland	190	286
Wales	75	113
Northern Ireland	446	672
England	741	1,118
Match funding		
Scotland	243	366
Wales	111	167
Northern Ireland	159	240
England	820	1,237

BNFL

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what liaison has taken place between his Department and the Nuclear Installations Inspectorate, since July 1999, in respect of assessing progress made by BNFL in meeting the enhanced safety targets he established in his statement on the proposed PPP for BNFL. [114083]

Dr. Howells: While NII has no formal role in assessing BNFL's performance against the targets announced last July by my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, my officials are in regular contact with HSE, of which NII is a part, on BNFL's safety performance.

"A Fairer Measure"

Mr. Martlew: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will publish the conclusions of the consultation on the document, "A Fairer Measure"; and if he will make a statement. [113963]

Dr. Howells: The response to the DTI consultation paper on up-dating and simplifying the regulation of goods sold by weight or measure has generally been favourable. I hope to make a statement in the near future about the detailed legislative changes that the Government intend to propose.

International Price Comparisons

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has for further research into international price comparisons. [114077]

Dr. Howells: The international price comparisons survey published on 13 February 2000 was the first time the Government have tried to compare UK prices with those in America and other European countries. My officials shall be discussing with the Office of Fair Trading, retail groups, and consumer groups the lessons that can be learned and how we develop this research in the future.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what consultations his Department had with consumer organisations on the range of products to be included in the AC Nielsen survey into international price comparisons. [114076]

Dr. Howells: There were no consultations with consumer organisations on the range of products to be included in the international price comparisons survey. This was determined in close consultation with the contractor to ensure it reflected current consumer expenditure patterns.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what response the Government have made to the Dresdner Kleinwort Benson report into international supermarket prices. [114081]

Dr. Howells: Many organisations regularly produce international comparisons of supermarket prices. While taking an interest in these, the Government do not respond on an individual basis.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what account he took of the potential for conflict of interest in deciding on an organisation to carry out a survey into international price comparisons. [114078]

Dr. Howells: AC Nielsen were chosen to carry out the survey into international price comparisons following a competitive bidding process in full accordance with EC procurement legislation. In choosing them the Department took full account of the fact that they, like all market research companies, work for businesses that produce branded goods.

EU (Cost of Living)

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what response the Government have made to the report by Employment Conditions Abroad on the cost of living within European Union member states. [114080]

Mr. Alan Johnson: Many organisations regularly produce reports on price levels and the cost of living in different countries. While taking interest in these, the Government do not respond to them on an individual basis.

Correspondence

Mrs. Roe: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when the hon. Member for Broxbourne will receive a reply to her letters of 21 September, 20 October, 17 November, 14 December, 11 January and 8 February relating to Mr. James Gardiner, a constituent. [113929]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 10 March 2000]:* My Department has no record of any such correspondence being received from the hon. Lady. If she sends me copies of her letters I will ensure that the matter is dealt with promptly.

Export Licences

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) which UK manufacturers are exempt from the requirement to provide end-user documentation in applying for export licences; and if he will make a statement; [114360]

(2) under what circumstances UK manufacturers are not required to provide end-user documentation in applying for export licences; and if he will make a statement. [114361]

Dr. Howells: In almost all circumstances, applications for a Standard Individual Export Licence (SIEL) must be supported by appropriate end-user documentation. Where the intended consignee is a Government body, and the application is not for a licence to export chemicals listed in Schedule 2 or 3 to the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) to a state which has not ratified the CWC, a copy of the official Government purchase order or a copy of the relevant part of the Government contract covering the order is normally sufficient.

An Open Individual Export Licence (OIEL) is specific to an individual exporter and covers multiple shipments of specified goods to specified destinations and/or, in some cases, specified consignees. The exporter must obtain from each consignee an appropriate end-user undertaking for each export before the export takes place, or not later than one month after the date of exportation.

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry who was the intended recipient in *(a)* the Republic of Korea and *(b)* Singapore the military explosives or additives for which standard individual

export licences were issued between 1 January 1999 and 21 January 2000; and if he will list the named exporter in each case. [114359]

Dr. Howells: The first of these licences was issued to Lancaster Synthesis Ltd. for the export of di-isopropylamine, N,N-diemethylhydrazine, triethyl phosphite and phosphorus pentachloride to Daejung Chemicals and Metals Ltd. in the Republic of Korea. The second of these licences was issued to Merck Ltd. for the export of zirconium powder to Nanyang Technological University in Singapore.

The two licensees concerned were consulted and did not object to the disclosure of this information, which I am disclosing in accordance with the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Pakistan (Arms Sales)

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list all arms sales to Pakistan, for which export licences have been applied for in the past year, together with the level of ECGD support provided and the costs to the British High Commissioner of promoting such sales. [113825]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* The entry in the relevant legislation under which the export of goods is controlled is known as their rating. The Export Control Organisation's computer databases have been interrogated and the following results were obtained. Between 1 January 1999 and 3 March 2000, 69 Standard Individual Export Licences (SIELs) and 18 Open Individual Export Licences (OIELs) were issued covering the export to consignees or end-users in Pakistan of goods subject to export control by being listed in Part III of Schedule 1 to the Export of Goods (Control) Order 1994, commonly known as the Military List. Individual licences may cover a range of goods with various ratings (and OIELs may also cover a range of countries). Where this is so, the licence is included in the table in the total for all of the relevant ratings.

Individual licences issued between 1 January 1999 and 3 March 2000 covering the export to Pakistan of goods on the Military List

Rating	*Number of SIELs issued covering goods with this rating*	*Number of OIELs issued covering goods with this rating*
ML1	1	0
ML2	1	0
ML3	1	0
ML4	4	1
ML5	3	1
ML6	5	1
ML9	8	5
ML10	11	4
ML11	7	5
ML13	0	1
ML15	1	0
ML18	1	1
ML22	2	2
PL5017	5	1
PL5033	0	1
End use	13	0

This information does not cover any Media OIELs that may have been issued during this period. Media OIELs authorise the export to all destinations of protective clothing, mainly for the protection of aid agency workers and journalists when working in areas of conflict.

This information should be considered in light of the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Mr. Berry) on 27 July 1999, *Official Report*, columns 307–08W.

In addition, Pakistan is a permitted destination on certain Open General Export Licences, covering the export of goods on the Military List; copies of all Open General Export Licences valid at any time during the period are in the Library of the House.

As regards the level of ECGD support, I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given to him by my right hon. Friend the Minister of State for Trade and Industry on 8 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 122W.

Finally, as regards costs to the British High Commissioner of promoting defence sales, I understand this information is not compiled.

NTL/Cable and Wireless

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will publish the advice of the Director General of the Office of Fair Trading on the proposed acquisition by NTL of Cable and Wireless when he publishes the report of the Competition Commission on this case. [114576]

Dr. Howells: In line with current practice, I do not intend to publish the advice of the Director General of Fair Trading on the proposed acquisition by NTL Incorporated of the cable business of Cable and Wireless Communications plc. However the Office of Fair Trading are looking at ways of publishing, in the future, the Director General's advice on whether to refer key mergers to the Competition Commission.

Sub-post Offices

Mr. Ashdown: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what is his estimate of the number of sub-post offices which closed in the United Kingdom in 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [114165]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I understand from the Post Office that the number of sub-post office closures in their 1999–2000 financial year is not yet available. In the 1998–99 financial year, 232 sub-post offices closed.

NORTHERN IRELAND

RUC (Compensation Claims)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what expenses have been incurred to date arising from compensation claims against the RUC in the last 10 years. [113436]

Mr. Ingram: The information requested is not readily available and could be provided only at a disproportionate cost.

News Releases

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list the *(a)* national, *(b)* regional and *(c)* local newspapers and media bodies to which his Department sent news releases during the period 2 May 1997 to 29 February 2000. [113985]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 10 March 2000]:* The information requested is as follows:

Breakdown of media press release distribution

National press

News London
David McKitterick
ITN
GMTV
Reuters
RTE
Sky News
BBC
Liam Clarke
Press Association
UK News
Associated Press
Channel 5 News
Merrick Power
Bloomberg News
New Dawn Publications
TNAG
John Murray Brown
Jim Dee
Sunday Times
The Times
T Hanna
Herve Amoric

Regional Press

Scope Magazine
Belfast City Beat
Eamon Maillie
News Letter
UTV
Irish Times
Ulster Press Agency
Irish Independent
Belfast Telegraph
Sunday Life
Irish News
Downtown Radio
Bob Rodwell
Ed Maloney
Alan Murray
Democratic Dialogue
John Simpson
John Mullin
Carmel McQuaid
North West News Agency
Chris Ryder
Terry Dick
Fortnight
ONTV
Ulsternews International
Anne Hailes
Shandwick
McMillan Media
Sunday Tribune
Sunday World
Farm Trader
Farm Week
Irish Farmers Journal
Irish News
News Letter

Local Press

Channel 9
Q102
Radio Ireland
Carmah Communication
Q97.2 Radio
Radio Foyle
Bangor News
Tyrone Times
Ulster Gazette
Derry Journal
Tyrone Constitution
Ulster Herald
Antrim Guardian
Antrim Times
Ballymoney Times
Ulster Star
Ballymena Guardian
Banbirdge Chronicle
Down Democrat
Down Recorder
Down Spectator
Dromore Star
Mourne Observer
Newry Reporter
Newtownards Chronicle
Outlook Press
Coleraine Chronicle
Coleraine Times
Ulster Television
RTE
Downtown Radio
BBC NI
Farmgate BBC Radio

Fermanagh Herald
Mid-Ulster Mail
Tyrone Courier
Derg & District News
Roe Valley Sentinel
Londonderry Sentinel
Ballyclare Gazette
Lurgan Mail
Portadown Times
Larne Gazette
Ballymena Observer
Banbridge Leader
Carrick Times
Carrick Advertiser
Newtownabbey Times
Impartial Reporter
Northern Constitution
Ballymena Times
Dungannon Observer
Strabane Weekly News
Armagh Observer
Cross Examiner
Dromore Leader
Larne Times
Newtownards Spectator
Tyrone Democrat.

Public Authorities

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list the bodies which he intends to designate as public authorities under section 75(3)(a) and (3)(d) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998; which Departments, corporations or bodies listed in Schedule 2 to the Parliamentary Commissioner Act 1967 will not be so designated; and when he intends to make the final list public. [113560]

Mr. George Howarth: The Northern Ireland Act 1998 defines over one hundred public bodies to which the section 75 obligations already apply. However, the Secretary of State may designate additional bodies under section 75(3)(a) and (d) of the Act, including those listed in the Parliamentary Commissioner Act 1967, to which the obligation should apply. The Parliamentary Commissioner Act lists a large number of public authorities, many of which have little or no influence in Northern Ireland.

I have met the Equality Commission to discuss the contents of the proposed designation order. At our meeting, the Equality Commission suggested a considerable number of other bodies for inclusion in the order. We plan to consult those bodies suggested to us by the Equality Commission which carry out functions relating to Northern Ireland as part of our consideration of whether they should be designated.

We intend to lay an order before Parliament as soon as possible which will list a number of bodies in respect of which our consultation is complete. In due course we hope a more comprehensive designation order will be drafted, for making later this year.

Armstrong Primary School

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what was the total number of *(a)* applicants and *(b)* admissions into the Armstrong Primary School in Armagh City in September 1999; what provision there is for a pre-school class at this school; at which locations in Armagh City he has approved pre-school provision; if there is an application by the Armstrong Primary School for approval of a pre-school facility; and if he will make a statement. [113685]

Mr. George Howarth *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* The total number of applicants and the total number of admissions to the Armstrong Primary School, Armagh in September 1999 was 37. This includes 22 applications for reception during the current school year as they reach their fourth birthdays. Funded pre-school education provisions exists or has been approved through the 1999–2000 Pre-School Education Development Plan for the Southern Education and Library Board area in the following settings in Armagh City.

Ward/school/centre	*Number of funded reception places*[1]	*Number of funded voluntary/private pre-school places*	*Number of statutory nursery places*	*Total number of funded pre-school places*	*Number of P1 children*
Abbey Park					
St. Patrick's Primary School	7	—	—	7	66
College Farm Nursery	—	—	52	52	—
Downs					
Christian Brothers' Primary School	13	—	—	13	44
St. Malachy's Primary School	—	—	—	—	30
Naiscoil Ard Macha	—	8	—	8	—
Dara Playgroup	—	18	—	18	—
Scotwell House	—	9	—	9	—
Callanbridge					
Mount St. Catherine's Primary School	11	—	—	11	30
O'Fiaich Playgroup	—	8	—	8	—
Early Bird Monnesson Playgroup	—	8	—	8	—
The Mall					
Drelimcourt Infants' Primary School	4	—	—	4	11
Grove Nursery School	—	—	51	51	—

Ward/school/centre	Number of funded reception places [1]	Number of funded voluntary/private pre-school places	Number of statutory nursery places	Total number of funded pre-school places	Number of PI children
Observatory					
Armstrong Primary School	6	—	—	6	34
Armagh Nursery School	—	—	29	29	—
Royal School Prep Department	—	—	—	—	3
Saints and Scholars Integrated Primary School	[2]8	—	[2]26	26	22
Total	49	51	158	250	240

[1] Number of reception children in attendance on 31 October 1998.
[2] The reception places are due to be replaced by the nursery places in the 2000–01 school year.
Note:
There is currently no application by Armstrong Primary School for approval of a pre-school facility in addition to its reception group. A proposal in 1999 from the Southern area Pre-School Education Advisory Group for the establishment of a nursery unit at the school was not approved by the Department of Education.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Organic Farming

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what recent assessment he has made of the main obstacles to the growth of the organic farming sector. [113827]

Mr. Morley: As part of the Review of the Organic Farming Scheme we are commissioning a study to ascertain farmers' views on organic farming and to identify the nature and extent of the main barriers to conversion.

Tree Felling Licences

Mr. Chope: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to his answer of 8 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 723W, on tree felling licences, if he will place a copy of the licence referred to in the Library. [114430]

Mr. Morley: I have arranged for a copy of the tree felling licence for Avon Heath Country Park to be placed in the Library.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to his answer of 8 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 723W, on tree felling licences, if he will identify in respect of each of the breaches the owner or organisation responsible and the nature of the breaches alleged. [114386]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* In the last five years, three owners were successfully prosecuted for breaches of tree felling licences. One owner had felled unapproved trees within the approved area; his conviction is now spent under the terms of the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act. The other two owners, Mr. L. B. Holliday and Mr. C. A. P. Duncombe, had both felled trees outside the approved area.

In the other breaches investigated by the Forestry Commission over the last five years the owners were not successfully prosecuted so it would not be appropriate to give their names. In each case they had either felled trees outside the approved area or felled unapproved trees within the approved area.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to his answer of 7 March 2000, *Official Report*, columns 581–82W, on tree felling licences, what was the size and location of each area covered by the licences; and how long each licence is to remain in force. [114213]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* The size, location and expiry dates of tree felling licences granted to the RSPB in each of the last five years are given in the table.

Year ending 31 March	Location	Number of trees licensed for felling	Size of area (hectares)	Expiry date
1996	Lakenheath Fen, Suffolk	390	3.7	March 1988
1997	Nil	—	—	—
1998	Stowborough Nature Reserve, Dorset	200	0.6	April 2000
1998	Grange Heath, Dorset	800	8.0	September 1999
1998	Sandy Warren, Bedfordshire	2,680	2.6	February 2000
1998	Aldringham Walks, Suffolk	180	5.0	October 1999
1999	Avon Heath Country Park, Dorset	86,000	77.9	January 2004
1999	Sandy Warren, Bedfordshire	15	0.1	March 2001
2000	Grange Heath, Dorset	210	0.5	January 2004

Mr. Chope: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will place in the Library a copy of the preliminary guidance drawn up by the Forestry Commission as to how its staff when considering felling licences should respond to potential conflict arising from the EU requirement to restore heathland habitats in Dorset

and the need to retain trees as a habitat for woodland birds and as an amenity landscape feature. [114322]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* The Forestry Commission's guidance to staff on this issue is given on pages 13, 14 and 29 of the Forestry Commission's publication "Lowland Heaths and Forestry", a copy of which has been placed in the Library. The Commission is currently drafting more detailed guidance for its staff, and I have asked the Commission to send the hon. Member a copy of the first draft.

Hedgerows

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on how the Government intend to encourage farmers *(a)* to protect and maintain hedgerows and *(b)* to increase the number and area of field buffer strips; and if he will make a statement. [114173]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* The Ministry operates a range of schemes to encourage environmentally friendly farming. The Countryside Stewardship (CSS) Scheme and the Environmentally Sensitive Area (ESA) Scheme both provide for the planting, laying and coppicing of hedgerows. 10,000 km of hedgerows are currently managed under these schemes.

The CSS and some of the 22 ESAs also offer incentives to create field buffer strips. The Ministry is the lead partner in the Habitat Action Plans for cereal field margins and ancient species-rich hedgerows. The announcement by the Minister on 7 December that the funding of agri-environment schemes will be doubled over the next seven years will allow for more hedgerows and field margins to be managed under these schemes.

Fisheries

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when the Salmon and Freshwater Fisheries Review Committee will publish its report. [114437]

Mr. Morley: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given to my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral, South (Mr. Chapman) on 9 March 2000, *Official Report,* column 800W.

Correspondence

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he intends to reply to the letters to him dated 11 November and 16 December 1999 and 20 January from the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton with regard to Mrs. J. Smith. [114580]

Mr. Nick Brown: A reply to my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton was sent on 13 March 2000.

Mr. Peter Atkinson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he will reply to the letter of 10 January from the hon. Member for Hexham about the restrictions imposed by his Department on organo-phosphate dips. [114543]

Mr. Nick Brown: My noble Friend the Baroness Hayman replied to the letter from the hon. Member for Hexham on 28 February.

HEALTH

TV Patientline Cards

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to give pensioners and benefit recipients concessions for the purchase of TV Patientline cards in NHS hospitals. [103556]

Mr. Denham: There are televisions in most day rooms and ward bays which are provided free of charge by National Health Service trusts. Some trusts have reached agreement with the manufacturers of Patientline to offer an improved service to those patients who wish to use it. The installation and pricing policy will be a matter for agreement between the company and the NHS trust.

Consultants

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much his Department's agencies and non-departmental public bodies have spent on external consultants and advisers since May 1997. [102099]

Yvette Cooper: Total expenditure on external consultants and advisers, by the Department of Health's agencies and non-departmental public bodies (including Special Health Authorities[1]), from May 1997 to 31 September 1999 is as follows:

	£ million
Agencies	3.08
NDPBs	4.38

[1] Except the National Blood Authority

Biomedical Staff

Mr. Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for Health on what basis he calculated the number of biomedical staff who will benefit from a 26 per cent. pay increase from April 1999. [112445]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 1 March 2000]:* I regret that my answer of 31 January 2000, *Official Report,* column 453W in relation to the number of trainee Medical Laboratory Scientific Officers to benefit from a 26 per cent. pay offer from 1 April 1999 was incorrect.

Trainee MLSOs will receive increases ranging between 6.6 per cent. for those on spine points 6, 7, 8 and 9 to 26 per cent. for those on spine point 1. The figures broken down are as follows, rounded to the nearest 100:

Spine point	*Numbers of staff*	*per cent. increase*
01	100	26
02	50	22
03	100	18
04	100	1-
05	100	10.25
06	550	6.6
07		6.6
08		6.6
09		6.6

Spine points 01 to 06 are effectively abolished under the terms of this offer, which establishes a new 4-point spine.

Medical Laboratory Science Officers

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many medical laboratory science officers left the NHS in each of the past 10 years; [113192]

(2) how many people qualified as medical laboratory science officers, and how many of them went into direct employment in the NHS, in each of the last 10 years. [113199]

Mr. Denham: Information on numbers of medical laboratory scientific officers who qualify, join or leave National Health Service employment in each of the last 10 years is not held centrally.

Patient Referrals

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will publish information about the extent to which patients in other countries have the right to select or be referred to the consultant or hospital of their choice. [113854]

Ms Stuart: Comprehensive information is not available within the Department.

Drug Treatment Programmes

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will introduce measures to encourage general practitioners to become involved in treating patients with drug addiction problems. [113954]

Ms Stuart: We have made available £50 million over three years for health authorities to improve treatment services for drug misusers. A priority is to develop and increase the provision of primary care, which is recognised as the ideal setting for the treatment of the basic health needs of drug misusers and problems associated with drug misuse. The Department has set the target of involving at least 20 per cent. of general practitioners in the treatment of drug misusers. Revised clinical guidelines were issued in April last year which recommend shared care as the model for treating drug misusers in primary care. The Standing Conference on Drug Abuse produced a "training pack" last year for primary care teams in support of the clinical guidelines, on behalf of the Department.

NHS Direct

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment has he made of the extent of disruption to NHS Direct Services caused by the failure of computers in the week beginning 20 February; and what action is being taken to ensure complete reliability in the telecommunications infrastructure for NHS Direct. [113180]

Ms Stuart: On 20 February, British Telecom had a major fault with two of the three main BT routers for 0845, 0345, 0870, 0645, 0800 link-line numbers. This left one router to carry all traffic. This British Telecom problem, over which "NHS Direct" has no control, affected many services including banks, building societies, and insurance companies, public utility emergency numbers and the Samaritans and domestic violence helplines, among others within the voluntary sector. This was the first time that this problem has occurred. "NHS Direct" on that day handled about 1,000 calls less than the number of calls expected.

In order to communicate this problem, "NHS Direct" immediately released a press notice urging callers who were unable to get a ringing tone after trying 0845 4647 to use alternative health services.

BT has apologised for the interruption to the service and has reassured the Department that it will not happen again.

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the *(a)* constituencies, *(b)* health authorities and *(c)* counties that are (i) covered and (ii) not covered by NHS Direct; and what is his timetable is for extending coverage. [113203]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* The White Paper "The New NHS; Modern, and Dependable" announced our commitment to NHS Direct. At present, NHS Direct covers 65 per cent. of the population. By the end of October this year, the whole of England will be covered. I have placed copies of the list of *(a)* constituencies, *(b)* health authorities and *(c)* counties that are (i) covered and (ii) not covered by NHS Direct in the Library.

NHS Direct on-line provides users with the facility to determine whether their postcode or telephone number is covered by NHS Direct.

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what studies he has commissioned to establish how many users, as distinct from individual calls, there are of NHS Direct. [114496]

Ms Stuart: We have not commissioned any studies to establish how many users, as distinct from individual calls, there are of NHS Direct.

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many nurses are employed by NHS Direct; and how many are expected to be employed once the service has achieved national coverage. [114497]

Ms Stuart: NHS Direct currently accounts nationally for about 600 whole-time equivalent nurses. Following the national rollout later this year, we expect the number to increase to about 1,000 nurses, a small number against the overall size of the nursing workforce (330,000 whole-time equivalent in England as of 30 September 1998).

NHS Direct recruits nurses from a wide range of different backgrounds. Some are from a hospital background, others are from primary care or are working outside the National Health Service. NHS Direct also provides opportunities for disabled and work injured nurses. Many staff who work for NHS Direct do so on a part-time basis, allowing them to combine working for NHS Direct with other clinical duties.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Burma

18. **Mr. Miller:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations he has received on behalf of the Karen people. [112886]

Mr. Battle: I am grateful that my hon. Friend has persistently raised the case of the Karens. I continue to receive a number of letters reflecting the great deal of interest amongst Parliamentarians and members of the public about ethnic minorities in Burma. We also receive representations from Burmese exiles and non-governmental organisations.

We continue to monitor carefully the situation of ethnic minorities in Burma and along the Thai-Burma border; and to condemn violations of their human rights at every opportunity.

Mr. Savidge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what support Her Majesty's Government are giving in James Mawdsley's case; and if he will make a statement on the political situation in Burma. [112905]

Mr. Battle: We continue to do all we properly can to ensure that James's rights are respected but we cannot intervene in the Burmese judicial process just as we would not allow them to intervene in ours.

We remain appalled by the lack of democracy and human rights in Burma: we are at the forefront of international action to press the Burmese regime to improve the situation.

Arms Exports

19. **Dr. Cable:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on his role in advising on approval of ECGD cover for arms exports. [112887]

Mr. Hain: The FCO carefully scrutinises all applications for arms sales abroad via the reformed and tightened export-licensing regime.

Once an export licence is approved it is up to ECGD to decide whether or not to provide export credit support.

However, stricter conditions apply in poor and heavily indebted developing countries to ensure ECGD only covers projects that clearly contribute to social and economic development. ECGD will always consult other Whitehall Departments, including FCO, to ensure these conditions are met.

Angola

20. **Kali Mountford:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the scale of breaches of UN sanctions against UNITA, with particular reference to breaches by neighbouring countries. [112888]

Mr. Hain: I am extremely concerned by any allegations of breaches of UN sanctions against UNITA, especially through South Africa, Zambia, Rwanda, Burkina Faso, Togo and Uganda.

Iran

21. **Mr. Stephen Twigg:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations he has made to the Government of Iran on the funding of Hezbullah and Hamas. [112889]

Mr. Hain: This Government and our EU colleagues have frequently raised with the Iranians our concerns about their support for groups who use violent methods to oppose the Middle East Peace Process and will continue to do so.

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he last made representations to the Government of Iran on the situation of the 13 Jews arrested on charges of espionage. [112935]

Mr. Hain: The continued detention on espionage charges of a number of Iranians including members of the Iranian Jewish community is a matter of great concern to us. We and our EU partners have repeatedly stressed to the Iranian authorities the importance we attach to this issue. We have also stressed our belief that those detained should either be released or be granted a speedy, fair and open trial.

The Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary both raised this issue with the Iranian Foreign Minister Dr. Kharrazi during his visit in January. They pressed for the release of all those detained or for their early trial. Since then three of the detainees have been released on bail and a trial date of 13 April announced. Dr. Kharrazi said that those detained would receive a fair trial with access to lawyers and their families.

I raised this issue with Deputy Foreign Minister Sarmadi when we met on 7 March.

Mercenaries

22. **Mr. Mackinlay:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the steps he is taking to control the hiring of mercenaries and marketing of small arms *(a)* within and *(b)* via the United Kingdom. [112890]

Mr. Hain: The Government deplore the use, financing and recruitment of mercenaries. We are committed to publishing a Green Paper on mercenary activity by November 2000.

On small arms, the UK has some of the most stringent controls on firearms in the world. In order to sell, transfer or expose for sale any firearm by way of business or trade, a person must be registered with the police as a firearms dealer. All applications for licences to export small arms from the UK are rigorously assessed against our national export licensing criteria and those in the EU Code of Conduct on Arms Exports. We will not issue export licences where there is a clearly identifiable risk that the small arms might be used for internal repression or international aggression.

St. Helena

23. **Mr. Bob Russell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to commemorate the 500 anniversary of the discovery of the Island of St. Helena. [112891]

Mr. Battle: A contribution of £160,000 has been agreed from the FCO towards a new much larger museum that will also house the national archives and so tell the story of St. Helena's 500 year history more professionally and comprehensively. Work will start this week and will be completed in time for the quincentenary celebrations in 2002.

Bosnia

24. **Mr. Malcolm Bruce:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs under what conditions the British Government will support Bosnia-Herzegovina's application for membership of the Council of Europe. [112892]

Mr. Vaz: The British Government have supported in principle Bosnia and Herzegovina's membership of the Council of Europe since its application in December 1998. But we believe that Bosnia and Herzegovina must be able to meet the basic commitments and obligations arising from membership. The Council of Europe has set down 12 central preconditions for Bosnia and Herzegovina's membership. It is clear that further progress is still needed towards the requirements set down by the Council of Europe, particularly in areas such as the functioning of the state-level institutions and the passage of an Election Law. We are continuing to assist Bosnia and Herzegovina in its efforts to meet these requirements and have recently given £50,000 to the Council of Europe for additional assistance to Bosnia and Herzegovina specifically for this purpose.

Cyprus

25. **Sir David Madel:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make an official visit to Cyprus. [112893]

Mr. Vaz: I have no plans to visit Cyprus at present. But my Special Representative for Cyprus, Sir David Hannay, concludes a visit to the island today.

Pakistan

26. **Mr. Gordon Prentice:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations he has made to the Government of Pakistan concerning the restrictions on the reporting of the trial of the former Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif. [112894]

Mr. Hain: From the outset, we have urged on the Pakistani authorities the need for a fair and transparent trial for Nawaz Sharif and his co-defendants. We have made clear that there should be no "show trials". Members of EU missions in Karachi attend each court hearing, as do representatives of the national and international media.

Middle East Peace Process

27. **Mr. Clappison:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations he has received about the middle east peace process. [112895]

Mr. Hain: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and I are in frequent contact with all the parties to the Middle East Peace Process. Most recently, for example, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has had discussions with Nabil Shaath, Palestinian Minister for Planning and International Co-ordination, Yossi Beilin, Israeli Minister for Justice and Farouk a-Shara'a, Syrian Foreign Minister. In recent days, I myself have discussed the Middle East Peace Process with Shlomo Ben-Ami, Israeli Minister for Internal Security, and received a group of Arab Ambassadors in London.

European Security and Defence Initiative

28. **Mr. Wilkinson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations he has received from the United States Secretary of State about the European Security and Defence Initiative. [112896]

Mr. Vaz: The United States Secretary of State and my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary discuss European Defence on a regular basis, most recently during his visit to Washington on 8–10 February 2000. Mrs. Albright follows developments closely, and continues firmly to support our efforts to build a NATO-friendly crisis management capability in the EU.

Congo

29. **Helen Jackson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on his steps to bring peace to the Democratic Republic of the Congo. [112897]

Mr. Hain: Bringing peace to DRC matters to Britain. That is why we are actively supporting the Lusaka Agreement. It provides a realistic peace formula. So our aim is to make it work and to keep DRC on the international agenda.

At the Security Council meetings in December and January, and in bilateral discussions with all those involved, I made clear that Britain would back all those determined to make Lusaka work: with finance, practical help, people on the ground and political support. I encouraged others to follow suit.

And if we all play our part in driving the process forward; if there is sustained international support; if the parties to the conflict work for peace, Lusaka can be implemented.

Nigeria

30. **Mr. David Heath:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the political situation in Nigeria. [112898]

Mr. Hain: We welcome the strong start that the government of President Obasanjo has made since taking office in May 1999 and his commitment to reform. There are many serious challenges ahead for Nigeria. Britain will continue to support Nigeria's reform programme.

Falkland Islands

31. **Mr. Borrow:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions Her Majesty's Government have had with the new Argentine administration about the Falklands Islands. [112899]

Mr. Battle: We have established a good working relationship with the new Argentine Government. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has met President De la Rua twice. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has met Rodriguez Giavarini. I attended the Argentine Presidential inauguration and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence has met the Argentine President and Defence Minister.

On these and other occasions both sides have reaffirmed their commitment to the Joint Statement of July 1999 and to continue our dialogue on issues of common interest.

This does not affect our sovereignty of the Falkland Islands or our commitment to the Islanders' rights to determine their own future.

East Timor

32. **Mr. Tom Clarke:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions Her Majesty's Government have held with the Australian and New Zealand Governments on the situation in East Timor. [112900]

34. **Maria Eagle:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with the Australian and New Zealand Governments about the situation in East Timor. [112902]

Mr. Battle: We hold regular discussions with the Australian and New Zealand Governments on a range of issues, including East Timor. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and I held talks with the Australian Foreign Minister during his visit to London in January, and I visited Australia from 21–26 February and New Zealand from 27 February to 2 March for discussions with members of both Governments. We will continue to work together to ensure the transition of East Timor to a new democracy.

33. **Mrs. Betty Williams:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what support Her Majesty's Government are providing for institution-building in East Timor. [112901]

Mr. Battle: We are working closely with the UN Transitional Administration (UNTAET) to help East Timor prepare for statehood. We have committed a total of £19.71 million to help with humanitarian relief, reconstruction and institution-building. In addition 14 British policemen and four military liaison officers are serving in UNTAET. We look forward to seeing East Timor emerge as the first new democracy of the 21st century.

Palestinian Refugees

35. **Mr. St. Aubyn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the policy of Her Majesty's Government with respect to the status of Palestinian refugees. [112903]

Mr. Hain: Both the status and the condition of Palestinian refugees are of great importance to us. We support UN General Assembly Resolution 194. Our contributions to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, bilaterally through the EU, make us the largest EU donor and second largest country donor.

Palestine

36. **Ms Perham:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps he is taking to assist the Palestinian authority to build democratic and accountable institutions. [112904]

Mr. Hain: The UK's programme of assistance to the Palestinians includes several projects to strengthen their institutions and promote good governance. For example the FCO fund the Palestinian rights Programme which is the largest FCO human rights programme anywhere in the world. DfID are also providing technical and legal assistance to the Palestinian Authority, for example to the Ministry of Economy and Trade to help prepare trade negotiations.

Colombia

38. **Mr. Goggins:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the recent Human Rights Watch report on conditions in Colombia. [112906]

Mr. Battle: We have considered the recent Human Rights Watch report carefully.

The allegations in this report are serious, particularly those of collusion between the Armed Forces and the paramilitaries.

We are encouraged by assurances from the Colombian Government that it is taking steps to address these issues. We will continue to follow this closely.

China

39. **Dr. Gibson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on Her Majesty's Government's relations with China. [112907]

Mr. Battle: China is an important and growing presence in the world, with which we need to engage. We have a good and wide ranging relationship with China, which is not just political and commercial, but includes areas such as culture, education and science and technology. Engagement with the Chinese at all levels enables us to promote our interests in these areas and to raise our concerns about human rights and other sensitive issues.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) if he will make a statement on his policy in respect of the proposed resolution on China, to be tabled at the 56th United Nations Commission on Human Rights; [114420]

(2) if he will make a statement on his policy in respect of co-sponsoring a resolution on China at the 56th United Nations Commission on Human Rights. [114422]

Mr. Battle: We are aware that the United States intends to table a resolution critical of China at the forthcoming 56th session of the UN Commission on Human Rights. We are considering policy towards the resolution, including a position on co-sponsorship, with EU partners, as was the case in 1999. The matter will be discussed at the General Affairs Council on 21 March.

Mozambique

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the UK's relations with Mozambique. [112884]

Mr. Hain: UK/Mozambique relations are close and friendly, and the UK has been at the forefront of the emergency relief effort following floods and future development assistance.

Sri Lanka

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what further efforts he is making to encourage a peaceful resolution of the conflict in Sri Lanka between Government forces and the Tamil Tigers. [113653]

Mr. Hain: We take every opportunity at bilateral meetings to stress the need for a political settlement to end the conflict in Sri Lanka. We have made clear that we stand ready to help if both sides ask us to play a role.

Embassies

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many meetings have been held within his Department to consider his plan to change the name of British embassies to United Kingdom embassies; and what was the cost of holding these meetings. [113845]

Mr. Hain: No meetings were held to discuss this. We have no plans to stop using 'British' in describing our diplomatic missions overseas. British Embassies will continue to be known as British Embassies.

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what will be the cost of changing the name of the British Embassy in the United States of America to the United Kingdom Embassy. [113846]

Mr. Hain: There are no plans to change the name of the British Embassy in the United States of America. I would be opposed to any such change.

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the cost of implementing his plan to change the name of British Embassies to United Kingdom Embassies. [113844]

Mr. Hain: We have no plans to stop using "British" in describing our diplomatic missions overseas. British Embassies will continue to be known as British Embassies.

Balkans

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations he has received from *(a)* the US State Department and *(b)* the EU partner countries on the political and security situation in (i) Kosovo, (ii) Montenegro and (iii) Serbia. [113875]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 10 March 2000]:* We are in frequent regular contact with the US Government and with our EU partners on the political and security situations in Kosovo, Montenegro and Serbia.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to visit *(a)* Kosovo and *(b)* Montenegro. [113869]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 10 March 2000]:* My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has no present plans to visit Kosovo or Montenegro.

Federal Republic of Yugoslavia

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what changes have been made to measures in place against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. [114824]

Mr. Vaz: The European Union's ECOFIN Council on 28 February adopted a Common Position and Council Decision implementing changes to the EU sanctions regime on the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia which had been agreed at the General Affairs Council on 14 February. Council Decision 2000/177/CFSP introduced, with immediate effect, a revised and expanded list of FRY citizens (representing an increase to a total of 794 names) against whom the EU visa ban applies, and Common Position 2000/176/CFSP suspended the EU flight ban on the FRY for a period of six months. The suspension of the flight ban will come into effect when the necessary amendments have been made to the relevant Council regulations. In parallel we are working with our partners to tighten up the implementation of financial sanctions targeted against the regime.

Further to the written answer given by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd)—the then Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs—on 13 July 1999, *Official Report*, columns 141–42W, the Government have decided to introduce a case by case approach to consideration of export licence applications for dual use goods to the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia including Kosovo and Montenegro. There are humanitarian developmental and commercial reasons for doing so and it brings us into line with the practice of our major partners. Reconstruction in Kosovo is crucial to the province's development and the UK contribution to Kosovo could potentially be hindered without a change in practice. Applications will be considered consistent with the national export licensing criteria announced in July 1997 and those in the EU Code of Conduct on Arms Exports. We will not approve any dual use goods licence applications which could benefit the armed forces, internal security forces or similar entities of the authorities in Belgrade.

Overseas Embassies (Staff)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the employees working in embassies overseas paid for by business, indicating in each case *(a)* the name of the employee, *(b)* the business providing the financial support, *(c)* the level of financial support and *(d)* the embassy. [114421]

Mr. Hain: Since 1979, the FCO has arranged 56 secondments to British diplomatic missions overseas from 40 private sector organisations. In line with HMG's policy of increased interchange with the private sector as part of the Modernising Government agenda, there are at present eight private sector secondees at posts overseas, primarily in the US and the Far East. A further 14 secondments were completed over the last year. These include substantive secondments of up to four years and short-term attachments of 3–6 months under the Short Term Business Attachment Scheme. In all cases, the secondees are bound by Diplomatic Service Regulations relating to conduct and discipline, and are answerable to the head of the diplomatic post at which they are serving.

It would not be appropriate to list the names of individual secondees.

Panchen Lama

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps he has taken to establish whether the Panchen Lama is alive. [114111]

Mr. Battle: We remain concerned about the absence of any independent verification of the whereabouts of Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, the Dalai Lama's choice as Panchen Lama. We regularly urge the Chinese authorities to allow access by diplomats or an independent figure to confirm his state of health and living conditions. I raised the matter with Chinese Vice Foreign Minister, Wang Yingfan, in Beijing on 9 November 1999, and was given a written assurance that reports that Gedhun Choekyi Nyima had died were not accurate and that he was alive and well. We also raised the Gedhun's case during the fourth round of the UK/China bilateral human rights dialogue in February and received similar assurances. We will continue to press for independent access.

Egypt

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent reports he has received from the Egyptian Government regarding the grounds for the charges brought against Father Gabriel Abdel-Massesh Gabriel following the sectarian violence in Al-Kosheh. [114590]

Mr. Hain: Following the violence in Al-Kosheh, it was announced that Father Gabriel Abdel-Massesh Gabriel had been charged with attempted murder and illegal possession of weapons. He was released on bail. The Egyptian Public Prosecutor's Office has now concluded its report on the incident. At a press conference on 11 March the Public Prosecutor reportedly confirmed that no religious leaders would be charged.

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the UK's relations with Egypt. [112870]

Mr. Hain: The British Government have a strong relationship with the government of President Mubarak and UK/Egypt trade relations continue to grow.

Kosovo

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the progress made in setting up a local Kosovo police force. [113874]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 10 March 2000]:* So far 349 recruits have graduated from the OSCE Police Training School in Kosovo. A third course of 250 students began their initial training on 22 February 2000. This group consisted of 217 Albanians, 22 Serbs and 11 other minority members.

All students undergo nine weeks of basic police training instruction. This consists of both classroom training and practical exercises in democratic policing, legal affairs, patrol duties, firearms, administration, defensive tactics, crime investigation, forensics and traffic control. Following this, each student undergoes a further 17 weeks of field training with an UNMIK police officer and an additional 80 hours of advanced classroom training. Having successfully completed the three phases of instruction, each recruit is eligible for certification and independent assignment.

The OSCE training mandate is to develop and deliver basic police training for approximately 3,500 police recruits within the next 16 months.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations have been made to him by experts on the level of international police numbers in Kosovo. [114577]

Mr. Hain: The Secretary-General has determined that the number of civilian police officers required for UNMIK is 4,718. The UN has consistently underlined the urgency of reaching that number soon. The only other representation received by the UK is that from the European Secretary-General/High Representative, Mr. Javier Solana, as set out in my answer of 6 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 500W.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 6 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 501W, on which two dates the UN Secretariat requested additional police officers for the international peacekeeping effort in Kosovo. [114692]

Mr. Hain: The UN Secretariat issued requests for police officers for Kosovo on 11 June and 18 November 1999.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of whether the number of *(a)* international police officers and *(b)* UK police officers in Kosovo is sufficient to ensure security in the province. [114578]

Mr. Hain: We share the UN Secretary-General's assessment of the number of international police officers required to ensure security in Kosovo. Until the full police strength is achieved, KFOR is offering assistance in this area.

To date, the UN have requested 120 UK police officers for Kosovo. We have been able to respond positively to this request, and hope to deploy the remainder of the contingent to the region in the near future.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 6 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 501W, concerning the UN Secretariat's requests for more police officers for Kosovo, for how many police officers the UN Secretariat asked on *(a)* the first and *(b)* the second occasion; and how many police officers the United Kingdom offered in response to each request. [114691]

Mr. Hain: On both occasions, the UN Secretariat requested 60 UK police officers. The UK has met the first request in full, and 60 police officers have been in Kosovo since November 1999. In order to meet the second request, the UK is identifying 60 suitable officers for deployment in the near future.

"Europe Day"

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to the oral answer

of 15 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 759, if he will set out the terms of reference and budget for "Europe Day" on 9 May. [114147]

Mr. Vaz: The FCO will mark "Europe Day" this year with a Europe-focused open day on 9 May. This will launch a series of 12 open days, on successive Tuesdays between May and June of this year. Each will focus on a different aspect of the FCO's work.

The FCO's series of "open days" form part of the London String of Pearls Millennium Festival, a year long event involving 60 historic buildings along the Thames. These will open their doors to the public in order to celebrate the social, political and cultural achievement of the last Millennium.

The FCO's "Europe Day" event aims to make the UK public more aware of the culture of our European neighbours, and of Britain's place in Europe.

The budget for this event is £40,000.

Iraq

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the criteria used by his Department to decide the number of people travelling to Iraq on the flight organised by the hon. Member for Glasgow, Kelvin (Mr. Galloway). [114134]

Mr. Hain: The hon. Member for Kelvin applied for clearance for a humanitarian flight carrying medical supplies to Iraq. On receipt of a passenger list containing 207 names, I advised the hon. Member that the practice of the UN Sanctions Committee indicated that a humanitarian flight with this number of passengers was unlikely to receive Sanctions Committee approval. The hon. Member reduced the number of passengers to 29 on 6 March. The flight application was then submitted to the UN Sanctions Committee, which approved the flight on 8 March.

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when the hon. Member for Glasgow, Kelvin (Mr. Galloway) was told that his original plans for the flight to Iraq were not acceptable to his Department. [114133]

Mr. Hain: On receipt of a passenger list containing 207 names, I advised the hon. Member for Kelvin on 4 March that, because of the large number of passengers on what was a humanitarian flight, it was unlikely that the UN Sanctions Committee on Iraq would approve the flight application. The hon. Member reduced the number of passengers to 29 on 6 March. The application for the flight and its cargo of medicine was then submitted to the UN Sanctions Committee, which approved the flight on 8 March in time for it to proceed.

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the *(a)* meetings and *(b)* discussions which have taken place between the hon. Member for Glasgow, Kelvin (Mr. Galloway) and (i) Ministers and (ii) officials in his Department, regarding the proposed flight to Iraq. [114232]

Mr. Hain: I and my officials have been in regular contact with the hon. Member for Kelvin since January regarding the proposed flight to Iraq. On my recommendation it was given clearance by the UN Sanctions Committee. But for reasons best known to himself, the hon. Member decided not to proceed.

Ministerial Visit (Loughborough)

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to the oral answer of 15 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 759, when the Minister of State, the hon. Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz) will visit Loughborough; and what other towns and cities he plans to visit and on what dates. [114145]

Mr. Vaz: I plan to visit several cities in the next few months, including Reading on 26 May. I have also written to local councils in Liverpool, Norwich, Leeds and Southampton to ask for their support in organising Europe Days during May and June. I hope to visit a number of other towns and cities, including Loughborough, later in the year.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Maternity Pay

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the cost to the Exchequer of increasing Statutory Maternity Pay at 90 per cent. of earnings to 18 weeks, but restricting the additional entitlement to those women not paying the higher rate tax. [113660]

Mr. Bayley: The estimated cost of increasing Statutory Maternity Pay (SMP) at 90 per cent. of earnings to 18 weeks but, restricting the additional entitlement to women not paying higher rate tax, is an additional full year cost of £460 million.

Note:

This estimate is based on the Government Actuary's Department projection of 2000–01 average case load of SMP.

Means-tested Benefits

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what changes he plans to make with regard to *(a)* savings and *(b)* capital held by claimants applying for means-tested benefits. [113962]

Mr. Bayley: The Pensions Green Paper outlined our commitment to looking at ways to better reward savers. We will bring forward our proposals later in the Parliament.

Housing Benefit

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the *(a)* local authorities which have contracted out the administration of Housing Benefit and *(b)* companies contracted by each authority for this work. [112651]

Angela Eagle: As there is no formal requirement on local authorities to inform the Department that Housing Benefit administration has been contracted out, comprehensive data are not available. Such information as is available is set out in the table:

Local authority	*Contractor*
Barrow-in-Furness	CSL
Bexley	Capita Business Services
Brent	Electronic Data Services Ltd.
Bromley	Capita Business Services
Broxbourne	W. S. Atkins
Croydon	CSL
Ealing	Vertex Datasciences Ltd.
East Cambridgeshire	Capita Business Services
Hackney	ITNet
Havant	Capita Business Services
Horsham	Seimens Business Services
Hounslow	ITNet
Islington	ITNet
Lambeth	Capita Business Services
Mendip	Capita Business Services
North Somerset	CSL
Rother	CSL
Sheffield	CSL
South Bucks	ITNet
South Oxfordshire	CSL
Southwark	CSL
Taunton Deane	CSL
Westminster	Capita Business Services
West Devon	Capita Business Services

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what has been the total estimated saving from Single Room Rent restrictions *(a)* in total and *(b)* in London for each year since 1996; and how many people have been subject to these restrictions in each year. [114099]

Angela Eagle: When the Single Room Rent restriction was introduced, the estimated yearly savings, which took little account of behavioural changes, for 1996–97, 1997–98 and 1998–99 were £13/£57/£62 million respectively. However, we are unable to provide actual savings because there is insufficient quantitative information to assess how this group as a whole responded to the change.

Because of the number of reasons which could limit the contractual rent, on which data are not held, it is not possible to estimate the savings from Housing Benefit restrictions.

The measures which limit the rent for Housing Benefit purposes are:

certain service charges included in the contractual rent which are not generally eligible for Housing Benefit, for example, charges for cleaning, laundry, fuel, meals and personal care and nursing;

the range of determinations, including determinations of single room rents, made by rent officers in respect of most claims from tenants living in the private rented sector; and

where local authorities consider that the rent is unreasonably high or the accommodation overlarge or the eligible rent is none the less too high in respect of a particular case.

Such information as is available is contained in the table:

Date	*Numbers assessed under the Single Room Rent restriction rules*
May 1997	30,000
May 1998	32,000

Source:
Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit Annual Summary Statistics May 1998.

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what was the total estimated savings from Housing Benefit restrictions *(a)* in total and *(b)* in London for the period 1994–95 to 1998–99; [114098]

(2) how many households with children were subject to Housing Benefit restrictions as a consequence of rent restrictions in 1997, 1998 and 1999; [114095]

(3) how many households on income support were subject to restrictions of Housing Benefit entitlement *(a)* in total and *(b)* in each London borough in 1997–98 and 1998–99. [114097]

Angela Eagle: Because of the number of reasons which could limit the contractual rent, on which data are not held, it is not possible to estimate the savings from Housing Benefit restrictions.

The measures which limit the rent for Housing Benefit purposes are:

certain service charges included in the contractual rent which are not generally eligible for Housing Benefit, for example, charges for cleaning, laundry, fuel, meals and personal care and nursing;

the range of determinations, including determinations of single room rents, made by rent officers in respect of most claims from tenants living in the private rented sector; and

where local authorities consider that the rent is unreasonably high or the accommodation overlarge or the eligible rent is none the less too high in respect of a particular case.

Under the current arrangements, Rent Officers are required to make rental determinations in respect of claims from most tenants living in the deregulated private rented sector. These determinations restrict the rent for a variety of reasons. We do not centrally collect information on individuals' contractual rent and are unable to provide the information for specific household compositions.

Mr. Lepper: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what research his Department has *(a)* carried out and *(b)* commissioned on the effects of single room rent restriction on the accessibility of housing for those aged 18 to 24 years; and if he will make a statement on the findings of such research. [114517]

Angela Eagle: In 1997, the Department of Social Security and the Department of the Environment Transport and Regions (DETR) commissioned the London Research Centre to explore the role of Housing Benefit in the private rented sector. In particular, the study sought to investigate the impact of the single room rent and local reference rent. The study included interviews with young people who had their Housing Benefit restricted under the single room rent rules, as well as with other tenants, landlords, Housing Benefit Officers and Rent Officers. The report was published by DETR in April 1999, with the title 'Housing Benefit and the Private Rented Sector'.

The findings of the report concluded that the single room rent restriction is causing difficulties for some young people under 25 years in accessing and maintaining accommodation. We are considering the future of the single room rent as part of our wider review of housing. We will be taking account of all the available research which will include the localised reports we received from a variety of organisations on the effects of the single room rent.

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is the cost of implementing the housing benefit verification framework; and what estimates have been made of the savings in housing benefit costs through fraud reduction. [114103]

Angela Eagle: The Government have made available £100 million to enable all local authorities to implement the Verification Framework. By the end of 1999–2000 we expect to have spent over £34.5 million funding the implementation of the Verification Framework in 229 local authorities. Some authorities will have received set-up costs, some will have received continuing costs and some will have received both set-up and continuing costs.

Although it is too early to draw firm conclusions about the impact of the implementation of the Framework on savings in Housing Benefit costs the increasing number of authorities implementing the Framework will make an important contribution towards reducing the estimated £840 million lost each year through fraud and error in Housing and Council Tax Benefit claims. A robust approach to checking at the outset and during the life of a claim will prevent fraudulent claims from entering the system and will detect fraud at the earliest point during the life of a claim. Initial views from local authorities that are fully compliant with the Framework indicate that its implementation has already led to the prevention and detection of a considerable amount of fraudulent claims.

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what evidence he has assessed and what monitoring is being undertaken, of the impact of the housing benefit verification framework on *(a)* the overall level of housing benefit claims, *(b)* the level of housing benefit claims from pensioners and *(c)* the time taken to process new and repeat claims for housing benefit. [114102]

Angela Eagle: All local authorities are required to provide Housing Benefit management information. In addition, local authorities fully compliant with the Framework provide Verification Framework management information. This information will enable us to measure the impact of the introduction of the Framework. At present we only have initial views and anecdotal information concerning a limited number of local authorities.

We are currently examining, and we will continue to monitor, the impact of the Verification Framework on the number of Housing Benefit claims, the overall Housing Benefit caseload and the time taken to process claims. As part of our on-going evaluation of the Framework we will examine the number of pensioners receiving Housing Benefit.

As soon as robust evidence becomes available the Department will consider publishing this in the usual way.

ONE Pilot Scheme

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) who employs the personal advisers working in the ONE pilot area currently being run by the Reed/Shaw Trust; [114230]

(2) from which organisations personal advisers in the ONE pilot areas run by the Reed/Shaw Trust are on secondment. [114231]

Angela Eagle: Reed in Partnership Ltd. is leading a consortium (also comprising the Shaw Trust, Nat West Bank plc and SEMA Group Ltd.) to deliver the ONE pilot in North Nottinghamshire. Their teams of Personal Advisers are staffed by direct employees from Reed in Partnership Ltd., and also by staff on voluntary secondment from the Employment Service, the Benefits Agency, and Ashfield District Council.

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what training in adjudication has been given to the personal advisers in the ONE pilot scheme. [114229]

Angela Eagle: Personal advisers are not trained to adjudicate on benefit entitlement which is the responsibility of fully trained officers of the Benefits Agency or relevant local authority. From 3 April, the personal advisers will decide whether a client has fulfilled the new requirement to take part in a work-focused meeting as part of the normal claims process.

Benefit Statistics

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is the margin of error of the statistics being used to measure *(a)* Jobseeker's Allowance, *(b)* Income Support and *(c)* Income Support and Jobseeker's Allowance for his Department's Public Service Agreement. [114671]

Angela Eagle: There is 95 per cent. confidence that the true figure for fraud and error for Jobseeker's Allowance and Income Support individually is within 8 per cent. of the estimate.

There is 95 per cent. confidence that the true figure for fraud and error in Income Support and Jobseeker's Allowance combined in the Public Service Agreement are within 5 per cent. of the estimate.

Landlords

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if a representative sample of landlords is included in the current area benefit review. [114670]

Angela Eagle: The review's objective is to measure the extent of losses due to fraud and error, including fraud involving landlords, in Housing Benefit paid with Income Support or Jobseeker's Allowance (Income Based). The sample to be reviewed is therefore made up of a random selection of Housing Benefit claimants including those whose benefit is paid direct to their landlord. The results will give us a representative value for the amount lost through landlord fraud.

Pensions

Mrs. Fyfe: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will seek to amend the Pensions Act 1995 to ensure that the remit of the trustees of a pension scheme includes improving the level of protection of the interests of employees. [112865]

Mr. Rooker: We have no plans to amend the Pensions Act in this respect. Under Trust Law pension scheme trustees already have a fiduciary duty to act in the best

interests of the beneficiaries of the scheme, including those members who are employees of the sponsoring employer.

Mrs. Fyfe: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many cases the Office of the Pensions Advisory Service has referred to the Pensions Ombudsman in the last year for which figures are available; and of these how many were upheld and subsequently enforced. [112864]

Mr. Rooker: In the year ending 31 March 1999, the Office of the Pensions Advisory Service (OPAS) recommended 170 complainants take their case to the Pensions Ombudsman. OPAS suggested that a further 73 complainants, where the evidence was inconclusive, might consider taking their case to the Pensions Ombudsman. Of the 510 cases determined by the Pensions Ombudsman in the year to 31 March 1999, 122 of those upheld had been referred by OPAS.

It is expected that the determinations of the Pensions Ombudsman will be complied with. Determinations are enforceable by the complainant by means of a County Court order. The Pensions Ombudsman will assist in this procedure if necessary but is not able to keep records as to the total number of cases that have been enforced. There were no Court applications with which he assisted in the year to 31 March 1999.

Mrs. Fyfe: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what steps he will take to ensure all pension schemes are compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. [112861]

Mr. Rooker: The Department for Education and Employment has published a Code of Practice which provides practical guidance for anyone with duties under the Act's employment provisions, including managers and trustees of occupational pension schemes.

Mrs. Fyfe: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many grievances about occupational pension schemes have been considered by the Pensions Ombudsman in the last year for which figures are available. [112863]

Mr. Rooker: In the year to 31 March 1999, the Pensions Ombudsman's office received 3,067 inquiries. The majority of these inquiries (1,940) were either referred back to the scheme to undergo the internal dispute resolution procedure or on to the Office of the Pensions Advisory Service or the appropriate regulatory authority. 719 cases were accepted for investigation. In addition, 624 cases were already being investigated at the start of the year. The Pensions Ombudsman issued 510 determinations in the year to 31 March 1999.

Source:

The Pensions Ombudsman's annual report 1998–99.

Mrs. Fyfe: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what cases of complaint to the *(a)* Office of the Pensions Advisory Service and *(b)* the Pensions Ombudsman, have involved breaches of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. [112867]

Mr. Rooker: No complaints specifically involving breaches of the Disability Discrimination Act have been received by either the Office of the Pensions Advisory Service or the Pensions Ombudsman. Both organisations are aware that a small number of individuals may make reference to this Act in support of complaints about other pensions matters. However, neither office keeps statistics on the number of complaints that refer to the Disability Discrimination Act.

Mrs. Fyfe: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what reports he has received as a result of monitoring and evaluating pension schemes of failures to comply with the Pensions Act 1995. [112866]

Mr. Rooker: The Occupational Pensions Regulatory Authority (OPRA) is responsible for securing compliance with those provisions of the Pensions Act 1995 which govern the running of occupational pension schemes. As required by section 2 of that Act, the Secretary of State receives annual reports from the Chairman of OPRA about the activities of the Authority and lays them before Parliament.

The reports include detailed information and statistics relating to the investigations undertaken by OPRA in the last financial year, the numbers of investigations opened and closed, referrals to the Police and the Serious Fraud Office, and the nature of the penalties imposed by OPRA on those found to have failed to comply with the provisions of the Pensions Act. Copies of the three reports received to date, covering the financial years from 1996–97 to 1998–99, are in the Library.

Benefit Savings Scheme

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what was the amount of the Security and Control Programme funding for the weekly benefit savings scheme for each year between 1996 and 1999. [114589]

Mr. Rooker: The Security and Control Program (S and CP) funding from 1996 to 1999 is shown in the table:

£ million

Year	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*
S and CP Funding	106.5	164	246	264

Note:

Figures are the audited figures validated by the NAO. (As reported in the NAO Report on Vote 1 Appropriation Account 1995–96 to 1998–99).

PRIME MINISTER

Ministerial Conduct

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Prime Minister if the Chancellor of the Exchequer sought his advice on whether the circumstances in which he acquired a flat from AGB Research Ltd. in 1992 presented a possible conflict of interest with his present role in Her Majesty's Government. [104669]

The Prime Minister: No.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Prime Minister what assessment he has made of the operation of the Ministerial Code, with particular reference to actual or apparent conflicts of interest between Ministers' public duties and private interests in relation to the Chancellor of the Exchequer's purchase of a flat which had been owned by AGB Research Ltd. [104671]

The Prime Minister: None.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Millennium Dome

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport on what days to date all available tickets for the Millennium Dome have been sold; and what was the attendance on those days. [110464]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 17 February 2000]:* All available tickets were sold from 1 to 3 January, from 18 to 26 February and on 28 February. Attendances on those days were as follows:

1 January: 11,190

2 January: 22,252

3 January: 21,718

18 February: 27,000

19 February: 24,700

20 February: 26,200

21 February: 27,621

22 February: 27,508

23 February: 25,825

24 February: 26,443

25 February: 25,984

26 February: 24,757

28 February: 24,969.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what is the total sum that has been paid by the New Millennium Experience Company since the commencement of the Millennium Dome project in compensation to contractors and designers whose employment or contracts have been terminated by the NMEC. [110917]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 21 February 2000]:* No termination payments have been made by the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) to contractors or designers.

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what are the most recent attendance figures for the New Millennium Experience. [113446]

Janet Anderson: The Millennium Dome welcomed its one millionth visitor on Saturday 4 March. There were 569,538 visitors to the Millennium Dome in February and 366,420 in January, an increase of 55 per cent.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will invite Jean-Marie Gerbeaux to contribute his expertise to the operation of the Millennium Dome. [113505]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 7 March 2000]:* It is for the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) to decide what expertise it requires.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many Millennium Dome tickets have been sold through National Lottery terminals. [112860]

Janet Anderson: At 29 February, 289,071 tickets for the Millennium Dome had been sold through National Lottery terminals.

31 December 2000

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what proposals he has for celebrating the start of the new millennium on 31 December 2000. [111802]

Janet Anderson: The Millennium Commission was set up to fund projects to mark the year 2000 and the beginning of the third millennium. The Millennium Festival is running throughout the year 2000 and includes events scheduled for new year's eve 2000. In addition, smaller grants are still available to community organisations who can plan millennial celebrations for their villages and towns on 31 December 2000.

Select Committee Report

Mr. Faber: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport at what time on 2 March he *(a)* received a copy of the Fourth report from the Culture, Media and Sport Committee (HC164) and *(b)* finalised the content of his Department's press notice No. 49/2000. [113777]

Kate Hoey: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State received a Confidential Final Revise copy of the Fourth Report from the Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee shortly after 2.00pm on 2 March. The Departmental press notice was issued shortly after 3.00pm on the same day.

Athletics Venues

Mr. Faber: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list those organisations and individuals outside his Department whom he met in the week beginning 28 February to discuss venues for major athletics events and related issues; and at what time and on what date those meetings were held. [113778]

Kate Hoey: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State had no meetings in that week to discuss venues for major athletics events. I met David Moorcroft and Adam Walker from UK Athletics at 2.30pm on 1 March 2000 in my office at DCMS about a range of issues including, possible venues for major athletics events including the 2005 World Athletics Championships.

Mr. Faber: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions his Department has had with *(a)* Sheffield City Council, *(b)* Gateshead Council, *(c)* the City of Edinburgh Council and *(d)* the Scottish Executive about a national athletics stadium; and if he will make a statement. [113818]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* My Department has had no discussions with representatives from City Councils at Sheffield, Gateshead, Edinburgh or the Scottish Executive about a national athletics stadium.

Mr. Faber: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) if he will make a statement on his Department's policy on the location of a national athletics stadium; [114178]

(2) if he will make a statement about his policy on the selection of a venue for a British bid to stage the 2005 World Athletics Championships; [113761]

(3) if he will make a statement about his Department's consideration of Twickenham Stadium as a venue for *(a)* the World Athletics Championships in 2005 and *(b)* track and field events and opening and closing ceremonies during a London Olympic Games. [113760]

Kate Hoey *[holding answers 13 March 2000]:* Sport England is, together with UK Sport, UK Athletics, the BOA and the Department, undertaking further work on non-Wembley options for staging international athletics events. The Rugby Football Union (RFU) proposed that Twickenham might be used for such events and constructive discussions have taken place between my Department, Sport England, UK Athletics, the BOA, the RFU and the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames. Sport England have, in discussion with the parties above, drawn together further information and evaluation criteria and a further announcement will be made shortly.

Mr. Faber: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement about his Department's discussions with Manchester City Council about a national athletics stadium. [113937]

Kate Hoey: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and I met a delegation from Manchester City Council on 19 January 2000 led by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd), to discuss proposals for holding the 2005 World Athletics Championships. This presentation was followed up by my officials and Sport England who discussed the proposals further with the Chief Executive of Manchester City Council. However, the decision by UK Athletics to submit a London bid for the 2005 World Athletics Championships and the BOA confirming that it will only consider a London based Olympic bid has effectively ruled out Manchester as an option for a national athletics venue. I also understand that the delay caused by redesigning the Manchester stadium upgrade to host the World Athletics Championships could have put the 2002 Commonwealth Games in jeopardy.

Sports Institute

Mr. Faber: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement about progress in the development of Crystal Palace as a London site for the United Kingdom Sports Institute. [113945]

Kate Hoey: Sport England is considering Crystal Palace as a potential site for an English Institute of Sport Network Centre. A major component of the London Centre will be provision for athletics training.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Public Record Office

Mr. Baker: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what criteria determine the removal for disposal of documents from the Public Record Office; how many were so disposed of in 1999; and if he will make a statement. [114109]

Mr. Lock: The criteria which determine the removal for disposal of documents, which have been selected for permanent preservation and have been accessioned into the national collection at the Public Record Office, are governed by section 4 (3) of the Public Records Act 1958, which states:

> "The Lord Chancellor may at any time direct that public records shall be transferred from the Public Record Office to a place of deposit appointed under this section or from such a place of deposit to the Public Record Office, or another place of deposit".

This provision has usually been employed to allow public records which are primarily of local or specialist interest to be transferred to the appropriate local authority record office or specialist archive. These institutions must be approved placed of deposit and are required to have suitable facilities for the safekeeping, preservation and inspection by the public of the records concerned.

In the calendar year 1999, no public records were transferred from the Public Record Office.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Animal Experiments

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many animals were being used in the UK for scientific experiments on 1 March. [113833]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Records are not held in such a way as to identify the overall number of animals used in procedures on any one day.

The Statistics of Scientific Procedures on Living Animals (Great Britain 1998) provides a great deal of information on the numbers of animals used including the total number of animals per species used each year. Figures for 1999 are in the process of being collated and are due to be published in the summer.

Home Detention Curfew

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department for each year that figures are available what percentage of the prisoners released on licence under home detention curfew were *(a)* juveniles and *(b)* young offenders. [113915]

Mr. Boateng: From 28 January 1999 to 31 January 2000, 15.5 per cent. of those prisoners placed on Home Detention Curfew were under the age of 21. Of these, none was aged under 18, as Home Detention Curfew does not apply to prisoners under the age of 18.

Harlan Animal Breeding Centre

Mr. David Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will release the unpublished sections of the investigation into the operations of the Harlan UK animal breeding centre in Belton, North West Leicestershire. [114310]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Blanked out areas of the text in the report which I placed in the Library on 8 March represent points bearing on commercial sensitivity, personal safety or confidentiality agreements entered into by the Home Office with the British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection (BUAV) at the outset of our investigation.

It is my wish to publish a fuller version of the report, but I cannot do so without the agreement of the BUAV to waive its confidentiality agreement. We are awaiting a final response from the BUAV on this point. They have agreed to waive a couple of the lines out of the ninety lines blanked out and are considering whether they will lift the restrictions on the rest of the blanked out sections of the report.

Visitor Bond Scheme

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to introduce a bond scheme for visitors to the UK from areas other than South Africa; and if he will make a statement. [113941]

Mrs. Roche: We have not yet decided where to run the pilot scheme. A bond scheme can, however, operate only in countries whose nationals require a visa prior to travelling here. As South African nationals do not require prior entry clearance, consideration is not being given to operating the pilot there.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will publish the Government's response to the consultation on its proposal for a bond scheme for visitors to the UK. [113940]

Mrs. Roche: An announcement about the results of the consultation process will be made in due course. We will also publish our proposals for the scheme when they are finalised. These will take account of all the representations made to us, including those in response to the consultation document.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will publish the responses to the consultation process on a bond scheme for visitors to the UK. [113939]

Mrs. Roche: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave him on 8 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 145W.

Police Pensions

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many early leavers there were from the police pension scheme in each police authority area in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998 and *(c)* 1999; [114456]

(2) how many early leavers there were from the Police Pension Scheme in each police authority area between 30 September 1998 and 30 September 1999. [114455]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Police Pension Scheme is administered locally by individual police authorities. Information about those who opt out of the Police Pension Scheme is not held centrally.

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what was the number of police pensions in payment in each police authority area in *(a)* 1989, *(b)* 1997 and *(c)* 1999; [114459]

(2) what was the number of deferred members of the police pension fund in each police authority area in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998 and *(c)* 1999. [114460]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Police Pension Scheme is administered locally by individual police authorities. The information requested is not held centrally.

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police officers in each police authority area were eligible to be members of the police pension fund in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998 and *(c)* 1999. [114462]

Mr. Charles Clarke: All regular police officers in the United Kingdom are eligible to be members of the Police Pension Scheme. Membership is automatic unless officers exercise their right to opt out of the Scheme. There are, however, some restrictions on eligibility to rejoin the Scheme after a decision to opt out.

Information on the total number of police officers in each force in 1997, 1998 and 1999 is set out in the table, a copy of which has been placed in the Library.

Total police officer strength including secondments within the police service in England and Wales

Police force	*March 1997*	*March 1998*	*March 1999*
Avon and Somerset	3,045	3,033	3,010
Bedfordshire	1,113	1,098	1,050
Cambridgeshire	1,322	1,309	1,282
Cheshire	2,087	2,083	2,084
Cleveland	1,480	1,510	1,450
Cumbria	1,164	1,186	1,132
Derbyshire	1,824	1,802	1,768
Devon and Cornwall	2,908	3,006	2,904
Dorset	1,306	1,331	1,287
Durham	1,489	1,543	1,577
Essex	2,996	2,962	2,898
Gloucestershire	1,153	1,124	1,106
Greater Manchester	7,031	7,070	6,836
Hampshire	3,504	3,535	3,514
Hertfordshire	1,793	1,740	1,732
Humberside	2,071	2,045	1,980
Kent	3,310	3,294	3,246
Lancashire	3,309	3,328	3,257
Leicestershire	1,991	2,025	2,006
Lincolnshire	1,218	1,211	1,146
London, City of (2)	883	846	787
Merseyside	4,332	4,311	4,229
Metropolitan police (1,2)	27,123	26,561	26,133
Norfolk	1,455	1,446	1,384
Northamptonshire	1,199	1,191	1,146
Northumbria	3,732	3,821	3,853
North Yorkshire	1,367	1,396	1,345
Nottinghamshire	2,358	2,355	2,234
South Yorkshire	3,202	3,231	3,215
Staffordshire	2,249	2,326	2,272
Suffolk	1,199	1,206	1,192
Surrey	1,643	1,626	1,667
Sussex	3,140	3,046	2,867
Thames Valley	3,762	3,838	3,768
Warwickshire	951	947	921
West Mercia	2,073	2,046	2,036
West Midlands	7,217	7,245	7,352
West Yorkshire	5,283	5,226	4,996
Wiltshire	1,178	1,184	1,156
Dyfed-Powys	1,016	1,012	1,034
Gwent	1,261	1,249	1,259
North Wales	1,397	1,420	1,416
South Wales	3,030	3,053	2,994
Total of all 43 forces	127,158	126,814	124,520
NCS	—	—	1,333
NCIS	—	—	243
Total	127,158	126,814	126,096

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the number of active members of the police pension fund in each police authority area in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998 and *(c)* 1999. [114461]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Police Pension Scheme is administered locally by individual police authorities and the information requested is not held centrally. However, as the vast majority of regular police officers choose to be members of the Police Pension Scheme the number of active members of the Scheme in each force will be slightly less than its total number of officers.

Police (Best Value)

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the national application of the Association of Chief Police Officers' document, "Harmonisation of Business Processes", and its role in delivering best value by comparison of police forces' performance. [114464]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Association of Chief Police Officers' "Harmonisation of Business Processes" document has been one of a number of emerging influences which have been taken account of, and incorporated into, the new inspection model developed by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary. The new inspection model will assist us in our efforts to compare performance across police authorities and Basic Command Units.

Police (Inspections)

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to use the business excellence model as the framework for future inspections of police forces by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary. [114463]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary has developed a new inspection model which will come into effect on 1 April 2000. This coincides with the introduction of best value into the police service.

The principles of the Business Excellence Model have been closely followed during the development of this new inspection model. However, the model has been tailored to meet the particular needs of policing.

A manual explaining the new inspection model is due to be published in April.

City Status

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the towns which have applied for city status for the third millennium. [114587]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The following towns have submitted bids for the grant of city status for the millennium:

England

Blackburn with Darwen
Blackpool
Bolton
Brighton and Hove
Chelmsford
Colchester
Croydon
Doncaster
Dover
Guildford
Ipswich
Luton
Maidstone
Medway
Middlesbrough
Milton Keynes
Northampton
Preston
Reading
Shrewsbury
Southend
Southwark
Stockport
Swindon
Telford
Warrington
Wolverhampton

Northern Ireland

Ballymena
Lisburn

Scotland

Ayr
Inverness
Paisley
Stirling

Wales

Aberystwyth
Machynlleth
Newport
Newtown
St. Asaph
Wrexham.

British Nationality Applications

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many applications for British nationality are awaiting approval; and if he will make a statement. [114252]

Mrs. Roche: As at 31 January, the current estimated number of British nationality applications awaiting approval was 94,000.

Stop and Search Operations

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people were stopped and searched in 1998 and in 1989; how many people were arrested following stop and search in 1998 and 1999; how many white people per 1,000 population were stopped and searched in 1998 and 1999; how many black and ethnic minority people per 1,000 population were stopped and searched in 1998 and 1999; how many white people per 1,000 population were arrested following stop and search in 1998 and 1999; how many black and ethnic minority people were arrested following stop and search in 1998 and 1999; what was the ratio of stop and searches for black and ethnic minority people for each white person stopped and searched in 1998 and 1999; what was the ratio of arrest following stop and search for black and ethnic minority people for each white person arrested following stop and search in 1998 and 1999; and what

was the ratio for conviction following stop and search for black and ethnic minority people for each white person convicted following stop and search in 1998 and 1999 for each police authority in England, and for each borough in the Metropolitan Police area. [114431]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Information by police force area and ethnic appearance of suspect for persons stopped and searched by the police and those subsequently arrested, is published annually by the Home Office in 'Statistics on Race and the Criminal Justice System', a copy of which is in the Library. This information is also available through the Home Office web site www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/publf.htm. The latest information published in December 1999, covers information for the financial year 1998–99. No information is available centrally for each borough in the Metropolitan Police area or for the number of convictions following a stop and search.

Correspondence

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he intends to reply to the letters to him dated 15 November and 16 December 1999 and 20 January from the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton with regard to Mr. A. H. Sameh. [114582]

Mrs. Roche: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary wrote to my right hon. Friend the Member for Gorton on 9 March.

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he intends to reply to the letters to him dated 16 November and 15 December 1999 and 20 January from the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton with regard to Mr. K. Mandelsi Ibrahim. [114581]

Mrs. Roche: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary wrote to my right hon. Friend the Member for Gorton on 14 March. I am sorry for the delay in replying.

Porton Down

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what has been the total cost to date of the investigation by Wiltshire Constabulary into the Chemical and Biological Defence establishment at Porton Down; and how many *(a)* police officers and *(b)* civilians are employed on it. [114224]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The total costs, as of 29 February 2000, are estimated at approximately £203,000. This figure includes all salaries, overtime, subsistence, travel, accommodation and purchase of additional computer and other equipment.

Fourteen police officers (one on a part-time basis) and two civilian support staff are employed on the investigation.

Asylum Seekers Voucher Scheme

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the testing of asylum seeker support vouchers began; and what progress has been made with those tests. [114541]

Mrs. Roche: Sodexho Pass began testing the voucher scheme in early March. This is an ongoing process that will continue until the scheme goes live on 3 April.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department which local authorities have been consulted by Sodexho about the implementation of the new asylum seeker voucher scheme. [114584]

Mrs. Roche: Sodexho Pass is not contractually bound to consult local authorities in regard to the voucher scheme. However, the National Asylum Support Service continues to liaise and work with local authorities, through the regional consortia and the Local Government Association, on all aspects of the new support arrangements.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he expects Sodexho to have an asylum seeker voucher scheme ready to implement on 1 April; and if he will make a statement. [114583]

Mrs. Roche: Yes. Sodexho Pass, the contractor for the asylum support voucher scheme, will be ready to implement the voucher scheme from 3 April when the new national asylum support scheme begins to be phased in.

Anti-social Behaviour Orders

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list, for each local authority, the number of anti-social behaviour orders *(a)* in total and *(b)* per head of population; and if he will make a statement. [114588]

Mr. Charles Clarke: As I said in my reply to the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins) on 21 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 824W, records of numbers of anti-social behaviour orders applied for are not currently held centrally. We understand that about 25–30 orders have been made in England and Wales since the order came into force in April last year.

Young Offenders

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the *(a)* number of incidents of concerted indiscipline at each young offender institution and *(b)* average daily population at each young offender institution in the last year for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [114638]

Mr. Boateng: The information requested is given in the tables.

Number of incidents of concerted indiscipline at young offender institutions between 1 January 1999 and 31 December 1999

Prison Service establishment	*Number of incidents*[1]
Altcourse	1
Aylesbury	2
Brinsford	2
Brockhill	1
Castington	10
Deerbolt	1
Doncaster	2
Dover	1
Exeter	3
Feltham	3
Gloucester	6
Hollesley Bay	2
Lancaster Farms	1
Moorland	2
New Hall	1
Northallerton	1

Number of incidents of concerted indiscipline at young offender institutions between 1 January 1999 and 31 December 1999

Prison Service establishment	*Number of incidents* [1]
Parc	3
Rochester	5
Stoke Heath	4
Wetherby	2
Total	53

[1] Provisional figures

Average population in young offender institutions in England and Wales in 1999

Prison Service establishment	*Average population*
Male	
Altcourse	105
Ashfield	32
Aylesbury	357
Brinsford	500
Cardiff	88
Castington	350
Deerbolt	421
Doncaster	515
Dorchester	24
Dover	265
Exeter	63
Feltham	822
Glen Parva	827
Gloucester	119
Guys Marsh	134
Haslar	150
Hatfield	119
Hindley	462
Hollesley Bay	204
Hull	134
Huntercombe	305
Lancaster Farms	482
Lewes	82
Moorland	386
Northallerton	268
Norwich	149
Onley	590
Parc	253
Portland	545
Reading	220
Rochester	272
Stoke Heath	611
Swansea	71
Swinfen Hall	283
Thorn Cross	231
Usk	15
Werrington	100
Wetherby	332
Woodhill	78
Female	
Brockhill	10
Bullwood Hall	65
Drake Hall	18
East Sutton Park	3
Holloway	38
New Hall	105
Styal	58

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the average time between arrest and sentencing for persistent young offenders *(a)* in 1999 and *(b)* from July to December 1999; and if he will make a statement. [114639]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The average time between arrest and sentence for persistent young offenders in the first half of 1999 was 110 days. Figures for the whole of 1999 are expected to be available within the next two months.

Millennium Celebrations (Policing)

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the cost to police forces of additional commitments for policing for the Millennium celebrations; and if he will make a statement. [114649]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The detailed information is not collected centrally, but estimates were provided in the reply that I gave the hon. Member on 21 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 485W.

Secure Training Centres

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many incidents of concerted indiscipline have been recorded at each secure training centre in each quarterly period since they have been open and in total to date; and if he will make a statement. [114640]

Mr. Boateng: There have been a total of 45 recorded incidents of concerted indiscipline at the three secure training centres (STC) since the first centre opened. Medway opened on 17 April 1998, Rainsbrook opened on 1 July 1999 and Hassockfield opened on 17 September 1999.

The definition of concerted indiscipline is not uniform across the three contracts. In the Medway and Rainsbrook contracts, "concerted indiscipline" is defined as

> Any single act committed by a group of more than two Trainees, which is in breach of the STC Rules.

In the Hassockfield contract, "concerted indiscipline" is defined as

> Any single incident when two or more Trainees act together with the intention of disrupting the order and discipline of the Secure Training Centre and/or refusing to desist any action or to comply with any lawful order.

A quarterly breakdown of the total of recorded incidents of concerted indiscipline, by individual centre, is as follows:

	Medway	*Rainsbrook*	*Hassockfield*
April-June 1998	2	[1]—	[1]—
July-September 1998	10	[1]—	[1]—
October-December 1998	5	[1]—	[1]—
January-March 1999	1	[1]—	[1]—
April-June 1999	5	[1]—	[1]—
July-September 1999	3	1	1
October-December 1999	5	2	4
January-10 March 2000	2	0	4

[1] Not open

Persistent young offenders often exhibit challenging behaviour. Preliminary analysis shows that half of the early recipients of the Secure Training Order had been excluded from school and at least 75 per cent. had been in local authority homes care. Many trainees have a history of disruptive behaviour in local authority homes. Previous community-based attempts to tackle their offending have proven to be unsuccessful.

Dealing with large groups of volatile young offenders has been problematical. The centres have experienced early operating difficulties, each to varying degrees. The contractors continue to learn from their experience and my officials, with the assistance of inspectors from Social Services Inspectorate and Ofsted, continue to monitor the management of each of the centres.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the *(a)* capital cost of establishing each secure training centre and *(b)* average cost per place per year; how many places are there in total at secure training centres; what plans he has to open further secure training centres; and if he will make a statement. [114643]

Mr. Boateng: The capital costs of secure training centres are met by the contractors, with part of the contract payment (the fixed element) covering the cost of financing the capital expenditure. We estimate that the capital costs are in the order of £10 million per centre. The average cost per place per year, including the fixed element and based on full occupancy, is: Medway £149,445; Rainsbrook £118,161 and; Hassockfield £131,827 (all at January 2000 prices). There are 120 places in total at the three centres. There are currently plans to provide two further secure training centres. From 1 April, the Youth Justice Board for England and Wales will take on the function of commissioning and purchasing secure accommodation for remanded and sentenced children and young people.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many employees involved in education have resigned at each secure training centre since they opened; and if he will make a statement. [114642]

Mr. Boateng: There are three secure training centres, each contracted to hold up to 40 trainees. Medway opened on 17 April 1998, Rainsbrook opened on 1 July 1999 and Hassockfield opened on 17 September 1999.

As at 10 March 2000, the number of teaching staff who have resigned at each of these centres since they opened is six at Medway; one at Rainsbrook; and five at Hassockfield. A further two teachers at Hassockfield are working their period of notice.

The contracts require each centre to provide each trainee with 25 hours per week of education and/or vocational training, and for nine full time equivalent teachers to be employed at each centre. Occasional shortfalls in the number of full time teachers have been remedied by the use of sessional teachers and all three centres have continued to deliver the requirement for twenty five hours of education per week per trainee throughout the period of contract.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what has been the cost to date of damage caused by those held at each secure training centre; and if he will make a statement. [114641]

Mr. Boateng: The cost of damage caused by those held at secure training centres is met in full by the contractor and not passed on to the Home Office. Contractors are not required to provide details of such costs to the Home Office and the information requested is not, therefore, available.

Vivisection Investigation

Dr. Ladyman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 8 March 2000, *Official Report*, columns 661–62W, (1) how many hours work his officials put into investigating the allegations made by the British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection against Harlan UK; what was the total cost of the investigation, including the cost of the time spent on it by his officials; and what plans he has to recoup that cost from the British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection; [114200]

(2) how many allegations of breaches of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986, its codes of practices and licence conditions were made by the British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection in their report about Harlan UK; and how many of these were substantiated by the results of the investigation made by his officials; [114201]

(3) how many lines of text of his officials' report into the allegations made by the British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection against Harlan UK were blanked out or removed at the request of the British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection before a copy was placed in the Library; what subjects these sections refer to; what reasons were given by the British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection for requesting that these sections of the report be blanked out or removed; if these sections include suggestions by his officers that the British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection investigator was herself responsible for the breaches that formed the basis of the allegations made against Harlan UK; and if he will publish the full, unedited version of his official's report of their investigation. [114202]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: As originally summarised by the British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection (BUAV), there were 22 clusters of allegations which were investigated by the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Inspectorate. A further set of eight allegations was submitted in July 1999. One breach of a condition of certification, mentioned separately in two allegations, was confirmed. No action has been judged necessary in relation to the remaining allegations.

Blanked out areas of the text in the report placed in the Library on 8 March reflect confidentiality agreements entered into by the Home Office and points of commercial sensitivity and personal safety. About 90 lines of text were blanked out because of a confidentiality agreement with the BUAV, accepted in July 1999 in order to obtain information to enable a full Home Office investigation. This agreement covered incidental material from videotapes, an audio-tape and diaries kept by the undercover investigator. An interview conducted with her in the course of the Inspectorate's investigation was also subject to the same reservations. Discussions are continuing with the BUAV about the release of confidentiality of these sections of the report, so that a fuller version can be published.

In excess of 1,000 hours were expended on the investigation into the allegations and the preparation of the report at a cost of more than £36,000. Inspectors were also diverted from other work protecting animals to

investigate these allegations. There is no mechanism by which I can recoup the costs from the BUAV: they will form a minor part of the expenditure in operating the 1986 Act which must be recouped each year through levying fees on designated establishments and personal licence holders.

Automatic Release

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is his estimate of the impact on the average daily prison population of ending automatic release on licence of offenders; and if he will make a statement. [114644]

Mr. Boateng: Prisoners sentenced to less than 12 months are released automatically half way through their sentence unless additional days have been imposed for breaches of discipline. These prisoners will be "at risk" until the end of their sentence; that is, if they commit a further imprisonable offence before the end of their original sentence, the court dealing with the new offence may add all or part of the outstanding sentence to any new sentence it imposes. The effect of stopping automatic unconditional release would be approximately to double the number of prisoners currently serving sentences of up to 12 months, which at the end of January 2000 was 7,200.

Prisoners sentenced to 12 months or more but less than four years are released automatically half way through their sentence (subject to additional days). They are released on licence and subject to supervision up to the three-quarter point of their sentence (or to the end in the case of some sex offenders) and are "at risk" until the end of their original sentence. The effect of stopping automatic conditional release would be to double the number of prisoners currently serving sentences of 12 months and up to four years, which at the end of January 2000 was 19,400.

Those sentenced to four years or more are eligible for parole half way through their sentence. If parole is not granted then or at a subsequent parole review, release occurs at the two-thirds point of the sentence. Release is on licence and subject to supervision up to the three-quarters point of the sentence (or to the end in the case of some sex offenders). All are "at risk" until the end of their original sentence. The effect of stopping discretionary release could be to increase the number of prisoners serving determinate sentences of four years or more by up to 20,000.

These estimates assume no change in sentencing practice by the courts.

Special Constables

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if the number of special constables recruited to the Metropolitan Police Service between 30 September 1998 and 30 September 1999 is available; and if he will make a statement. [114454]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis tells me that 84 special constables were recruited to the Metropolitan Police Service between 30 September 1998 and 30 September 1999.

External Consultants

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the external consultants used by his Department since 1997, excluding public relations and marketing consultants, and their cost. [114453]

Mr. Straw: Information listing the name and cost of all external consultants used by the Department since 1997, excluding public relations and marketing consultants can be obtained only at short notice at disproportionate cost. The individual values of consultancy contracts are commercial in confidence. The available information is as follows:

Consultant

Helix Consulting Group
Janet Maitland
Debenham Consulting
Kinsley Lord
Iôanann Management Consultants
Kermon
KPMG
Smythe Dorward Lambert
Clear Communication
BDO Stay Hayward
Admiral
Manpower IT Services
Institute for Employment Studies
Ernst & Young/Qi/Bull
EcSoft
Equilibra
Angela Harris
Mary Manolias
Tom Debenham Consultant
Capitas Ras
PA Consultancy
Gensys Editoral
Priority Training Ltd. (Bull)
Hendra
PA Consulting Group
Price Waterhouse Coopers
Sir William Stubbs
Summerfield Wilmot Keene
Mark Carroll
Mike Briggs
Brian Farrington Ltd.
Mott McDonald
Mr. Ron Harrington
Winfield Consulting
AWA Associates
South Bank University Enterprises
Derek Sullivan
Guy Sears
Munro Sutherland
West Midlands Fire Service
J. Carven
David Hayton
C. Herbert
J. Greenwell
W. Mumford
J. Mulley
R. Hastie Smith

Cashton

W. Kirkham

B. Venner

Holmes Ellis Consultants

Central Communications Telecommunications Agency

Beamount Colson Ltd.

Dr. Saroj Patel

Total Value: £6,208,025.

Best Value

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if, in delivering best value, it is his policy that comparisons should be made between the performance of basic command units within police forces; and if he will make a statement on the criteria to be used. [114457]

Mr. Charles Clarke: In January this year, for the first time, the recorded crime statistics were published at Basic Command Unit (BCU) level. This allows local people to judge and compare the performance of their local police. From July 2000, this will be augmented with recorded crime statistics being published at crime and disorder reduction partnership level.

Both the BCU and the partnerships' data will be published in a form which will assist comparison on a like with like basis. We are working, in conjunction with Leeds University, to draw up families of BCUs and partnerships, so that they can be compared with one another within these families. We expect the existence of these families to be a significant help to police forces and authorities who, under Best Value, wish to benchmark performance at local level.

From April 2001, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary hope to undertake more comprehensive inspections at BCU level. This will also allow comparisons to be made. These inspections will be based upon the same principles as the new Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary inspection model for police authorities. A BCU inspection protocol is currently being developed.

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if it is his policy that police forces should use *(a)* external consultants or *(b)* internal assessment for the purposes of assessing Best Value performance. [114465]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Under the Local Government Act 1999, individual police authorities are responsible for delivering best value. This includes the extent to which they use external consultants or undertake internal assessments.

Immigration and Nationality Directorate

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many staff were employed in the Immigration and Nationality Directorate on 1 February. [112620]

Mrs. Roche *[pursuant to her reply, 6 March 2000, c. 545]:* The number of staff employed in the Immigration and Nationality Directorate on 1 February was 5,806.

Ministerial Visits

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the occasions on which he and Ministers in his Department have undertaken overseas visits in the cause of their ministerial duties since 28 January 1999, indicating the purpose and duration of each visit. [114458]

Mr. Straw: The information requested is given in the table.

Minister	*Location*	*Date of travel*	*Date of return*	*Purpose*
Kate Hoey	The Hague	7 February 1999	8 February 1999	Ministerial visit to Europol
Kate Hoey	Berlin	10 February 1999	12 February 1999	Informal meeting of Justice and Home Affairs Council (JHA)
Home Secretary	Berlin	11 February 1999	11 February 1999	Informal meeting of JHA Council
Kate Hoey	Bonn	23 February 1999	23 February 1999	Restricted meeting of the JHA
Home Secretary	Brussels	11 March 1999	12 March 1999	JHA Council Meeting
Kate Hoey	Brussels	11 March 1999	12 March 1999	JHA Council Meeting
Paul Boateng	Brussels	13 March 1999	14 March 1999	Meeting with EU Commissioner for Social Affairs
Lord Williams	Thailand and Cambodia	13 March 1999	19 March 1999	Meetings regarding child sex exploitation matters
George Howarth	Brussels	16 March 1999	16 March 1999	Meetings regarding drugs and European elections
Kate Hoey	Cologne	24 March 1999	28 March 1999	Attending conference on domestic violence/violence against women.
Kate Hoey	Luxembourg	7 April 1999	7 April 1999	Special JHA council on Kosovo
Home Secretary	Luxembourg	7 April 1999	7 April 1999	Special JHA council on Kosovo
Kate Hoey	Brussels and Turin	20 April 1999	22 April 1999	Appearance at Civil Liberties Committee and football intelligence officers
Lord Williams	Germany	10 May 1999	12 May 1999	Meetings with German Minister responsible for prisons
Home Secretary	Bonn	10 May 1999	10 May 1999	Meeting with Interior Minister
Home Secretary	Brussels	26 May 1999	27 May 1999	JHA Council Meeting
Kate Hoey	Brussels	26 May 1999	28 May 1999	JHA Council Meeting
Paul Boateng	Chicago	26 May 1999	28 May 1999	Meetings regarding policing, drugs and social exclusion
Paul Boateng	Washington	28 May 1999	7 June 1999	Severe personality disorder. Meetings and visits
Kate Hoey	Vilnius	30 June 1999	1 July 1999	Meetings regarding immigration and organised crime
Kate Hoey	Helsinki	17 July 1999	18 July 1999	Pre-Presidency ministerial visit

Minister	*Location*	*Date of travel*	*Date of return*	*Purpose*
Lord Bassam	Lille	19 August 1999	19 August 1999	Attending French launch of 'Show Racism the Red Card' campaign
Home Secretary	Turku, Finland	15 September 1999	17 September 1999	JHA Council (informal meeting)
Barbara Roche	Turku, Finland	15 September 1999	17 September 1999	JHA Council (informal meeting)
Barbara Roche	Warsaw, Poland	23 September 1999	23 September 1999	Meeting with Polish Minister of Interior
Home Secretary	Tampere, Finland	14 October 1999	16 October 1999	Special JHA Council meeting
Paul Boateng	Madrid	14 October 1999	15 October 1999	Meetings regarding volunteering and prison matters
Barbara Roche	Luxembourg	29 October 1999	29 October 1999	JHA Council Meeting
Paul Boateng	Paris	16 November 1999	17 November 1999	Attending Community Service Volunteering Conference
Paul Boateng	Utrecht, Holland	18 November 1999	19 November 1999	Visit to Centre for treating severely personality disordered individuals
Home Secretary	Brussels	2 December 1999	3 December 1999	JHA Council Meeting
Home Secretary	Brussels	2 December 1999	3 December 1999	JHA Council Meeting
Barbara Roche	Brussels	2 December 1999	3 December 1999	JHA Council Meeting
Barbara Roche	The Hague	20 January 2000	21 January 2000	Visit to The Netherlands. Minister Job Cohen—to see Dutch asylum
Paul Boateng	Stockholm	26 January 2000	26 January 2000	Stockholm International Conference on the Holocaust (accompanying Foreign Secretary)
Home Secretary	Lisbon	3 March 2000	4 March 2000	JHA Meeting

Written Answers to Questions

Wednesday 15 March 2000

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Lindane

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he is taking to control the importation of seeds treated with Lindane; what estimate he has made of the quantity of such seeds imported within the last month for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [112560]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 7 March 2000]:* A ban on seed treatment uses of lindane was introduced in July 1999 following advice from the Advisory Committee on Pesticides (ACP) that the level of exposure of those treating seed with lindane was above acceptable levels. However, the ACP was satisfied that seed already treated and present in the supply chain posed no concerns.

EU seeds marketing directives, which have been implemented by seeds marketing regulations in this country, do not require nor permit controls to be placed on the importation of seeds treated with lindane. Consequently, my Department does not have the statistical information available to enable any reliable estimate to be made of the quantity of imported seeds treated with lindane.

Pets (Travel)

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what safeguards have been put in place to ensure that animal owners participating in the pets travel pilot scheme are not overcharged for any of the services required to clear their pets for travel; and if he will make a statement. [113741]

Ms Quin: The charges made by veterinary surgeons to their clients for animals participating in the pets scheme are a private matter between the client and the veterinary surgeon. However, pet owners should consider shopping around between veterinary practices. The Guidance issued to all veterinary surgeons by the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) states that they must give realistic fee estimates based on treatment options. If clients feel that a veterinary surgeon has acted unprofessionally in setting fees they should contact the RCVS. Alternatively, if they feel that there may have been an infringement of trading standards legislation, they should contact the local Trading Standards Office.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what advice his Department has issued to pet owners to enable them to identify veterinary surgeons in France and Belgium who are able to provide the required tick and tapeworm treatment for animals under the pets travel pilot scheme; and if he will make a statement. [113740]

Ms Quin: We encourage pet owners to (a) consult official lists of veterinary surgeons held by the French local authorities, or other sources of local information, (b) seek advice from their transport operators as to vets that are available. In addition, each British Consulate in France will hold a copy of the Annual Directory of Veterinary Surgeons in France. In Belgium, information on vets providing this treatment is available on the British Embassy and Belgian Ministry websites and to telephone inquirers to the Embassy and Consular Offices and the Belgian Ministry helpline. Several of the transport companies participating in the PETS pilot provide lists of veterinary surgeons in France who are able to provide treatment required under the PETS scheme. There are also several independent websites which provide details of English-speaking vets in other member states.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what estimate he has made of the cost per animal of *(a)* vaccination against rabies, *(b)* insertion of a microchip and *(c)* treatment against ticks and tapeworms in connection with the pets travel pilot scheme. [113739]

Ms Quin: The charges made by veterinary surgeons to their clients for animals participating in the pets scheme are a private matter between the client and the veterinary surgeon. However, an indicative cost of treatment in the UK would be as follows: £50 for an initial vaccination against rabies, £30 for insertion of a microchip and from £25 for treatment against ticks and tapeworms.

Red Tape

Mr. Paice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he is taking to implement Recommendation 10 of the Red Tape Working Group on the Meat Industry. [113882]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 10 March 2000]:* A meeting of the Government/Industry Working Group Microbiology Sub-Group has been arranged for 5 April with a view to recommending standards which plants would have to meet to be considered for exemption from Hygiene Assessment Scores procedures.

Meat Hygiene Service

Mr. Paice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he expects to commence the next quinquennial review of the Meat Hygiene Service. [113883]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 10 March 2000]:* The Meat Hygiene Service transfers to the Food Standards Agency on 1 April 2000; it will be for the latter to decide when to carry out a Quinquennial Review.

Farms (Shropshire)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many tenanted farms there are in *(a)* Shrewsbury and Atcham and *(b)* Shropshire; what is the percentage of these farms compared to the total farming area of (i) Shrewsbury and Atcham and (ii) Shropshire; and if he will make a statement. [114381]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* The table provides information on farms with all their agricultural land subject to a tenancy agreement.

	(a) Shrewsbury and Atcham	(b) Shropshire
Number of wholly tenanted farms	119	658
Percentage of agricultural land in the area accounted for by these farms	[1]13.4	[1]15.2

Source:
Agricultural and Horticultural Census, 1999

Dairy Calves

Mr. Peter Atkinson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many male dairy calves have been registered with BCMS, Workington in the three months following the end of the Calf Slaughter Scheme. [111503]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 28 February 2000]:* In the three months following the end of the Calf Processing Aid Scheme in July 1999 BCMS registered 144,128 male dairy calves on the Cattle Tracing System database.

WALES

NHS Trusts

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what financial arrangements are being made in respect of the NHS trusts in Wales dissolved on 1 April 1999 in connection with the new NHS trusts established on that day. [115216]

Mr. Paul Murphy: Pursuant to the dissolution of 20 NHS trusts in Wales on 1 April 1999 and their reconfiguration through the establishment of 10 new trusts on that date, and the remission of the outstanding debt of each of the dissolved trusts, HM Treasury presented a minute to the House on 14 March 2000 giving particulars and circumstances of the remission proposed by the National Assembly for Wales, which it has approved in principle.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Segregation Units

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the longest period of time that *(a)* men and *(b)* women had been held in a segregation unit in a prison in England and Wales on 1 March. [113835]

Mr. Boateng: The information requested cannot be obtained from the centrally available data.

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on his Department's policy on the regimes to be followed in the segregation units of prisons in England and Wales; and if he will make a statement. [114250]

Mr. Boateng: Prison Service Performance Standards require that there is a published regime for all segregation units, which is known and observed by prisoners and staff. The published regime takes account of exercise, shower or bath, visits, education, library and telephone calls.

Prison Service Order 1700 is to be published in the summer of 2000 and a copy will be placed in the Library. It will provide specific guidance on the management of segregation units and the standards by which they will be measured. The Order makes it a requirement to have a published regime. Regimes for individual prisoners can be varied by governors following an assessment of the risks involved.

Juvenile Prisoners

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* boys and *(b)* girls under the age of 16 years were serving a custodial sentence on 1 March. [113832]

Mr. Boateng: The latest available information for persons held in Prison Service establishments is for 31 January 2000. On that date, there were 166 males and five females aged 15 years serving a custodial sentence in prisons in England and Wales. Information on the numbers held in Secure Training Centres (STCs) is available only for the current date and shows that on 9 March there were 103 sentenced 12–14 year-old males held. Information on other persons aged less than 16 years in local authority accommodation is published in a Department of Health statistical bulletin entitled "Children Accommodated in Secure Units". This information is presented on a financial year basis with the last report covering the year ending 31 March 1999.

Information on the population of persons aged 15 years in Prison Service establishments in England and Wales is published in "Prison statistics England and Wales" (Table 3.2 of the 1998 edition, column 4430) a copy of which is in the Library.

Gammahydroxybutyrate

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to prevent the use of gammahydroxybutyrate in night clubs and pubs. [114162]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Home Office Drugs Prevention Advisory Service (DPAS) was established in April 1999, with a remit to promote effective drugs prevention and to support local Drug Action Teams in their role of delivering the aims of the Government's national anti-drugs strategy.

At a national level, DPAS works with the Department of Health and others on helping to establish the best ways and means of targeting young people with sound information about the risks of substance misuse. DPAS regional teams are well placed to engage with Drug Action Teams, local authority licensing bodies and other partnerships about approaches to tackling the problem of substance misuse in clubs and pubs, including the harmonisation of enforcement activity with local and community concerns about such misuse.

Other measures taken recently to tackle the use of drugs in clubs and similar venues include bringing into force the Public Entertainments Licences (Drug Misuse) Act 1997. It enables local authorities to close those clubs found to have a serious problem relating to the supply or use of controlled drugs. Home Office guidance has been issued to local authorities on the implementation of the Act. It is designed to encourage and develop partnerships between

the police, licensing authorities and club operators to combat the threat posed by drugs to clubs and provide a safe environment for customers.

In November 1998, a Good Practice Guide on the Implementation of the Act was published jointly by the Association of Chief Police Officers, the Local Government Association, the British Entertainment and Discotheque Association and the United Kingdom Anti-Drugs Co-ordination Unit. Its recommendations include a range of measures to be implemented by clubs to safeguard health and safety and to discourage drug users on their premises.

Police Numbers

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the total change was in the number of police officers *(a)* in each force in England and Wales and *(b)* in total since March 1997; what estimate he has made of the (i) planned recruitment to, (ii) expected wastage from and (iii) change in police numbers in police forces, including transfers, including information provided in the bids for the Crime Fighting Fund and the allocation of Crime Fighting Fund money, (1) in total and (2) in each of the next three years; and what estimate he has made of the expected change in police numbers in each force and in total between March 1997 and the end of each of the first three years of the Crime Fighting Fund; and if he will make a statement. [114700]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 14 March 2000]:* Table A shows the total change in the number of police officers in each force in England and Wales and in total from March 1997 to September 1999.

In respect of the figures for projected recruitment and wastage including transfers I refer the hon. Member to the replies I gave the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) on 21 February 2000, *Official Report,* columns 826–28W.

Table B, using figures taken from forces' bids under the Crime Fighting Fund, shows the balance of forces' projected wastage against forces' projected recruitment, including inter-force transfers. On the basis of these theoretical projections, supplemented by the additional 5,000 officers allocated to forces under the Crime Fighting Fund on 9 February, at the end of the three year scheme there should be around 1,100 more officers in the police service than there were at the start of the scheme.

Table C shows actual and projected total police numbers between March 1997 and 2003; I must stress that the latter are projections only and are subject to a range of variables. Actual recruitment levels will depend on chief officers' decisions in the light of the available resources—including the outcome of the 2000 Spending Review now under way.

Table A: Police strength for ordinary duty in England and Wales

Police force	Actual Strength[1] March 1997	September 1999	Change
Avon and Somerset	2,989	2,989	0
Bedfordshire	1,094	1,048	−45
Cambridgeshire	1,302	1,272	−30
Cheshire	2,046	2,044	−2
City of London	859	745	−114
Cleveland	1,459	1,373	−87
Cumbria	1,144	1,903	−51
Derbyshire	1,791	1,764	−27
Devon and Cornwall	2,865	2,861	−3
Dorset	1,284	1,276	−8
Durham	1,461	1,555	+94
Dyfed Powys	1,005	1,049	+44
Essex	2,961	2,835	−126
Gloucestershire	1,133	1,098	−35
Greater Manchester	6,922	6,810	−111
Gwent	1,243	1,261	+18
Hampshire	3,452	3,411	−41
Hertfordshire	1,759	1,760	+1
Humberside	2,045	1,926	−119
Kent	3,260	3,257	−3
Lancashire	3,247	3,221	−26
Leicestershire	1,949	1,998	+49
Lincolnshire	1,196	1,111	−86
Merseyside	4,230	4,071	−160
Metropolitan Police	26,677	25,884	−793
Norfolk	1,432	1,382	−50
Northamptonshire	1,177	1,130	−47
Northumbria	3,677	3,800	+123
North Wales	1,369	1,399	+30
North Yorkshire	1,338	1,294	−44
Nottinghamshire	2,323	2,227	−96
South Wales	2,976	2,983	+7
South Yorkshire	3,159	3,165	+6
Staffordshire	2,211	2,206	−5
Suffolk	1,180	1,160	−20
Surrey	1,620	1,721	+102
Sussex	3,085	2,909	−176
Thames Valley	3,695	3,750	+55
Warwickshire	926	916	−10
West Mercia	2,040	1,979	−61
West Midlands	7,113	7,296	+184
West Yorkshire	5,209	4,873	−336
Wiltshire	1,154	1,150	−4
Total all forces	125,051	123,050	−2,002

[1] Full-time equivalents

Note:
Figures exclude secondments

Table B: Police Officer projected recruitment less projected wastage, including inter-force transfers

	Balance wastage/recruitment[1] 2000–01	2001–02	2002–03	Total
Avon and Somerset	−30	−16	−16	−62
Bedfordshire	0	1	−8	−7
Cambridgeshire	48	0	0	48
Cheshire	−4	−10	−25	−39
City of London	−4	0	0	−4
Cleveland	12	0	0	12
Cumbria	−58	−3	−3	−64
Derbyshire	−37	−1	−17	−55
Devon and Cornwall	−30	−20	−10	−60
Dorset	−8	−1	−1	−10
Durham	0	0	0	0
Dyfed-Powys	0	0	0	0
Essex	88	0	0	88
Gloucestershire	57	23	23	103
Greater Manchester	−39	−5-	−5-	−49
Gwent	−62	28	0	−34
Hampshire	25	0	0	25
Hertfordshire	14	14	14	42
Humberside	−95	−100	−86	−281
Kent	−10	−85	−10	−105

Table B: Police Officer projected recruitment less projected wastage, including inter-force transfers

	Balance wastage/recruitment [1]			
	2000–01	*2001–02*	*2002–03*	*Total*
Lancashire	−18	−16	−32	−66
Leicestershire	−4	0	0	−4
Lincolnshire	4	0	0	4
Merseyside	−110	−120	−130	−360
Metropolitan	−693	−939	−585	−2,217
Norfolk	−24	−23	−24	−71
North Wales	0	0	0	0
North Yorkshire	13	10	11	34
Northamptonshire	−14	−14	−14	−42
Northumbria	17	3	3	23
Nottinghamshire	14	0	0	14
South Wales	48	18	18	84
South Yorkshire	−21	−21	−18	−60
Staffordshire	−78	−50	−11	−139
Suffolk	−37	−14	−1	−52
Surrey	15	0	0	15
Sussex	−25	−25	−25	−75
Thames Valley	−4	−26	−49	−79
Warwickshire	−3	−6	−4	−13
West Mercia	−34	−40	0	−74
West Midlands	−5	−5	−5	−15
West Yorkshire	−85	−105	−93	−283
Wiltshire	−9	−17	−13	−39
Total	−1,186	−1,565	−1,116	−3,867

[1] Figures supplied by forces in their bids under the crime Fighting Fund including inter-force transfers but excluding CFF recruits

Note:

Table C: Changes in police numbers: 1997–2003

March	*Total*
Actual	
March 1997	127,158
March 1998	126,814
March 1999	126,096
Estimated	
March 2000	124,800
Projected	
March 2001	124,500
March 2002	125,000
March 2003	125,900

Note:

Figures include secondments and CFF recruits

Departmental Buildings

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list *(a)* the offices (i) owned and (ii) rented by his Department and its agencies in Scotland and *(b)* the number of staff (y) employed and (z) that can be accommodated (1) in total and (2) at each site. [114238]

Mr. Straw: My Department and its agencies do not own any office space in Scotland. The rental of space and employment of staff by the Home Office in Scotland is as shown in the table. No estimate has been made of the number of staff that could be accommodated at these sites. This would depend on the nature of the work to be undertaken and would require a space planning exercise based on actual business requirements.

Offices in Scotland

Address	*Number of staff employed*
Block 1, Northgate, 96 Milton Street, Glasgow	407
Tay House, 300 Bath Street, Glasgow	330
Glasgow Airport	34
130 St. Vincent Street, Glasgow	19
Aberdeen Airport	8.3
Argyll House, Marketgait, Dundee	7.5
Edinburgh Airport	7.5
Blythswood House, 200 West Regent Street, Glasgow	3
Prestwick Airport	0
Franborough House, Bothwell Street, Glasgow	0
Total	816.3

Young Offender Institutions

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many inmates of Feltham Young Offenders Unit and other young offenders' units in England have been assessed as mentally ill and are awaiting transfer to hospitals; [114511]

(2) what is the average waiting time for transfer to hospitals of current inmates in young offender institutions in England who have been assessed as mentally ill; and what was the average for each of the last three years. [114512]

Mr. Boateng: On 31 January 2000, the latest date for which comprehensive statistics are available, four young men in establishments primarily for young offenders were reported to be awaiting transfer to hospital under sections 47 or 48 of the Mental Health Act 1983, three of whom were at Feltham. Information about average waiting times for transfer to hospital is not routinely collected centrally, though the Prison Service and the NHS are now monitoring cases where there is excessive delay.

Electronic Tagging

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women were electronically tagged in England and Wales on 1 March. [114504]

Mr. Boateng: 2,667 men and 254 women were electronically tagged in England and Wales as at 1 March. This includes 53 men and four women who were tagged on 1 March itself.

Kerb Crawlers

Mr. Fabian Hamilton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to make kerb crawling an arrestable criminal offence. [114564]

Mr. Charles Clarke: We intend to make kerb crawling an arrestable offence as soon as a suitable legislative opportunity arises.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will estimate how many children arrived in the United Kingdom in 1999 as members of an asylum seeking family. [114251]

Mrs. Roche: The information requested is not available. Information on principal applicants and dependants is published on an annual basis. It is planned that the figures for 1999 will be included within the next Asylum Bulletin which is due to be published in June of this year. It is not possible separately to identify dependent children without the examination of individual case records at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum seekers have applied for permission to work, having been in the UK for six months or more; and how many of these have been granted permission, in each of the last three years for which figures are available. [114565]

Mrs. Roche: Statistics on the number of asylum seekers granted permission to work are not recorded centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Special Constables

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many special constables were recruited by each of the police forces in England and Wales between 30 September 1998 and 30 September 1999; [111474]

(2) how many special constables left each of the police forces in England and Wales between 30 September 1998 and 30 September 1999. [111472]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Pursuant to the reply I gave the hon. Member on 28 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 117W, a figure for the Metropolitan police was not available for inclusion in the table setting out the number of special constables recruited by each police force in England and Wales between 1 October 1998 and 30 September 1999. The Metropolitan police have confirmed that they recruited 84 special constables during the relevant period.

TREASURY

Incomes

Mrs. Fyfe: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the lowest possible income for a family where one partner is working for 16 hours or more a week, with one or more dependent children under *(a)* 16 and *(b)* 19 years if in full-time education. [114487]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 14 March 2000]:* The information requested is contained in the table:

Minimum Income Guarantee in work

£

	From October 1999	*From April 2000*
One child aged under 11	144.15	147.00
One child aged between 11 and 15	145.20	147.00
One child aged 16 or over and still in full time education	150.25	152.10

Working Families Tax Credit (Northern Ireland)

Mr. Pike: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many families have benefited from the Working Families Tax Credit in Northern Ireland. [113225]

Dawn Primarolo: 24,433 awards of the Working Families Tax Credit were made in Northern Ireland up to the end of January 2000.

Working Families Tax Credit

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the level of fraudulent claims as a result of the replacement of family credit with Working Families Tax Credit. [113297]

Dawn Primarolo: Reliable estimates are not yet available.

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what measures he has taken to prevent fraudulent claims for working families tax credit. [113298]

Dawn Primarolo: The Tax Credits Act 1999, and the regulations made under that Act, provide the Inland Revenue with effective powers to make inquiries into applications. Where fraud is discovered, the Act provides for financial penalties to be charged, based on the amount fraudulently claimed. In the most serious cases, a criminal prosecution may be brought. The application form warns prospective applicants of the consequences of making a fraudulent claim.

The Inland Revenue use risk assessment procedures to target their inquiries on the applications most likely to be fraudulent, and where the largest amounts are at stake.

Mrs. Fyfe: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if the annual household income for the purposes of calculating working families tax credit includes child benefit to which the family is entitled. [114486]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 14 March 2000]:* No, child benefit is wholly disregarded in calculating entitlement to the working families tax credit.

Mrs. Fyfe: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if the £200 a week minimum income received by families on working families tax credit includes child benefit. [114485]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 14 March 2000]:* Yes, it includes child benefit and working families tax credit as well as earnings net of tax and National Insurance.

Mrs. Fyfe: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what guidance he will issue to the Inland Revenue to ensure that working families tax credit is *(a)* paid in full and on time and *(b)* takes account of the amount owed when an employee claiming working families tax credit leaves their job. [114481]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 14 March 2000]:* From April, when tax credits start to be paid by employers through the payroll, the Inland Revenue will continue to assess awards. They will tell employers exactly when they have to start paying tax credit, when to stop, and how much to pay per calendar day (the daily rate) in each pay period during which they are responsible for paying tax

credit. The start notification sent to the employer includes a table showing 1–31 multiples of the daily rate to take account of different pay periods.

If an employee leaves his/her job before the end of the tax credit award, the employer will have to stop paying tax credit and issue the employee with a Certificate of Payments, showing the date up to which tax credit has been paid. The employee will send this to the Inland Revenue's Tax Credit Office, who will resume direct payments of tax credit to the employee.

Full guidance has been issued to both Inland Revenue staff and employers on these arrangements, which will ensure that employees receive the correct amount of tax credit throughout their 26-week award.

Mrs. Fyfe: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the additional amount per week that would be received by a family entitled to working families tax credit, for *(a)* one, *(b)* two and *(c)* three children, when the family's annual income is £10,400 and (i) there are no child care costs and (ii) the parental contribution to child care costs per week is (1) £10, (2) £20, (3) £30, (4) £40 and (5) £45. [114478]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 14 March 2000]:* For such families with £10,400 gross income, and for 1999–2000, the value of the Working Families Tax Credit exceeds that of Family Credit by following amounts per week:

£

	Total child care costs per week					
	None	*£10*	*£20*	*£30*	*£40*	*£45*
1 child	25.34	27.44	29.54	31.64	33.74	34.79
2 children	30.04	32.14	34.24	36.34	38.44	39.49
3 children	34.74	36.84	38.94	41.04	43.14	44.19

Note:
Figures based on a full-time worker with all children under 11 using eligible child care

Mrs. Fyfe: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if small businesses will be reimbursed promptly in respect of payments made by them as a result of handling working families tax credit; and if he will make a statement. [114479]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 14 March 2000]:* Employers will be able to set tax credits paid to their employees against the PAYE income tax and National Insurance contributions and student loan deductions which they are due to pay to the Inland Revenue. Employers who think that they will have to pay out more in tax credits than they will deduct in PAYE income tax and National Insurance contributions and student loan deductions will be able to apply to the Inland Revenue for additional advance funding. They can apply up to six months in advance and do not have to wait until they have actually paid the tax credit.

Payment of WFTC through the pay packet is central to demonstrating the rewards of work and making work pay for families on low incomes. The Inland Revenue has been providing an extensive range of direct practical help and support for employers, including a dedicated telephone helpline for employers and a range of literature and face to face workshops which are particularly aimed at small businesses. Every employer received a copy of the Inland Revenue's "Employer's Guide To Tax Credits".

EU Taxation Policy Group

Mr. Portillo: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will publish the remit of the European Union's Taxation Policy Group. [114226]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 14 March 2000]:* The Taxation Policy Group was established following the Dublin European Council in December 1996 which noted the ECOFIN Council conclusions of November 1996. These conclusions welcomed a proposal for a group made up of member states and the Commission as set out in "Taxation in the European Union—Report on the Development of Tax Systems" of October 1996 (Com(96)546).

The Taxation Policy Group has no power to take decisions. EU tax decisions are a matter for member states, acting by unanimity, within the Council.

Mr. Portillo: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what position was taken by Her Majesty's Government on *(a)* improving the VAT system in the internal market and *(b)* company taxation in the European Community, at the meeting of the European Union's Taxation Policy Group on 2 March. [114228]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 14 March 2000]:* The UK position at the meeting was wholly consistent with our public statements.

Mr. Portillo: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will publish the agendas and minutes of the meetings of the EU Taxation Policy Group which have taken place to date. [114227]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 14 March 2000]:* It has not normally been the Commission's practice to issue minutes. I will ensure that the agendas of Taxation Policy Group meetings are placed in the Library of the House.

Mr. Portillo: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer who attends meetings of the European Union's Taxation Policy Group on behalf of Her Majesty's Government. [114225]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 14 March 2000]:* I am the Government's lead representative on the Taxation Policy Group. If I am unable to attend, senior officials may attend on my behalf.

National Insurance Recording System

Mr. Russell Brown: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if his Department plans to seek compensation from Andersen Consulting as a result of the delays to the new National Insurance Recording System. [115218]

Dawn Primarolo: My conclusion is that it would not be sensible or cost effective to seek further compensation from Andersen Consulting beyond the agreed amount of £4.1 million which was paid for delays in 1997 and 1998. This also involved Andersen Consulting in additional, unrecoverable development costs of £20 million.

In reaching this decision I have taken into account not just the contractual and legal position, but also the further investment made by Andersen Consulting beyond the development costs of some £7 million, at no cost to the Government, to ensure that the system is fully functional. Beyond this, I am satisfied that taking action against Andersen Consulting would prejudice the partnership

relationship now established between it and the Inland Revenue. This is essential to the delivery of future changes to the system in support of the Governments National Insurance and Pensions and Welfare Reform proposals.

Wealth Statistics

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the total wealth of the richest *(a)* 1 per cent., *(b)* 5 per cent., *(c)* 10 per cent. and *(d)* 50 per cent. of the United Kingdom population; and in each case what proportion of the United Kingdom total this represents. [113894]

Dawn Primarolo: The figures are shown in the table:

Distribution of marketable wealth 1996 [1]

	Wealth £ billion	*Percentage*
Top 1 per cent. of adult population	400	19
Top 5 per cent. of adult population	800	39
Top 10 per cent. of adult population	1,100	52
Top 50 per cent. of adult population	1,950	93
Entire adult population	2,100	100

[1] Provisional

Tax Allowances

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the full year cost from April 2000 of transferring an unused personal tax allowance from a married person to their earning spouse where *(a)* there are no children and *(b)* where that person's youngest child is (i) aged under five, (ii) under 11 and (iii) under 16 years at the beginning of the tax year. [113478]

Dawn Primarolo: The estimated costs for 2000–01 of allowing a married person to transfer an unused personal tax allowance to their earning spouse are given in the table.

Family type	*£ million*
(a) Married couples with dependant children	600
Married couples whose youngest child is:	
(b)(i) under the age of 5	850
(b)(ii) under the age of 11	1,200
(b)(iii) under the age of 16	1,350

E-commerce

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the erosion of revenue from VAT as a result of the increase in e-commerce. [114568]

Dawn Primarolo: Although accurate figures are not available, the VAT currently at risk is not considered to be significant. However, we will continue to monitor this area closely.

IR35

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the increased cost to United Kingdom businesses resulting from the introduction of IR35. [114500]

Dawn Primarolo: Such estimates were made for the Welfare Reform and Pensions Bill in the "Regulatory Impact Assessment for National Insurance Service Provision Through Intermediaries", which was published in October 1999.

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the estimated tax receipts flowing from the introduction of IR35 are for the next financial year. [114503]

Dawn Primarolo: Estimates of the expected revenue consequences from the proposed measure to stop avoidance of tax and National Insurance Contributions using personal service companies were included in the Financial Statement and Budget Report (FSBR) which was published on Budget Day in March 1999.

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the possible loss of revenue resulting from people leaving the United Kingdom following the introduction of IR35. [114499]

Dawn Primarolo: Information on our assumptions about the effects of the introduction of IR35 was included in the Regulatory Impact Assessment on the Welfare Reform and Pensions Bill which was published in October 1999.

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) if he will estimate the cost of the legislation introducing IR35; [114502]

(2) what the administrative cost of IR35 will be in each of the next three financial years. [114501]

Dawn Primarolo: This information is provided on pages 15 and 16 of the Regulatory Impact Assessment on the Welfare Reform and Pensions Bill published in October 1999.

NIRS2

Mr. Love: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will report on progress in the introduction of the NIRS 2; and if he will make a statement. [114696]

Dawn Primarolo: The majority of the NIRS2 system facilities are working well and we are now seeing considerable improvements. The Inland Revenue National Insurance Contributions Office is using the system to reduce backlogs and improve service to the customer.

Remaining key elements will be in place in April 2000—this will mean that the Inland Revenue National Insurance Contributions Office can reduce backlogs of pension work which in turn will help the Benefits Agency clear benefits work.

Churches

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will take steps to implement the European directive allowing a reduced rate of VAT on specified labour-intensive work relating to churches. [114336]

Dawn Primarolo: The new EC Directive on reduced rate experiments for labour-intensive services is aimed at private dwellings, not churches.

Basic State Pension

Ms Oona King: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 19 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 502W, on the basic state pension, what would be the real increase in the yield of national insurance contributions between 1999–2000 and 2010–11 if the total yield rose in line with average earnings. [114198]

Dawn Primarolo: If total national insurance contributions receipts for Great Britain in 1999–2000 were increased in line with average earnings each year until 2010–11, then this figure would be some £11.7 billion higher than the 1999–2000 figure in real terms[1].

This estimate was provided by the Government Actuary's Department.

[1] Using GDP at market prices as a deflator.

Employment Statistics

Shona McIsaac: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people were *(a)* employed and *(b)* unemployed in the former area of South Humberside in each year since 1981. [113902]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from John Pullinger to Shona McIsaac, dated March 2000:

The Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) has been asked to reply to your recent question on employed and unemployed people in the former area of South Humberside since 1981. I am replying in Dr. Holt's absence.

The Labour Force Survey (LFS) is the government's main source of labour market data on individuals. Data on levels of employment and unemployment are available from the LFS Annual Local Area Database. These data are available back to 1994.

In addition, information on levels of employment can be obtained from the Annual Employment Survey (AES) for 1995 to 1997 and the Census of Employment from 1981, although this survey was not carried out every year. Information on levels of unemployment can be obtained from the claimant count (the number of people receiving unemployment-related benefits), from June 1983 onwards on a monthly basis.

Information on the sub-region requested, the former area of South Humberside, is no longer available as this area is based on pre-1974 geographies. Information for the AES and claimant count by geographical areas is available from the Nomis database in the House of Commons Library and an approximate South Humberside region can be constructed using appropriate sub-regional geographical areas, or combinations of them.

Exports

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the fall in seasonally adjusted volume of goods exports excluding oil and erratics since August 1999; and if he will make a statement. [113890]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 14 March 2000]:* The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from John Pullinger to Mr. Matthew Taylor, dated 15 March 2000:

The Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) has been asked to reply to your recent question on export volumes. I am replying in Dr. Holt's absence.

The information may be found in table 3 of the monthly first release, UK Trade, published on 23 February 2000, copies of which are available in the House of Commons Library.

Tobin Tax

Mrs. Fyfe: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to discuss proposals for a Tobin tax, at the forthcoming IMF spring meetings in Washington. [114355]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 14 March 2000]:* None. The Government believe the idea of a tax on currency speculation is, in principle, interesting, but has a number of practical drawbacks. In particular, it would be almost impossible to achieve a global coverage, and there would be huge scope for avoidance.

Over the past two years the Government have worked with our G7 partners on measures designed to strengthen the international financial system and establish better mechanisms for crisis prevention and resolution. Much of the groundwork was laid during the UK presidency of the G7 with my right hon. Friend the Chancellor in the chair.

Capital Controls

Ms Drown: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the conclusion of the recent IMF report on the value of capital controls. [114714]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The IMF report of 18 November 1999 helpfully advances interactional discussion on capital controls. The report makes clear that capital controls are no substitute for sound macroeconomic policies, and that strong prudential policies play an important role in orderly and successful capital account liberalisation.

The Government believe that open capital markets can bring huge economic benefits, and support efforts to encourage orderly, progressive capital account liberalisation. The Government recognise that large short-term capital movements can be destabilising, and believe that the benefits of liberalisation are best enjoyed in countries which have embarked upon properly sequenced economic reform. Sound macroeconomic policy, open and credible institutions and procedures and a healthy financial sector are essential pre-conditions for orderly capital account liberalisation.

At the Cologne Economic Summit, the UK Government and our G7 partners urged the IMF to continue its work on the appropriate pace and sequencing of capital market liberalisation, and to explore other issues related to the Fund's role in facilitating an orderly approach to liberalisation.

Currency Transaction Tax

Ms Drown: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) if he will commission a study into the feasibility of introducing a tax on currency transactions; [114712]

(2) if he will support the proposal to be put forward by Canada at the United Nations Special Session in Geneva for a further study into the feasibility of a currency transaction tax. [114713]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Government have no plans to commission a study into the feasibility of introducing a tax on currency transactions, and will consider any proposals from others for a study on their individual merits.

The Government believe the idea of a tax on currency speculation is, in principle, interesting, but has a number of practical drawbacks. In particular, it would be almost impossible to achieve global coverage, and there would be huge scope for avoidance.

Pension Payment Tax Relief

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the yield, in each of years 2002–03 and 2003–04 as a result of the abolition from 6 April 2001 of the ability to carry forward entitlement to pension payment tax relief for up to six years. [114762]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The proposal to remove the carry forward facility is intended to simplify pension administration not to raise revenue. It is part of a package of measures designed to increase pension take up. We do not expect the removal of carry forward to save tax relief.

Charities

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what mechanism will replace tax credits in giving financial support to charities; and if he will make a statement. [114335]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The reform of corporation tax announced in 1997 will generate greater prosperity for businesses and those who invest in them. The withdrawal of payable tax credits on charities' dividend income did not come into effect until April 1999 and charities will receive generous compensation on a tapering basis in order to adjust, at a cost to the Exchequer of around £1.1 billion, for a further five years. The "Getting Britain Giving" package of measures which is being introduced in April, is estimated by the charity sector to be worth some £350 million a year to charities.

Press Releases

Mr. Brady: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer for the period 2 May 1997 to 29 February 2000 what was *(a)* the number of occasions on which couriers were used to distribute news releases from his Department and *(b)* the total cost of using couriers to distribute news releases. [113968]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 10 March 2000]:* The Treasury press office does not use couriers to distribute press releases. Press releases are distributed by the Central Office of Information (COI) through fax and electronic means. However, before the financial year 1999–2000, couriers were used to deliver releases to COI, who would then use their various delivery methods. The costs for the period from 2 May 1997, until the Treasury abandoned this practice in the financial year 1999–2000 and decided to rely on electronic means, are as follows:

1997/98—229 press releases at £40 per distribution totalling £9,160 (from 2 May till the end of the financial year);

1998/99—269 press releases at £50 per distribution which totalled £13,450.

Couriers would now be used only in exceptional circumstances and do not form a regular press office cost.

Mr. Brady: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the *(a)* national, *(b)* regional and *(c)* local newspapers and media bodies to which his Department sent news releases during the period 2 May 1997 to 29 February 2000. [113994]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 10 March 2000]:* The Treasury distributes its new releases by fax and electronic means through the Central Office of Information (COI). The COI issues releases to organisations held on mailing lists that have developed over time. Distribution will vary according to the subject concerned. Since there are over 2,000 organisations on the lists, it is not possible to re-organise them into national, regional, local newspapers and media bodies without incurring disproportionately high costs.

Cancer Statistics

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) if he will list by income decile in the UK the number of cancer deaths for each type of cancer for each year from 1992; and if he will make a statement; [114172]

(2) if he will list the number and type of cancers in people *(a)* in the UK as a whole, *(b)* on low incomes and *(c)* who are unemployed for the last available year; and if he will make a statement. [114175]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answers 13 March 2000]:* The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from John Pullinger to Mr. Paul Marsden, dated 15 March 2000:

The Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) has been asked to reply to your recent parliamentary questions about cancers in people on low incomes and by income decile. I am replying in Dr Holt's absence.

Information on income is not requested when a death is registered or a cancer registration is made and so this information is not centrally available.

Employment status is not available to all of the regional cancer registries and it is consequently not possible to present the number of new cases of cancer by type for persons unemployed at the time of cancer registration.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Nuclear Industry

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to his answer of 11 January 2000,

Official Report, column 109W, on the nuclear industry, if he will list *(a)* the installation concerned, *(b)* the name of the company and *(c)* the date the reactor shutdown began and the duration of it along with the reasons for the shutdown. [113350]

Mrs. Liddell: The information is contained in the table. All shutdowns are publicly reported in the power station fortnightly newsletter, which is circulated to the local media and members of the sites' Local Community Liaison Committee.

Load factors and unplanned shutdowns at magnox and advance gas-cooled reactor (AGR) power stations during 1999

Nuclear plant/reactor	*Station load factor percentage*	*Start date*	*Days*	*Primary cause of shutdown*
BNFL—magnox				
Bradwell				
R1	31	13 February 1999	3	Nuclear plant
		21 April 1999	254	Nuclear plant
R2		7 February 1999	3	Conventional plant
		25 April 1999	91	Precautionary measure
		2 August 1999	2	Nuclear plant
		18 August 1999	135	Nuclear plant
Calderhall				
R1	76	23 June 1999	1	Conventional plant
		5 November 1999	3	Conventional plant
R2		5 November 1999	3	Conventional plant
R3		8 October 1999	2	Nuclear plant
R4		9 March 1999	3	Nuclear plant
Chapelcross				
R1	81		None	
R2		14 September 1999	6	Nuclear plant
Dungeness A				
R1	89		None	
R2		11 February 1999	3	Conventional plant
		20 July 1999	3	Conventional plant
		2 November 1999	2	Conventional plant
Hinkley A				
R1	32	10 March 1999	6	Nuclear plant
		16 April 1999	259	Conventional plant
R2		7 February 1999	2	Conventional plant
		16 April 1999	161	Conventional plant
		3 December 1999	28	Nuclear plant
Oldbury				
R1	87	12 April 1999	2	Nuclear plant
		28 July 1999	2	Conventional plant
		15 September 1999	5	Conventional plant
		18 October 1999	5	Conventional plant
R2		20 August 1999	26	Nuclear plant
		7 October 1999	8	Conventional plant
Sizewell A				
R1	67	27 January 1999	2	Conventional plant
R2		12 June 1999	10	Conventional plant
		29 August 1999	7	Nuclear plant
Wylfa				
R1	83		None	
R2		14 December 1999	4	Nuclear plant
British Energy—AGR				
Dungeness B				
R21	37	13 January 1999	4	Nuclear plant
		3 August 1999	5	Nuclear plant
		5 September 1999	118	Conventional plant
R22		12 February 1999	17	Conventional plant
		17 March 1999	4	Conventional plant
		28 August 1999	7	Conventional plant
		26 September 1999	0	Nuclear plant
		20 November 1999	42	Conventional plant

Load factors and unplanned shutdowns at magnox and advance gas-cooled reactor (AGR) power stations during 1999

Nuclear plant/reactor	*Station load factor percentage*	*Start date*	*Days*	*Primary cause of shutdown*
Hartlepool				
R1	88	21 May 1999	2	Conventional plant
		19 June 1999	1	Conventional plant
R2		3 February 1999	1	Conventional plant
		31 March 1999	1	Conventional plant
		18 July 1999	9	Nuclear plant
		19 July 1999	0	Nuclear plant
Heysham 1				
R1	80	27 December 1998	3	Conventional plant
		6 November 1999	1	Nuclear plant
R2		16 January 1999	4	Conventional plant
		16 May 1999	3	Conventional plant
		22 May 1999	1	Conventional plant
		23 May 1999	5	Conventional plant
		2 July 1999	13	Conventional plant
		3 August 1999	1	Conventional plant
Heysham 2				
R7	65	20 October 1999	3	Conventional plant
		9 December 1999	23	Conventional plant
R8		27 December 1998	3	Conventional plant
		9 June 1999	17	Conventional plant
		16 July 1999	140	Conventional plant
		5 November 1999	0	Conventional plant
Hinkley Pt.B				
R3	76	27 May 1999	2	Conventional plant
		18 June 1999	5	Conventional plant
		28 June 1999	6	Conventional plant
		4 July 1999	7	Nuclear plant
		12 July 1999	1	Conventional plant
		17 July 1999	11	Conventional plant
		16 October 1999	5	Conventional plant
		10 November 1999	9	Conventional plant
		25 November 1999	16	Conventional plant
		14 December 1999	2	Conventional plant
R4		2 October 1999	0.2	Conventional plant
HunterstonB				
R3	86	27 December 1998	6	Conventional plant
		5 March 1999	3	Conventional plant
		30 July 1999	2	Conventional plant
		22 October 1999	3	Nuclear plant
R4		27 December 1998	9	Conventional plant
		11 March 1999	3	Conventional plant
		12 August 1999	5	Conventional plant
		9 November 1999	14	Nuclear plant
		17 December 1999	0.5	Conventional plant
Torness				
R1	93.5		None	
R2		7 November 1999	7	Conventional plant

Notes:
1. Station load factors: percentage of maximum possible output for each site (if operational 24 hours a day, 365 days a year). The figures include both planned and unplanned outages.
2. Reactor numbers: The numbering of reactors is a matter for the company.
3. Conventional plant: Plant common to all types of power station, eg turbines.

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to his answer of 11 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 109W, on the nuclear industry, for what percentage of time each nuclear reactor which was involved in the 78 unplanned shutdowns was in use in 1999 out of its possible maximum operating time. [113351]

Mrs. Liddell: The information is contained in the table. The "load factor" figures show the power stations output as a percentage of its maximum possible output if it was on line 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. The figures also include planned outages for refuelling and maintenance.

Load Factors and unplanned shutdowns at magnox and advance gas-cooled reactor (AGR) power stations during 1999

	Reactor	*Station load factor Percentage*	*Start date*	*Days*	*Primary cause of shutdown*
BNFL	magnox				
Bradwell	R1	31	13 February 1999	3	Nuclear plant
			21 April 1999	254	Nuclear plant
	R2		7 February 1999	3	Conventional plant
			25 April 1999	91	Precautionary measure
			2 August 1999	2	Nuclear plant
			18 August 1999	135	Nuclear plant
Calderhall	R1	76	23 June 1999	1	Conventional plant
			5 November 1999	3	Conventional plant
	R2		5 November 1999	3	Conventional plant
	R3		8 October 1999	2	Nuclear plant
	R4		9 March 1999	3	Nuclear plant
Chapelcross	RI	81		0	
	R2		14 September 1999	6	Nuclear plant
Dungeness A	R1	89		0	
	R2		11 February 1999	3	Conventional plant
			20 July 1999	3	Conventional plant
			2 November 1999	2	Conventional plant
Hinkley A	R1	32	10 March 1999	6	Nuclear plant
			16 April 1999	259	Conventional plant
	R2		7 February 1999	2	Conventional plant
			16 April 1999	161	Conventional plant
			3 December 1999	28	Nuclear plant
Odbury	R1	87	12 April 1999	2	Nuclear plant
			28 July 1999	2	Conventional plant
			15 September 1999	5	Conventional plant
			18 October 1999	5	Conventional plant
	R2		20 August 1999	26	Nuclear plant
			7 October 1999	8	Conventional plant
Sizewell A	R1	67	27 January 1999	2	Conventional plant
	R2		12 June 1999	10	Conventional plant
			29 August 1999	7	Nuclear plant
Wylfa	R1	83		0	
	R2		14 December 1999	4	Nuclear plant
British Energy	AGR				
DungenessB	R21	37	13 January 1999	4	Nuclear plant
			3 August 1999	5	Nuclear plant
			5 September 1999	118	Conventional plant
	R22		12 February 1999	17	Conventional plant
			17 March 1999	4	Conventional plant
			28 August 1999	7	Conventional plant
			26 September 1999	0	Nuclear plant
			20 November 1999	42	Conventional plant
Hartlepool	R1	88	21 May 1999	2	Conventional plant
			19 June 1999	1	Conventional plant
	R2		3 February 1999	1	Conventional plant
			31 March 1999	1	Conventional plant
			18 July 1999	9	Nuclear plant
			19 July 1999	0	Nuclear plant
Heysham 1	R1	80	27 December 1998	3	Conventional plant
			6 November 1999	1	Nuclear plant
	R2		16 January 1999	4	Conventional plant
			16 May 1999	3	Conventional plant
			22 May 1999	1	Conventional plant
			23 May 1999	5	Conventional plant
			2 July 1999	13	Conventional plant
			3 August 1999	1	Conventional plant

Load Factors and unplanned shutdowns at magnox and advance gas-cooled reactor (AGR) power stations during 1999

	Reactor	Station load factor Percentage	Start date	Days	Primary cause of shutdown
Heysham 2	R7	65	20 October 1999	3	Conventional plant
			9 December 1999	23	Conventional plant
	R8		27 December 1998	3	Conventional plant
			9 June 1999	17	Conventional plant
			16 July 1999	140	Conventional plant
			5 November 1999	0	Conventional plant
Hinkley Pt.B	R3	76	27 May 1999	2	Conventional plant
			18 June 1999	5	Conventional plant
			28 June 1999	6	Conventional plant
			4 July 1999	7	Nuclear plant
			12 July 1999	1	Conventional plant
			17 July 1999	11	Conventional plant
			16 October 1999	5	Conventional plant
			10 November 1999	9	Conventional plant
			25 November 1999	16	Conventional plant
			14 December 1999	2	Conventional plant
	R4		2 October 1999	0.2	Conventional plant
HunterstonB	R3	86	27 December 1998	6	Conventional plant
			5 March 1999	3	Conventional plant
			30 July 1999	2	Conventional plant
			22 October 1999	3	Nuclear plant
	R4		27 December 1998	9	Conventional plant
			11 March 1999	3	Conventional plant
			12 August 1999	5	Conventional plant
			9 November 1999	14	Nuclear plant
			17 December 1999	0.5	Conventional plant
Torness	R1	93.5		0	
	R2		17 November 1999	7	Conventional plant

Notes:
1. Station Load Factors: per cent. of maximum possible output for each site (if operational 24 hours a day, 365 days a year). The figures include both planned and unplanned outages.
2. Reactor Numbers: The numbering of reactors is a matter for the company.
3. Conventional Plant: Plant common to all types of power station, eg turbines.

Automatic Teller Machines

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will assess the benefits of ensuring that cash withdrawals from automatic teller machines located in post offices are not subject to bank charges. [113905]

Mr. Alan Johnson: My right hon. Friend considers that the imposition of charges for cash withdrawals from automatic teller machines will impact disproportionately on the socially excluded and those in rural areas. People on fixed budgets, particularly pensioners and the unemployed, should not suffer high charges to withdraw small amounts of cash. If charges are to be introduced, we will ensure that consumers know what they are before they proceed with a transaction. If the banks do not do this voluntarily, my right hon. Friend has powers under the Prices Act 1974 to compel them.

I understand from the Post Office that commercial and contract arrangements with the proposed partners for the installation of 3,000 more cash machines at post offices have not yet been finalised. Access and charging arrangements will, in the first instance, be commercial matters for the Post Office and its partners.

Post Office Services

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what proposals he has to expand banking and financial services in the national network of post offices; and if he will make a statement. [114909]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The Horizon project to equip the post office network with a modern on-line IT platform, towards the capital costs of which the Government is contributing nearly £500 million, will enable the Post Office to improve its services to existing clients and to attract new clients and services. In particular, Horizon offers the potential to move into automated network banking on an agency basis enabling post offices to restore a vital service to many rural areas and smaller communities. The Post Office already has arrangements with Girobank/Alliance and Leicester, LloydsTSB and the Co-operative Bank and they are currently in discussion with other High Street banks. An agreement has recently been reached on a pilot scheme in Cornwall to offer counter services on behalf of Barclays.

Renewable Energy

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if it is his policy to regard energy from waste schemes as renewable energy; and if he will make a statement. [114148]

Mrs. Liddell: Yes. Wastes produced by households, industry and commerce pose a difficult, costly and potentially environmentally damaging problem. Our draft national waste strategy provides for waste reduction, materials recycling and energy recovery. Where there is no better alternative, using waste materials to produce energy can reduce environmental problems and at the same time save fossil fuels.

Departmental Buildings

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list *(a)* the offices (i) owned and (ii) rented by his Department and its agencies in Scotland and *(b)* the number of staff (y) employed and (z) that can be accommodated (1) in total and (2) at each site. [114239]

Dr. Howells: The information is:

(a) Location[1]	*(b)(i) Staff*	*(b)(ii) Approximate potential capacity*
DTI Headquarters		
Atholl House, Aberdeen	65	160
376 Gilmerton Road, Edinburgh	[2]20	20
Tay House, Glasgow	51	80
Employment Tribunals Service		
Aberdeen	3	4
13 Albert Square, Dundee	3	4
52–56 Melville Street, Edinburgh	10	10
Eagle Building, Glasgow	30	36
Total	162	314

[1] Excluding offices owned or rented by other Departments where DTI or its agencies are minor occupiers

[2] Number of contractors

[3] No DTI staff are employed at this location

IT Strategy

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what progress he has made with the development of the Government's information technology strategy; and if he will make a statement. [113897]

Mr. Ian McCartney: I have been asked to reply.

I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol, West (Valerie Davey) on 14 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 353W.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Press Releases

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development for the period 2 May 1997 to 29 February 2000 what was *(a)* the number of occasions on which couriers were used to distribute news releases from her Department and *(b)* the total cost of using couriers to distribute news releases. [113979]

Clare Short: We do not use couriers to distribute news releases.

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list the *(a)* national, *(b)* regional and *(c)* local newspapers and media bodies to which her Department sent news releases during the period 2 May 1997 to 29 February 2000. [113990]

Clare Short: We do not keep records of all newspapers or media bodies to which press releases are sent, and it would be disproportionately expensive to seek to identify a full list. However, departmental press releases are available to the press through the News Distribution Service managed by the COI, and are also available through our internet site. More targeted distribution of press releases varies depending on the subject and content of the press release involved.

Departmental Buildings

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list *(a)* the offices (i) owned and (ii) rented by her Department and its agencies in Scotland and *(b)* the number of staff (y) employed and (z) that can be accommodated (1) in total and (2) at each site. [114236]

Clare Short: My Department owns Abercrombie House in East Kilbride. It can accommodate 485 people, which equates to the proposed staffing levels for 2000–01. We also rent the property at 43 Fairfield Place, East Kilbride. This is an unstaffed file store.

DEFENCE

RAF Personnel Management Agency

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* those targets of the RAF Personnel Management Agency for 1998–99 which (i) were and (ii) were not achieved, giving the factors affecting the outcome in each case and *(b)* action taken by the agency to improve target achievement performance in 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [111740]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the RAF Personnel Management Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the right hon. and learned Member.

Letter from Alan Cowpe to Mr. Menzies Campbell, dated 15 March 2000:

I have been asked to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question about the RAF Personnel Management Agency's performance against its Key Targets; the Air Secretary is out of the office on duty.

The information requested is contained in the Agency's Annual Report and Accounts 1998–99, a copy of which is in the Library of the House. I enclose for your convenience, however, a copy of the relevant pages which summarise performance against the Targets. You will see that of the Agency's five Targets, four were achieved, the exception being one which was overtaken by the SDR.

Performance Against Key Targets

Overview

The RAF PMA has achieved 4 out of its 5 Key Targets. Key Target 3, which required the expansion of the active strength of the Reserve Air Forces to exceed 2,900 by 31 March 1999, was in effect overtaken by the Strategic Defence Review which placed a temporary cap on the recruitment of Reserves and disbanded some reservist squadrons. Work now continues to define a new establishment for the Reserves.

Performance

Key Target 1a

To fill peacetime established posts, as a ratio of the overall manning level, to the following percentages:

	Percentage
1998–99	≥ 91.7
1999–2000	≥ 91.8
2000–01	≥ 91.9
2001–02	≥ 92.0
Performance	≥ 92.3

Key Target 1b

To man War, Crisis and MOD authorised Unestablished tasks to the following percentage: ≥ 95%

Performance—99.9%

Key Target 2

To ensure that 80% or more of personnel given a posting that qualifies for a domestic move receive the required notice:

Performance—80.5%

Key Target 3

To meet the Air Force Board's target to increase the number of operationally employable reservists to ≥ 2900 by 31 March 1999.

Performance—Target discontinued

Key Target 4

To ensure that the percentage variation between the actual average trained strength and that forecast by the Agency is no greater than: +/– 1%

Performance—0.38%

Key Target 5

To deliver the 3% savings that accrue from the efficiencies planned for the Financial Year 1998–1999.

Performance—Spend contained within reduced cash allocation.

RAF Maintenance Group Defence

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* those targets of the RAF Maintenance Group Defence for 1998–99 which (i) were and (ii) were not achieved, giving the factors affecting the outcome in each case and *(b)* action taken by the agency to improve target achievement performance in 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [111741]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* The RAF Maintenance Group Defence Agency (MGDA) no longer exists and was, in large measure, absorbed into the new Defence Aviation Repair Agency on 1 April 1999. Performance against the targets was covered in the 1998–99 MGDA Annual Report, which was placed in the Library of the House. Only one target for 1998–99 was not fully achieved.

To achieve 98 per cent. of the aero-systems and electronics maintenance task to standard and on time

Achievement 96.6 per cent. There were minor problems with spares and delays in receiving repair information.

The targets fully achieved were:

To keep within the agency's allocated budget

Achieved.

To achieve the efficiency targets specified in the Logistics Command Management Plan

Achieved.

To achieve planned reductions in Service manpower totals

Achieved.

Service Personnel

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many people from *(a)* Paisley, South, *(b)* Scotland and *(c)* the UK are serving in Her Majesty's armed forces. [113553]

Mr. Spellar: Examination of available personal records of currently serving personnel[1] has revealed the following information:

Area	*Naval Service*	*Army*	*RAF*
(a) Paisley	26	[2]—	[3]70
(b) Scotland	2,552	21,374	5,769
(c) UK	[4]42,902	108,926	51,450

[1] Naval Service data are based on current place of residence. About 29,000 Naval Personnel (some 67 per cent. of total strength) personal records include reference to current place of residence. Army and RAF details are based on nationality at birth taken from personal records of all Army and RAF personnel.

[2] Army records do not show this level of detail.

[3] RAF figures cover Paisley as a whole and not just Paisley, South.

[4] Naval Service total strength as at 1 February 2000 was 42,902, but this includes an unspecified number of Commonwealth citizens and Republic of Ireland nationals.

Bowman VHF System

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what will be the impact on *(a)* the cost to his Department and *(b)* the time scale for completion of the contract of ITT's take-over from Racal of the Bowman VHF system; and if he will make a statement. [113906]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Robert Walmsley to Mr. Mike Hancock, dated 15 March 2000:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about Bowman cost and timescale. This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

ITT Defence has been selected by Archer Communications Systems Ltd (ACSL) as preferred supplier to provide the VHF radio as part of ACSL's preparations to bid for the main production contract later this year. Precise details of the selection process are a matter for the Prime Contractor. However, the selection was made with a view to meeting the requirement at minimum cost, minimum risk and maximum speed of programme.

Radios

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many AN/PRC-138 125W HF radios his Department plans to acquire; and if he will make a statement. [113960]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Robert Walmsley to Mr. Mike Hancock, dated 15 March 2000:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence on how many AN/PRC-138 125W radios the Department plan to acquire. This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency (DPA).

The DPA has procured a total of ninety AN/PRC-138 patrol radio equipments. Of these, sixty-nine were procured with 125W amplifiers, three were procured with 150W amplifiers and eighteen were procured in their patrol (20W) configuration. The Department has no immediate plans to acquire any more AN/PRC-138 radios (in any configuration) though these equipments could be considered for future programmes if they were technically suitable and represented the best value for money.

Transport Aircraft

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) how many Puma helicopters the *(a)* Antonov 124–100 and *(b)* C-17 can carry; [114090]

(2) what is the range of the *(a)* C-17 and *(b)* Antonov 124–100 with full payload, without refuelling. [114092]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Robert Walmsley to Mr. Lindsay Hoyle, dated 15 March 2000:

I am replying to your questions to the Secretary of State for Defence in which you ask how many Puma helicopters the Antonov 124–100 and Boeing C-17 aircraft can carry and what is the range of the Boeing C-17 and Antonov 124–100 with a full payload, without refuelling. This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

We have carried four Puma helicopters in the Antonov An 124–100 and on the basis of information publicly available the Boeing C-17 is capable of carrying three, although some disassembly of the helicopters is required in both cases.

On the basis of information publicly available, the C-17 has an approximate un-refuelled range of 2400nm, at a maximum payload capability of 77 tonnes and the military limit of 2.25g, whereas the Antonov An 124–100 has an un-refuelled range of 1790nm, at a maximum payload capability of 120 tonnes and the civil limit of 2.5g.

Relief Operation (Mozambique)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if *(a)* the US C-17 and *(b)* the C5A Galaxy aircraft were available to support the UK relief operation in Mozambique. [114093]

Mr. Hoon: We concluded, from recent experience, that these aircraft would not be available in sufficient time for the UK relief operation in Mozambique.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what criteria were used in making the decision to use the Antonov 124–100 to carry supplies to Mozambique. [114089]

Mr. Hoon: No request was received to carry supplies to Mozambique. The request was for the movement of four Puma helicopters for rescue purposes. There are only three aircraft types able to carry Puma without the necessity to remove significant components from the helicopter; of these, we judged that only the Antonov An 124–100 was available within the required timeframe.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what consideration he gave to leasing the C-17 for the Mozambique operation. [114091]

Mr. Hoon: It is only possible to purchase or lease the C-17 from the manufacturer or to charter from the United States Air Force. Our recent experience of such options suggested that there was insufficient time for any of them to have been exploited for the Mozambique operation.

Military Aircraft Exercises

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the military aircraft exercises in the South of Scotland Tactical Training Area in the last five years which have involved aircraft from air forces other than the RAF. [114188]

Mr. Spellar: None of the three Tactical Training Areas in the United Kingdom is made available for use by foreign air forces.

HMS 'Dumbarton Castle'

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when HMS 'Dumbarton Castle' is due to end her service with the Royal Navy; and if he will make a statement. [114506]

Mr. Spellar: HMS 'Dumbarton Castle' is due to end her service with the Royal Navy in 2012.

Future Naval Deployments

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on future naval deployments in the south-west Atlantic. [114505]

Mr. Spellar: We will continue to conduct regular Naval patrols in the South West Atlantic.

Masonic Organisations

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence further to his answer of 21 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 738W, to the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) on Masonic organisations, if the act of administering an oath to a Loyal Orange Lodge or allowing an oath to be administered on his Department's premises or property is considered to be among those actions that encourage or promote membership of a secretive organisation for the purposes of the Joint Service Defence Council Instruction on Membership of Organisations such as the Freemasons. [114648]

Mr. Spellar: I will write to my hon. Friend and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Procurement

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list all prime contractors and major subcontractors for the *(a)* CV (F), *(b)* Future Carrier Borne Aircraft, *(c)* Type 45 destroyer, *(d)* strategic sealift, *(e)* Bowman, *(f)* Tracer, *(g)* Bvraam, *(h)* Asraam, *(i)* Hercules Rolling Replacement-tranche 2 and *(j)* short-term strategic airlift. [113889]

Mr. Hoon: *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Robert Walmsley to Mr. Robert Key, dated 15 March 2000:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about prime and sub-contractors for a range of projects. This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

The information requested is as follows:

CV(F)

Contracts for the CVF Assessment Phase were awarded in November 1999 to BAE and Thomson-CSF. BAE subsequently merged with their major sub-contractor. Marconi Electronic Systems, to form BAE SYSTEMS. Thomson-CSF's major sub-contractors include British Maritime Technology Defence Services Limited, Raytheon and Lockheed Martin.

Future Carrier Borne Aircraft (FCBA)

The current planning assumption for FCBA is the US joint Strike Fighter (JSF). The Boeing Military Aircraft Company and Lockheed Martin Aeronautical Company are the competing Prime Contractors in the current phase of the programme, which will lead to a US down-selection to one Prime Contractor in the Spring of 2001. In addition, Pratt and Whitney are developing the engine which will be provided as US Government Furnished Equipment to the selected Prime Contractor. The major UK sub contractors to the US Primes are:

Boeing:

BAE SYSTEMS

Messier Dowry

Rolls-Royce

Flight Refuelling

Martin Baker

TI Industries (Dowty Division)

Smiths Industries

Lockheed Martin

Rolls-Royce

BAE SYSTEMS

Flight Refuelling

Meggitt Avionics

Smiths Industries

Pratt and Whitney

Rolls-Royce

Callender Aeropart

Type 45 destroyer

The nominated Prime Contractor for the Type 45 Destroyer is BAE SYSTEMS. Subject to satisfactory progress, both Marconi Marine (YSL) Ltd and Vosper Thornycroft will be subcontractors involved in the Demonstration and First of Class Manufacture phase. A wide range of other companies could become major sub-contractors subject to the outcome of competitive selection processes yet to be completed by the Prime Contractor.

Strategic sealift

There are four consortia bidding to provide the MOD's strategic sealift service under PFI arrangements. They are:

Novomar S A

The Maersk Company

Andrew Weir Shipping

The Sealion Consortium

Subcontractor arrangements have yet to be decided.

Bowman

The current BOWMAN prime contractor is Archer Communications Systems Ltd (ACSL). Potential major sub-contractors include:

ITT Defence

BAe SYSTEMS

Racal

Cogent

Hunting Engineering

Tracer

The industrial consortia competing in TRACER Project Definition/Advanced Technology Demonstration (PD/ATD) Phase are:

'SIKA International', a joint venture company comprising BAE SYSTEMS and Lockheed Martin, with Vickers Defence System and General Dynamics Land Systems.

The LANCER consortium, an alliance between BAE SYSTEMS (the prime contractor), Raytheon SC, United Defence Limited Partnership (UDLP) and Alvis Vehicles.

BVRAAM

The BVRAAM programme is in the pre-contract competition stage and therefore prime contractorship has still to be determined. Proposals have been received from:

Matra BAe Dynamics (UK) Ltd, supported by Matra BAe Dynamics, France, Alenia-Marconi Systems SpA, CASA, DASA-LFK, SAAB Dynamics and Bayern Chemie with major proposed sub contractors Royal Ordnance, Thomson Detexis and Fiarey Hydraulics Ltd who are offering METEOR, and

Raytheon Systems Ltd, Harlow, supported by Raytheon Missile Systems, with major proposed sub-contractors Atlantic Research Company, Raytheon Systems Ltd, Glenrothes, Diehl, Alliant Technology, Thomson Thorn and Shorts, Belfast who are offering FMRAAM and ERAAM.

ASRAAM

Prime Contractor: Matra BAe Dynamics (UK) Ltd

Major Sub Contractors:

Seeker: Raytheon Systems Co

Sensor: LFK-Lenkflugkorpersysteme GmbH

Fuze: Thomson-Thorn Missile Electronics

Warhead: TDW-Gesellschaft fur verteidigunstechnische Wirksysteme mbH

Motor: Royal Ordnance plc

Acuator: Lucas Aerospace Ltd

Container: SAAB

Hercules Rolling Replacement Tranche 2

The decision on the Hercules Rolling Replacement tranche 2 (HRR2) has yet to be made and therefore no prime contractors or sub-contractors have been selected for this programme. We hope to be in a position to make a decision in the early part of this year.

Short Term Strategic Airlift (STSA)

The decision on the Short Term Strategic Airlift (STSA) has yet to be made and therefore no prime contractors or sub-contractors have been selected for this programme. We hope to be in a position to make a decision in the early part of this year.

Leased Sites

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the military establishments within *(a)* Devon and *(b)* the Torbay constituency that are occupied leasehold, indicating the dates for the expiry of the leases. [114552]

Mr. Spellar: The following leased sites are in Devon.

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Site	Expiry date
Britannia Royal Naval College, Dartmouth	Lease of Fundus (seabed)—29 September 2055
South Yard Fundus, HM Naval Base, Devonport	Lease of Fundus (seabed)—29 September 2081
Zeta Berth Amphibious Trials Unit, Instow	Lease of Funds (seabed)—1 June 2003
Facilities at Oreston for HM Naval Base, Devonport	Lease 29 March 2893
Careers Information Office—Fountain House, Exeter	Lease 13 September 2004
Pilgrim House, Defence Estates	Lease 24 March 2002
Point Terrace, Exmouth for CTC Lympstone	Lease 23 June 2008
The Camber Milbay Docks for Stonehouse Bks	Lease 1 January 2021

There are no leased sites in Torbay and there are 20 other minor leases covering weather monitoring and navigational aids.

The Braunton Burrows and Woodbury common training areas are held under licence.

Race Relations

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the impact on the armed forces of extending to all duties of public authorities the provisions of the Race Relations Act 1976 in respect of *(a)* direct and *(b)* indirect discrimination. [114540]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 14 March 2000]:* As the 1976 Race Relations Act applies already to the Armed Forces our assessment is that the extension of the Act to all public authorities should have minimal effect. Unlike other public authorities, such as the Police and Prison Service, the Armed Forces are not, other than in the broadest sense, engaged in delivering a public service to the community. We continue to act decisively to remove any direct or indirect discrimination on racial grounds. A great deal has been and continues to be undertaken across the Armed Forces to promote racial equality and diversity.

HM Naval Base Clyde

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if the sandbagged oil leak at HM Naval Base Clyde at Coulport has been reported to the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency; and what steps are being taken to repair the leak. [114233]

Dr. Moonie: The Scottish Environmental Protection Agency were made aware of the incident on 14 May 1999. The fuel oil ring main at Coulport has been shut down and drained to prevent any further leaks.

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what action he is taking to monitor the safety of commercial vessels near HM Naval Base Clyde. [114242]

Mr. Spellar: HM Naval Base Clyde consists of the Dockyard Ports of the Gareloch, Loch Long (which includes Coulport) and the Holy Loch. All vessel movements, commercial or military, in the Dockyard Port are controlled and monitored by the Queen's Harbour Master for the Clyde Dockyard Ports thus ensuring the safety of all vessels near HM Naval Base Clyde.

Departmental Buildings

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* the offices owned or rented by his Department and its agencies in Scotland for civilian use and *(b)* the number of staff (i) employed and (ii) that can be accommodated (1) in total and (2) at each site. [114234]

Dr. Moonie: Information about building usage and the number of staff that could be accommodated at MOD sites is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost. For an indication of the number of staff employed at different locations in Scotland I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) on 7 March 2000, *Official Report*, columns 650–51W.

Land Mines (Belarus)

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the conference on stockpiling of land mines in Belarus. [113366]

Mr. Spellar: A Workshop on Humanitarian Demining and Stockpile Elimination took place in Minsk on 6–7 March 2000. It was hosted by the Belarus Support Centre for Associations and Foundations, together with the United Nations Representative Office in Minsk and the Belarussian Ministries of Defence and Foreign Affairs. The purpose of the workshop was to discuss the scope of the land mine problem in Belarus and develop possible solutions. Two UK military officers and representatives of 12 other countries also attended.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Packaging Waste

Mr. Bill O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to ensure that targets set under the Producer Responsibility Obligation (Packaging Waste) Regulations will be achieved; and if he will make a statement. [113422]

Mr. Meacher: The Producer Responsibility Obligations (Packaging Waste) Regulations 1997 set out measures which are designed to achieve the UK's mandatory EC Directive recovery and recycling targets which the EC Directive on Packaging and Packaging Waste requires the UK to meet in 2001. A number of amendments have been made to the Regulations which are designed to contribute further to our achievement of the targets, in particular higher interim recovery and recycling targets for 1999 and 2000 which came into force on 1 January 2000.

I will continue to monitor progress carefully as the basis for an early decision on whether the targets for 2001 are set at the right level to achieve the Directive targets. In particular, it will be important to take account of information due shortly on the numbers of smaller businesses registering for the first time this year as a result of changes in the turnover threshold.

Homelessness

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what were the total number of households *(a)* nationally and *(b)* for each London local authority in respect of which local authorities accepted a housing duty where the cause of homelessness was the termination of a private sector tenancy for (i) 1997, (ii) 1998 and (iii) 1999. [114096]

Mr. Mullin: The available information, relating to households accepted as homeless and in priority need under the homelessness provisions of the 1985 and 1996 Housing Acts, is set out in the table:

	Total priority need acceptances			*Number of households where the main reason for the loss of the last settled home was the ending of an assured shorthold tenancy*		
	1997	*1998*	*1999*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*
England						
Barking and Dagenham	140	226	215	9	14	19
Barnet	856	986	[1]402	166	231	[1]72
Bexley	173	405	246	69	133	56
Brent	1,300	[2]771	969	227	[2]182	162
Bromley	578	703	809	110	139	129
Camden	1,345	1,571	1,429	84	58	57
City of London	38	63	60	1	2	0
Croydon	[2]745	791	1,157	[2]77	113	193
Ealing	979	1,036	989	211	218	75
Enfield	[2]551	781	752	[2]85	105	155
Greenwich	1,191	1,406	1,302	133	189	199
Hackney	[2]532	[2]396	[1]184	[2]48	[2]32	[3]17
Hammersmith and Fulham	584	590	758	39	55	65
Haringey	[2]882	963	1,388	[2]3	3	6
Harrow	618	713	713	130	125	109
Havering	272	[1]82	[2]328	34	[1]8	[2]41
Hillingdon	915	941	772	138	143	142
Hounslow	930	1,013	[2]567	118	221	[2]99
Islington	960	[2]812	1,312	68	[2]76	123
Kensington and Chelsea	598	[2]429	552	73	[2]51	80
Kingston upon Thames	374	[2]310	278	49	[2]60	22
Lambeth	[2]584	946	1,212	[2]4	8	16
Lewisham	[1]382	1,038	1,241	[1]39	172	108
Merton	216	185	251	22	12	15
Newham	[4]—	[2]921	1,687	[4]—	[2]145	189
Redbridge	287	314	438	69	69	110
Richmond upon Thames	544	621	503	77	97	62
Southwark	[2]660	1,071	[2]1,209	[2]51	73	[2]95
Sutton	293	290	410	59	57	40
Tower Hamlets	[2]728	1,010	1,147	[2]25	48	34
Waltham Forest	795	1,054	[3]261	91	242	[3]80
Wandsworth	454	[3]129	[1]391	3	[3]0	[3]14
Westminster	1,144	[2]952	1,199	239	[2]266	196
Total	102,410	104,490	104,770	13,500	15,390	14,170

[1] Data for two quarters only
[2] Data for three quarters only
[3] Data for one quarter only
[4] No Returns
Note:
England figures include estimates for non-responding authorities
Source:
DETR Quarterly P1E: Households dealt with under the homelessness provisions of 1985 and 1996 Housing Acts

Council Tax (Second Homes)

Ms Atherton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate has been made of the revenue lost to local authorities through the reduced council tax on second homes. [114187]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Second homes and other dwellings which are no-one's main residence for whatever reason receive a 50 per cent. discount in council tax. Around 500,000 households in England qualify for the discount at a cost of some £164 million.

In general, if a local authority has a reduced tax base because it has a high proportion of dwellings subject to a discount or exemption, it will receive more grant to compensate.

Press Releases

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the *(a)* national, *(b)* regional and *(c)* local newspapers and media bodies to which his Department sent news releases during the period 2 May 1997 to 29 February 2000. [113992]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 10 March 2000]:* All DETR news releases are distributed to the media through the Central Office of Information (COI). The COI target all the main national and regional newspapers, news agencies and broadcasting organisations through their electronic news distribution service. The COI also distributes news releases via fax to media organisations. News release distribution relies on the subject and content of the specific press release. All DETR news releases are available on the Internet and are also distributed via e-mail.

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions for the period 2 May 1997 to 29 February 2000 what was *(a)* the number of occasions on which couriers were used to distribute news releases from his Department and *(b)* the total cost of using couriers to distribute news releases. [113966]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 10 March 2000]:* The DETR does not use couriers to distribute news releases. News releases are distributed to the media through the Central Office of Information, by fax, by e-mail and through the Press Gallery at the House of Commons.

Tree Preservation Orders

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will bring forward proposals to amend the law to allow tree preservation orders to be designated for defined areas as well as for individual trees. [114245]

Mr. Mullin: The law as it stands allows local authorities to use tree preservation orders to protect areas of trees as well as individual trees. Orders may also be used to protect groups of trees and woodlands.

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will review the immunity of Crown land from tree preservation orders. [114244]

Mr. Mullin: Crown immunity from the planning system as a whole, including the tree preservation order system, will be removed when a suitable legislative opportunity arises. Under the current law, it is possible for local authorities to make tree preservation orders on Crown land, subject to the agreement of the Crown. Such orders ensure that trees are protected if the land falls into private hands.

Business Rate

Mr. Ruffley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent representations he has received from trade bodies requesting business rate relief to be granted to licensed public houses in rural areas. [114342]

Ms Beverley Hughes: We have recently received a substantial number of representations from the licensed trade asking that the 50 per cent. mandatory rate relief for village general stores and post offices be extended to village public houses. Although they were mainly from the licensees of public houses, we have received representations from the North West Brewers and Licensed Retailers Association and the Brighton and South Downs Branch of the Campaign for Real Ale.

Village public houses and other businesses in qualifying rural settlements are already eligible for rate relief of up to 100 per cent., at the discretion of the local authority.

Public Bodies

Dr. Tony Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions as of 1 April 1999, which of the executive and advisory non-departmental public bodies sponsored by his Department *(a)* were required to publish annual reports, *(b)* were required to publish annual accounts, *(c)* were subject to a full audit by the National Audit Office, *(d)* were under the jurisdiction of the Parliamentary Ombudsman or other ombudsmen, *(e)* had their own complaints procedure, *(f)* were required to observe the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information, *(g)* possessed a register of members' interests, *(h)* allowed the public to inspect a register of members' interests, *(i)* were subject to a public right to attend board meetings or committee meetings, *(j)* were obliged to release reports of meetings, *(k)* were subject to a public right to inspect agendas of meetings, *(l)* were subject to a public right to see minutes of meetings, *(m)* were required to hold public meetings, *(n)* (i) maintained an Internet site and (ii) were developing an Internet site and *(o)* had been subject to a quinquennial review within the last year, including a continuing review. [114168]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The answers for the NDPBs in DETR are as follows:

(a) All DETR's executive NDPBs are required to publish their Annual Reports, with the exception of the General Lighthouse Authorities, but there is a statutory requirement to produce the Accounts of the General Lighthouse Fund. The Annual Reports and Accounts of the individual Lighthouse Authorities are consolidated into the General Lighthouse Fund's Report and Accounts. The Department's advisory NDPBs either produce annual reports currently or plan to start producing one this year. Such reports are proportional to the body's size and scope.

(b) All DETR's executive NDPBs are required to publish their annual accounts.

(c) Where an executive NDPB's external auditor is the National Audit Office, then it is subject to a full audit by that body. For DETR, those are; the Audit Commission, the Countryside Commission, English Nature, the General Lighthouse Authorities and the General Lighthouse Fund, the Health and Safety Commission, the Health and Safety Executive, the Joint Nature Conservation Committee, the London Regional Passengers Committee, the Local Government Commission, the eight Regional Development Agencies, and the Traffic Director for London. In some cases, the National Audit Office contract out the work to private sector auditors. The Local Government Residuary Body and the London Pensions Fund Authority are audited by the District Auditor. All DETR's other executive bodies are audited by private sector firms.

(d) All DETR's executive NDPBs come under the remit of either the Parliamentary Ombudsman or the Local Government Ombudsman, with two exceptions:

(i) The Audit Commission appoints auditors of the accounts of local authorities and NHS bodies in England and Wales, and undertakes value for money studies. Like the National Audit Office, it does not deal directly with the public, but it does have its own complaints procedure. While it will investigate

complaints about the conduct of an audit, an audit that is found to have been properly conducted can only be reopened by a judicial review.

(ii) The British Board of Agrément was established under the Companies Act. It provides independent assessment and certification of construction products and systems for which there are no recognised standards. Its only dealings with the public are with the construction industry, and these are commercial and contractual by nature and subject to contract law. It will cease to be an NDPB, becoming an autonomous body, on 1 April 1999.

Those bodies that come under the jurisdiction of the Local Government Ombudsman are the five Housing Action Trusts (Castle Vale, Liverpool, Stonebridge, Tower Hamlets and Waltham Forest) and the London Pensions Fund Authority.

(e) All our NDPBs have their own complaints procedure.

(f) All executive NDPBs that come under the jurisdiction of the Parliamentary Ombudsman are formally required to observe the Code. Those that do not come under the Parliamentary Ombudsman's remit are nevertheless expected to apply the principles of the Code.

(g) All the Department's executive NDPBs possess Registers, with the following exceptions: the General Lighthouse Authorities whose members are not appointed by Ministers; the Health and Safety Executive as the Commission is the body which has Board members appointed to it; and the Traffic Director for London, who is a Corporation Sole and does not have a Board. The following advisory NDPBs have Registers, which are available on request: the Advisory Committee on Hazardous Substances, the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment, the Advisory Committee on Packaging, the Building Regulations Advisory Committee, the Committee on Chemicals and Materials of Construction for use in Public Water Supply and Swimming Pools, the Expert Panel on Air Quality Standards, the Inland Waterways Amenity Advisory Council, the Property Advisory Group, the Radioactive Waste Management Advisory Committee, the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution (on the Internet), the Sustainable Development Education Panel, the UK Round Table on Sustainable Development, and the Water Regulations Advisory Committee. It is the Department's policy that the remaining advisory bodies should have Registers in place.

(h) All DETR's NDPBs which possess a Register make it available for inspection on request, or will do so in future.

(i) None

(j) None

(k) None of DETR's NDPBs is subject to a public right to inspect agendas of meetings. However, the following executive and advisory NDPBs publish the agendas of their Board meetings and documents for meetings: the Countryside Commission, English Nature (but not Executive and Performance meeting papers), the Environment Agency (agendas only), the Health and Safety Commission/Executive, Housing Action Trusts (Castle Vale, Liverpool, Stonebridge, Tower Hamlets and Waltham Forest), the Joint Nature Conservation Committee, and the London Regional Passengers Committee; the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment, the Export Action Group for Building Materials, the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution, the Sustainable Development Education Panel, and the UK Round Table on Sustainable Development.

(l) None of DETR's NDPBs is subject to a public right to see minutes of meetings. However, the following executive and advisory NDPBs publish the minutes of their Board meetings on the Internet or make them available in paper form or do both: the Countryside Commission, English Nature (but not minutes of discussions on Executive and Performance meeting papers), the Environment Agency (summary only), the Health and Safety Commission/Executive, Housing Action Trusts (Castle Vale, Liverpool, Stonebridge, Tower Hamlets and Waltham Forest), the Joint Nature Conservation Committee, the Local Government Commission, and the London Regional Passengers Committee; the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment, the Committee on Chemicals and Materials for Use in Public Water Supplies and Swimming Pools, the Export Action Group for Building Materials, the Royal Commission on Environment Pollution, the Sustainable Development Education Panel, and the UK Round Table on Sustainable Development.

(m) None of DETR's NDPBs is required to hold public meetings. However, many of the Department's bodies hold at least one annual open meeting; the Commission for the New Towns, Docklands Light Railway, the Countryside Commission, English Nature, English Partnerships, the Environment Agency, the Health and Safety Commission/Executive, Housing Action Trusts, the Local Government Commission, the Local Government Residuary Body, the London Regional Passengers Committee, and the National Forest Company; the Building Regulations Advisory Committee, the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution, and the UK Round Table on Sustainable Development.

(n) Most of DETR's executive NDPBs maintain an Internet website. The only exceptions are the Northern Lighthouse Board, Stonebridge and Waltham Forest Housing Action Trusts, the Housing Corporation, the London Pensions Fund Authority, the London Regional Passengers Committee and the National Forest Company. All either plan to get a website shortly or are considering getting one. Generally, information on advisory NDPBs is available on the Department's own website, but the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution has its own website, and the Radioactive Waste Management Advisory Committee and the UK Round Table on Sustainable Development are planning to get their own sites.

(o) From 1 May 1997 to 1 April 1999, the following NDPBs have been subject to a Financial Management and Policy Review: the British Board of Agrément, the Local Government Commission, the UK Ecolabelling Board, the Building Regulations Advisory Committee, and the Expert Panel on Air Quality Standards. Ministers agreed that neither the British Board of Agrément nor the UK Ecolabelling Board should continue as executive NDPBs. Reviews of the Audit Commission, the Local Government Commission, the Darwin Advisory Committee and the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution are under way at present.

Departmental Buildings

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list *(a)* the offices (i) owned and (ii) rented by his Department and its agencies in Scotland and *(b)* the number of staff (i) employed and (ii) that can be accommodated (1) in total and (2) at each site. [114240]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The information is given in the table, based on the local property managers' response to the question:

Office and Location	*Number of staff employed*	*Number of staff that can be accommodated*
Maritime and Coastguard Agency		
Marine House, Aberdeen	56	84
Glasgow M. O., Glasgow	16	16
Leith M. O., Edinburgh	4	10
Navy Buildings, Greenock	30	30
Total	106	140
DVLA		
Aberdeen	10	11
Dundee	11	14
Edinburgh	29	29
Glasgow	45	53
Inverness	6	7
Total	101	114
DSA		
Haymarket House, Edinburgh	18	23
Boydstone Road, Glasgow	4	7
DTC, Glasgow Road, Edinburgh	1	1
DTC, Balgownie Road, Aberdeen	2	2
Total	25	33
DETR (C)		
Mulberry House, Edinburgh	0	10
Total	0	10
Vehicle Inspectorate		
Grayfield House, Edinburgh	5	5
HGVTS—Livingston	25	25
Bishopbriggs HGVTS—Glasgow	30	30
Kilmarnock HGVTS—Kilmarnock	20	20
East Fortune HGVTS—East Fortune	2	2
Charlesford HGVTS—Charlesford	2	2
Kirkcaldy HGVTS—Kirkcaldy	3	3
Lochgilphoad HGVTS—Lochgilphoad	2	2
Perth HGVTS—Perth	20	20
Montrose HGVTS—Montrose	2	2
Fort William HGVTS—Fort William	2	2
Aberdeen HGVTS—Aberdeen	20	20
Keith HGVTS—Keith	2	2
Inverness HGVTS—Inverness	20	20
Lairg HGVTS—Lairg	2	2
Wick HGVTS—Wick	2	2
Kirkwall HGVTS—Kirkwall	2	2
Lerwick HGVTS—Lerwick	2	2
Stornoway HGVTS—Stornoway	2	2
Portree HGVTS—Portree	2	2
Total	167	167
Traffic Area Network		
Argyle House, Edinburgh	42	42
Total	42	42
Overall totals	441	506

Planning Inspectorate Agency

Ms Ward: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what performance targets he proposes to set the Planning Inspectorate Agency for 2000–01. [115215]

Mr. Raynsford: The Planning Inspectorate has a key role to play in continuing to improve the efficiency and certainty with which the planning system delivers quality services to business and other users. To this end, I have set demanding key performance targets for the Planning Inspectorate for 2000–01. These include tougher targets for handling planning appeals and for providing Inspectors for local plan inquiries. I am also making the Inspectorate's performance in handling plan inquiries the theme for their customer satisfaction survey, with a clear requirement to act upon the results.

The tougher appeals targets which I am setting the Inspectorate to improve the service they deliver to customers makes it even more imperative that all parties to the appeals process play their part by co-operating with the Inspectorate in meeting deadlines and agreeing dates offered for inquiries.

The targets for 2000–01 are as follows:

Timeliness

(a) 80 per cent. of all planning appeals decided by written representations to be determined within 17 weeks;

(b) 80 per cent. of all planning appeals decided by hearings to be determined within 23 weeks;

(c) 80 per cent. of all planning appeals decided by inquiries to be determined within 33 weeks;

(d) to provide an Inspector for local plan inquiries in at least 90 per cent. of cases on the date requested by the local authority, provided that the objection period has ended and at least six months' notice has been given; and

(e) to deliver 90 per cent. of Inspectors' reports on local plan inquiries to local authorities according to timescales agreed under service agreements.

Efficiency

To generate a 3 per cent. improvement in the use of running costs compared to 1999–2000.

Quality

To satisfy the Advisory Panel on Standards, and thus the Secretary of State and the National Assembly for Wales, annually and following rigorous monitoring, that the quality of all the Inspectorate's work is being maintained at a high standard, with 99 per cent. of its casework free from justified complaint.

Information and Guidance

To survey customer satisfaction with the Inspectorate's performance in handling development plan inquiries and to act upon the results.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Indirect Discrimination

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the impact on *(a)* his Department, *(b)* local education authorities and *(c)* schools of the extension to all duties of public authorities of the provisions of the Race Relations Act 1976 in respect of indirect discrimination. [114708]

Ms Hodge: The Race Relations Act 1976 has always applied to local education authorities and schools in respect of direct and indirect discrimination, so an extension is not necessary. The Department for Education and Employment itself has established systems that take account of the need to avoid any indirect discrimination on race grounds throughout all its functions.

Free School Meals

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what was the average percentage of pupils entitled to free school meals in the 500 schools with the *(a)* highest and *(b)* lowest proportion of pupils achieving five grade A*-C passes at GCSE in the last year for which figures are available. [114667]

Ms Estelle Morris: The proportions of pupils "known to be eligible for free school meals" averaged over the 500 maintained, mainstream secondary schools with the highest, and lowest, percentages of 15-year-old pupils achieving five or more GCSE/GNVQ grades A*-C in 1999 were 5 and 37 per cent., respectively.

Class Sizes (Yeovil)

Mr. Ashdown: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is his estimate of the average class sizes for *(a)* five, *(b)* six, *(c)* seven, *(d)* eight, *(e)* nine, *(f)* 10, *(g)* 11, *(h)* 12, *(i)* 13, *(j)* 14, *(k)* 15, *(l)* 16 and *(m)* 17 year olds for schools within the Yeovil constituency for (i) 1995–96, (ii) 1996–97, (iii) 1997–98, (iv) 1998–99 and (v) 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [114181]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 14 March 2000]:* The available information on average class sizes collected in January for the Parliamentary constituency of Yeovil is shown in the tables. The class size count for January 2000 is currently being undertaken and provisional national estimates are expected to be published in April.

The Government are well on course to deliver their pledge to limit infant classes for five, six and seven year-olds to 30 or below by September 2001. In Yeovil Parliamentary constituency, the latest infant class size count carried out in September 1999 showed the average size of class to be 26.1 pupils per class.

Average size of classes taught by one teacher by year group in maintained primary schools in the Parliamentary constituency of Yeovil: 1996–99

	Year groups									
Position as at January	*Reception*	*1*	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*6*	*7*	*Mixed*	*Overall*[1]
1999										
Average class size	25.8	28.1	28.6	29.1	29.5	28.8	28.1	[2]—	28.1	27.8
Pupils	1,085	478	658	640	649	518	561	[2]—	2,806	7,455
Classes	42	17	23	22	22	18	20	[2]—	100	268
1998										
Average class size	27.1	28.2	28.1	29.0	28.9	29.6	26.4	[3]—	26.8	27.6
Pupils	1,058	479	674	697	693	621	476	[3]—	2,729	7,467
Classes	39	17	24	24	24	21	18	[3]—	102	271
1997										
Average class size	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	27.0
Pupils	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	7,409
Classes	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	274
1996										
Average class size	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	27.0
Pupils	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	7,159
Classes	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	265

[1] Includes all year groups and nursery classes
[2] Not applicable (no classes of this type)
[3] Not available

Average size of classes taught by one teacher by age band in maintained secondary schools in the Parliamentary constituency of Yeovil: 1996–99

	Ages[1]				
Position as at January	*Middle classes*	*Mainly under 14s*	*Mainly 14 and 15*	*16 or older*	*Overall*
1999					
Average class size	30.7	26.7	22.2	8.4	24.1
Pupils	736	2,885	2,088	135	
Classes	24	108	94	16	
1998					
Average class size	30.3	25.6	23.1	9.3	24.2
Pupils	698	2,868	2,011	130	
Classes	23	112	87	14	
1997					
Average class size	27.4	25.4	22.5	9.4	23.2
Pupils	795	2,793	2,043	198	
Classes	29	110	91	21	

Average size of classes taught by one teacher by age band in maintained secondary schools in the Parliamentary constituency of Yeovil: 1996–99

Position as at January	Middle classes	Ages [1] Mainly under 14s	Mainly 14 and 15	16 or older	Overall
1996					
Average class size	29.3	25.4	23.2	9.98	23.9
Pupils	820	2,739	2,109	179	
Classes	28	108	91	18	

[1] Ages as the start of the academic year (August 31)

Language Schools

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) how much funding was given by his Department to supplementary language schools in England and Wales in each year since 1992 and 1993; [113655]

(2) what monitoring of the quality of supplementary language schools is undertaken by his Department. [113678]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 9 March 2000]:* Supplementary language schools are independent community-based educational initiatives in England and are not directly funded by the DfEE. These schools fall outside of the immediate responsibility of this Department for monitoring and quality control.

The DfEE will be setting up a Supplementary School Support Service by tender later this year. The primary responsibility for this service will be to develop the capacity for supplementary schools to improve the educational achievement of minority ethnic pupils in National Curriculum subject areas.

The Study Support Team of the Schools Plus Division, Schools Directorate of the DfEE has assisted with some funding towards a publication called "A Directory of Supplementary and Mother-tongue Classes 1999–2000".

I refer my hon. Friend to the Welsh Assembly for the element of his question relating to Wales.

Voluntary Aided Schools

Mr. Colman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what action is being taken to ensure VAT does not have to be levied on basic capital approval borrowing by voluntary aided schools. [113448]

Jacqui Smith: The responsibility for premises work at voluntary aided schools is shared between school governing bodies and their local education authorities. The Department provides grant support at up to 85 per cent. for school governing bodies to help them meet the costs arising from their responsibilities for approved building work, including VAT. The Department does not provide basic capital approval borrowing direct to voluntary aided schools, although these schools can apply to the Department for loans to meet their share of the cost of premises work, including VAT.

Mr. Colman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the capital requirements of voluntary aided Anglican schools. [113447]

Jacqui Smith: Local education authorities apply to the Department each year for capital funding for voluntary aided schools as part of the Annual Capital Guidelines process. The applications include proposals for funding premises work at Anglican voluntary aided schools. They are prioritised locally by authorities, and are then assessed by the Department against the funding criteria and to ensure that the proposals represent value for money.

For 2000–01, £158 million has been allocated for capital and repair work at voluntary aided schools, including almost £26 million to be devolved direct to schools under Formula Capital arrangements. The total funding represents an increase of some 15 per cent. compared with 1999–2000, even after allowing for the 306 former grant maintained schools which joined the voluntary aided sector on 1 September 1999.

Tuition Charges

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will publish in tabular form mandatory tuition charges and contributions falling on students for *(a)* English students studying in England, *(b)* English students studying in Scotland and *(c)* Scottish students studying in England; and what is the net present cost of such charges on a standardised basis. [112122]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 28 February 2000]:* The table sets out the maximum tuition fee payable in 1999–2000 through public or private contributions in respect of home and other EU domiciled higher education students at publicly funded institutions across the United Kingdom. Only those students falling under the new funding arrangements (introduced in 1998) are required to make a private contribution.

Maximum tuition fees in academic year 1999–2000

	£
Full-time undergraduate and PGCE courses	1,025
Sandwich year-out and part-time courses of initial teacher training	510

The amount of fee payable through private contributions depends on the students' residual family income. Up to £17,370 no contributions are expected, thereafter contributions increase on a sliding scale from £45, and at residual income of £27,800 the maximum fee is payable.

PRIME MINISTER

Mineworkers' Pension Scheme

Mr. Illsley: To ask the Prime Minister what proposals the Government have for the division of the surplus in the mineworkers' pension scheme. [113256]

The Prime Minister: Under the agreement made between the Government and the coal pension scheme trustees in 1994, the Government guarantee inflation linked pensions and receive 50 per cent. of any declared surplus in exchange. Already the Government have covered earlier deficits and additional contributions of £400 million. The Government have received no representations from trustees for changing the division of surplus but the DTI are exploring with the trustees the scope for building upon the success achieved to date in terms of benefits for pensions.

Official Engagements

Sir Peter Tapsell: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 15 March. [114182]

The Prime Minister: This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House I will have further such meetings later today.

Lord Levy

Mr. Maude: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his answer of 22 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 852W, (1) with which Israeli political figures Lord Levy has held talks on behalf of the Prime Minister or in pursuit of British interests in the Middle East; [112511]

(2) on what occasions during Lord Levy's visits to Israel, Lord Levy has conducted business on behalf of the Prime Minister. [112510]

The Prime Minister: Lord Levy has frequent contact with leading Israelis, including Prime Minister Barak and other politicians. Lord Levy last saw Prime Minister Barak on 5 February. From time to time, he has passed on oral messages from me.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his answer of 22 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 852W, on Lord Levy, if the development of bilateral relationships includes discussion in respect of possible defence contracts. [112930]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 7 March 2000]:* Lord Levy has not discussed prospective defence contracts.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his answer of 22 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 852W, on Lord Levy, if the discussions in furtherance of the Prime Minister's support for the Peace Process, held by Lord Levy when visiting Israel in a private capacity, were held at the specific request of the Prime Minister. [112931]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 7 March 2000]:* Lord Levy conveys oral messages on my behalf from time to time. He therefore liaises closely with me and the Foreign Secretary.

Euro

Mr. Field: To ask the Prime Minister what guidance he has *(a)* given and *(b)* intends to give to civil servants on their involvement with organisations campaigning for and against the single currency. [113613]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 9 March 2000]:* Guidance to civil servants on contacts, in an official capacity, with outside interest groups is set out in "Guidance for Civil Servants: Contacts with Lobbyists". Guidance to civil servants on their private activities, including their involvement, in a private capacity, in political activities is set out in the "Civil Service Code" and the "Civil Service Management Code". Copies of these documents are available from the Library.

Iraq

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister if he will acquire a copy of John Pilger's film on Iraq, broadcast on 6 March, for the library of No. 10 Downing street. [114586]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 14 March 2000]:* No.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

EU Law Enforcement

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans the Government have to propose measures *(a)* in and *(b)* outside the intergovernmental conference to improve enforcement of EU law. [113609]

Mr. Vaz: We have long advocated a strong and efficient European Court of Justice, and support the inclusion of ECJ reform in the discussions at this IGC. The ECJ itself has put forward ideas to improve its efficiency and reduce delays. Some do not require Treaty change and are already being discussed in the Council. But some will require Treaty change, for example, a move to qualified majority voting for deciding on the Court's rules of procedure. A 'Friends of the Presidency' group has been set up at the IGC to look at these and other proposals.

China

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to encourage further parliamentary exchanges with China. [114159]

Mr. Battle: We support and encourage parliamentary exchanges with China as part of our overall strategy of engaging China on a wide range of issues and in a variety of fora.

In particular we welcome the forthcoming visit to China by my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral, South (Mr. Chapman) and fellow members of the All-Party China Group. We also welcome the proposed visit of the All-Party Tibet Group to Tibet.

Iraq

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the non-Iraqi recipients of money paid from the UN escrow account for the Oil for Food Programme in 1999, broken down by the amount each received and the purpose for each payment. [114367]

Mr. Hain: Under the current terms of the Oil for Food programme the revenues raised in each six month period are divided: 54 per cent. for food, medicine and humanitarian supplies in the centre and south, 13 per cent. for food, medicine and humanitarian supplies in the three northern governorates, 30 per cent. to the UN Compensation Fund, 2.2 per cent. for the UN's costs in administering the programme, 0.8 per cent. for the administrative costs of the United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC). For the 54 per cent. account, the Government of Iraq enters into contracts with suppliers of its choosing.

The United Nations website at http://www.un.org/Departments/oip.html provides a detailed breakdown of applications made under the Oil for Food programme over the last year.

Overseas Staff

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what has been the total amount of private sector payments made to Her Majesty's Government for staff working *(a)* in and *(b)* in conjunction with British embassies in each of the last three years. [114314]

Mr. Hain: No payments or fees have been made by private sector companies to Her Majesty's Government in respect of staff serving at British diplomatic missions.

In a few cases, however, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office makes recoveries from companies in respect of actual expenditure incurred on their behalf by posts on, for example, accommodation, utilities, telecommunications, postage and local support staff costs.

Total recoveries for the last three years were:

	£
1997–98	276,072
1998–99	299,328
1999–2000	274,090

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which companies make payments to Her Majesty's Government in relation to staff connected to British embassies. [114313]

Mr. Hain: UK companies do not make payments for such secondments but in a few cases the Foreign and Commonwealth Office makes recoveries in respect of certain items of administrative expenditure.

Since 1979, the FCO has arranged 56 secondments to British diplomatic missions overseas from 40 private sector companies. In line with HMG's policy of increased interchange with the private sector as part of the Modernising Government agenda, there are at present eight private sector secondees at posts overseas, with a further 14 secondments having been completed over the last year. These include substantive secondments of up to four years, and short-term attachments of three to six months under the Short Term Business Attachment Scheme.

In all cases, the secondees are bound by Diplomatic Service Regulations relating to conduct and discipline, and are answerable to the head of the diplomatic post at which they are serving.

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what criteria are used for issuing diplomatic credentials to private sector employees seconded to work in British embassies. [114312]

Mr. Hain: All diplomatic staff working in British Missions overseas, whether they are public servants or seconded from the private sector, are accorded diplomatic status if it is required to enable them to carry out their official duties, in line with the provisions of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations.

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the personnel seconded or released by private sector companies to work in British embassies who are currently accorded diplomatic status. [114311]

Mr. Hain: There are at present eight private sector secondees at British diplomatic missions overseas who hold diplomatic passports. Four are on substantive secondments of up to four years, and the others are on short-term attachments of 3–6 months under the Short Term Business Attachment Scheme. All secondees are bound by Diplomatic Service Regulations relating to conduct and discipline, and are answerable to the head of the diplomatic post at which they are serving.

It would not be appropriate to list individual secondees by name.

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the private companies who pay Her Majesty's Government a fee for the placement of an employee in a trade support position in a British diplomatic post; if he will list each occurrence of such an arrangement, including payments made; and if he will make a statement on Government policy on such business-to-Government agreements at diplomatic posts. [114155]

Mr. Hain: Private sector companies do not pay fees to HMG for the placement of their employees in British diplomatic missions overseas. HMG's policy is to increase interchange between the private sector and all British Government Departments including the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Secondment programmes have been running since 1979 and present activity is an important part of the Modernising Government agenda. The programmes represent a valuable two-way sharing of expertise between the public and private sectors.

Tokyo Embassy

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will terminate the secondment of the BNFL employee working as atomic energy counsellor in the British Embassy in Tokyo. [114196]

Mr. Hain: No.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Security

6. **Mr. Clifton-Brown:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the security situation in Northern Ireland. [113220]

7. **Mr. Randall:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the security situation in Northern Ireland. [113222]

16. **Mr. Paterson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the security situation in Northern Ireland. [113232]

Mr. Ingram: There remains a continuing potent and dangerous threat from dissident paramilitaries. There has also been a recent increase in the so-called punishment beatings which we unreservedly condemn. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State continues to keep the security situation under close review.

Prisoner Releases

8. **Mr. Stephen O'Brien:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what is the total number of terrorist prisoners who have been released early under the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act 1998; and if he will make a statement. [113223]

Mr. Ingram: To date there have been 319 prisoners released under the terms of the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act 1998. This is drawn from information current at 7 March 2000.

Peace Process

9. **Mr. Bill O'Brien:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the current peace negotiations in Northern Ireland. [113224]

10. **Miss Kirkbride:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the progress of political talks in relation to the peace process in Northern Ireland. [113226]

19. **Mr. Winnick:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the recent political developments in Northern Ireland in relation to the peace process. [113236]

20. **Miss McIntosh:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what progress he has made towards peace in Northern Ireland. [113237]

Mr. Mandelson: I refer my hon. Friends and the hon. Members to the reply I gave today, *Official Report*, column 281, to my hon. Friend the Member for Dumbarton (Mr. McFall) and the hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant).

12. **Mrs. Anne Campbell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the prospects for re-establishing the devolved administration in Northern Ireland. [113228]

Mr. Mandelson: I met the Irish Government and the political parties in Northern Ireland in a series of meetings last week and these consultations will continue in the U.S. over St. Patrick's Day. These consultations are aimed at bringing the process back on track so that the institutions can be restored to normal operation as soon as possible.

14. **Mr. Plaskitt:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what recent discussions he has had with the Irish Government about the way forward for peace in Northern Ireland. [113230]

15. **Mr. Blunt:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what are the circumstances in which he will restore powers to the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive. [113231]

24. **Mr. Simon Hughes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what plans he has for reviving the Northern Ireland Assembly and other institutions established under the Belfast agreement. [113241]

Mr. Mandelson: I met representatives of the Irish Government last week during consultations with the political parties in Northern Ireland. From those discussions we agreed that the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement remains the best way forward to achieve stability, peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland.

Tourism

11. **Mr. Evans:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what recent steps he has taken to encourage tourism to Northern Ireland. [113227]

Mr. Ingram: The Northern Ireland Tourist Board in conjunction with the tourism industry has recently launched a spring marketing campaign in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland offering good value short break holidays. This will help to build on the excellent results for 1999 when 1.64 million visitors came to Northern Ireland, contributing £255 million to the economy.

Decommissioning

13. **Mr. Pound:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when he last met General John de Chastelain to discuss progress on decommissioning. [113229]

23. **Mr. Dobbin:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when he last met General John de Chastelain to discuss progress on decommissioning. [113240]

Mr. Ingram: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State last met General de Chastelain on 14 February.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the decommissioning of illegally-held weapons and explosives. [113235]

Mr. Ingram: I refer my hon. Friends and the hon. Members to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh) on 2 March 2000, *Official Report*, columns 404–05W.

RN Patrol Vessels

17. **Mr. David Heath:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Defence on the future of the Royal Navy Northern Ireland patrol vessels. [113233]

Mr. Ingram: I have had no discussions with the Secretary of State for Defence on the future of Royal Navy Northern Ireland patrol vessels, but would expect to be to be consulted about their future should the need arise.

New Deal

18. **Mr. Healey:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the impact of the new deal on unemployment levels in Northern Ireland. [113234]

Mr. Ingram: Since New Deal was introduced in April 1998, unemployment has fallen by 54.2 per cent. in the target group for the New Deal for 18 to 24-year-olds, and 45.2 per cent. in the New Deal 25+ target group. The corresponding fall in non-target group unemployment was 2.1 per cent. An evaluation of New Deal in Northern Ireland is under way.

22. **Dr. Iddon:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the implementation of the New Deal programme in Northern Ireland. [113239]

27. **Mr. Michael J. Foster:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the implementation of the New Deal programme in Northern Ireland. [113244]

Mr. Ingram: All the New Deal initiatives are being successfully implemented in Northern Ireland. In particular the New Deal for 18–24 year olds and the New Deal for 25+ pilot, which applies throughout Northern Ireland, have had a major impact on unemployment with decreases of 54 per cent. and 45 per cent. respectively in the eligible groups claiming Jobseeker's Allowance since April 1998.

National Minimum Wage

21. **Mr. Nigel Griffiths:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many people in Northern Ireland have benefited from the national minimum wage. [113238]

Mr. Ingram: There is no definitive estimate of the number of people directly affected by the National Minimum Wage legislation. However, the latest official estimates relating to the period March-May 1999 indicate that 6.8 per cent. of Northern Ireland employees were earning less than the Minimum Wage. This compares with 10.1 per cent. in the same period one year earlier, representing a reduction over the period of 3.3 percentage points.

Victim Support

25. **Mrs. Mahon:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many families have received help from the Government programmes of victim support during the past 12 months. [113242]

Mr. Ingram: In terms of initiatives for victims of the troubles, figures for the number of families that have received help are not collected centrally. Many families are helped through the Government's funding of victim support groups and other Government initiatives designed to alleviate the suffering of those most affected by the Troubles in Northern Ireland.

Patten Report

26. **Mr. Donaldson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when he plans to introduce legislation to implement the Patten report on policing. [113243]

Mr. Ingram: Legislation will be introduced in Parliament before Easter.

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on progress made on policing reform since the publication of the Patten report. [113221]

Mr. Ingram: Since my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State's announcement of decisions on Patten on 19 January work has been ongoing to introduce a Police Bill before Easter. We are also preparing an implementation plan and are engaged in discussions on severance and in the search of an Oversight Commissioner.

Royal Ulster Constabulary

Mr. Beggs: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many complaints have been lodged to date by serving RUC officers against a serving police officer whose name has been supplied to him. [112038]

Mr. Ingram: Four complaints have been lodged.

Mr. Beggs: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will discuss with the Chief Constable the appointment of an experienced senior officer from a police force other than the Royal Ulster Constabulary to investigate complaints made against a serving police officer whose name has been supplied to him. [112039]

Mr. Ingram: No. The matter is one of internal investigation and an Assistant Chief Constable of the Royal Ulster Constabulary was appointed on 7 March to investigate the allegations.

Parades Commission

Mr. Peter Robinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many *(a)* RUC working hours have been allocated to and *(b)* RUC officers have been employed in the protection of members of the Parades Commission over the past 12 months. [113830]

Mr. Ingram: The information necessary to answer this question is not readily available and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Energy Efficiency

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what action he is taking to promote energy efficiency in Northern Ireland; and if he will make a statement. [113680]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 9 March 2000]:* Government actively promote energy efficiency in the public, domestic and industrial/commercial sectors. An Inter-Departmental Committee on Energy Efficiency co-ordinates energy efficiency measures throughout the public sector. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive, as the Home Energy Conservation Authority for Northern Ireland, promotes energy efficiency in the domestic sector, delivers the Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme and provides a range of energy efficiency services for vulnerable groups. The Industrial Research and

Technology Unit promotes energy efficiency in industry and commerce through free advisory visits to companies; seminars and workshops; and technical and financial support for energy efficiency measures.

Biomass Energy

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what action he is taking to promote energy from biomass sources; and if he will make a statement. [113683]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 9 March 2000]:* Short-rotation coppice (SRC) biomass has the potential to make a positive and significant contribution to the generation of electricity from renewable sources and to meet international obligations to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in Northern Ireland. Grants to encourage planting of short rotation coppice are available under the Woodland Grant Scheme. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has undertaken extensive research on the agronomic aspects of growing SRC in Northern Ireland and has developed systems for combined heat and power plants based upon biomass from short rotation coppice willow. Two experimental biomass schemes, including the first commercial biomass fuelled combined heat and power plant in the UK, near Londonderry, were assisted under the Energy Demonstration Scheme and the INTERREG II Programme respectively. Both projects were subsequently awarded 15 year contracts by Northern Ireland Electricity plc under its Non-Fossil Fuel Obligation.

Social Enterprises

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what action he is taking to offer financial assistance and support to social enterprises in Northern Ireland. [113681]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 9 March 2000]:* Social enterprises in Northern Ireland fall under the remit of DETI, which through the Local Enterprise Development Unit (LEDU), the small business agency for Northern Ireland, assists community businesses and co-operatives directly via the Community Business Start Up Scheme and indirectly via the Northern Ireland Co-operative Development Agency (NICDA).

The Community Business Start Up Programme, which has been in operation for nine years now, is an important means of addressing inequality and promoting economic development in disadvantaged areas.

Since its relaunch in 1996, the Programme has committed £1.5 million to support the establishment of 104 community businesses throughout Northern Ireland, creating employment opportunities for 182 people. Each business remains on the programme for two years from start-up with survival rates of 65–70 per cent. All businesses assisted under the programme are located in areas of social need or have direct benefit to the regeneration of such areas by the involvement of local communities in businesses, earning profits for local reapplication.

NICDA, also known as the Social Economy Agency, has provided development support and training to groups and local communities all over Northern Ireland seeking to establish social economy initiatives since 1985. NICDA has received funding from LEDU since 1994 for the delivery of a number of community-based projects in fulfilment of LEDU's objectives, including funding for the delivery of the Community Business Start Up Programme.

More recently, LEDU has assisted NICDA by purchasing a number of the programmes from their Social Economy Enterprise Programme, in particular those which add value to its Community Business Start Up Programme by stimulating increased Enterprise Awareness. Some of these programmes seek to develop marketing and other commercial skills within the Social Economy Sector.

Offshore Wind Power

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what action he is taking to promote onshore to offshore wind energy in Northern Ireland; and if he will make a statement. [113684]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 9 March 2000]:* The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Department of Public Enterprise, Dublin, have jointly commissioned a study into the potential for off-shore wind energy around the island of Ireland. The study report is expected shortly and, in the light of its recommendations, consideration will be given to how best to develop the potential of this renewable technology.

Integrated Education

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many *(a)* Protestants and *(b)* Roman Catholics are enrolled at each of the integrated primary schools and at each of the integrated secondary schools in Northern Ireland. [113687]

Mr. George Howarth *[holding answer 14 March 2000]:* The figures requested are:

Integrated primary schools

School name	*Roman Catholic*	*Protestant*
Forge Integrated Primary School	105	102
Hazelwood Integrated Primary School	184	119
Cranmore Integrated Primary School	58	53
Enniskillen Integrated Primary School	105	69
Omagh Integrated Primary School	90	53
Oakgrove Integrated Primary School	195	147
Carhill Integrated Primary School	17	29
Rathenraw Integrated Primary School	62	33
Mill Strand Integrated Primary School	72	70
Braidside Integrated Primary School	84	115
Corran Integrated Primary School	61	33
Acorn Integrated Primary School	59	106
Spires Integrated Primary School	30	18
Hilden Integrated Primary School	9	37
Kircubbin Integrated Primary School	22	48
Portaferry Integrated Primary School	33	24
Bangor Central Integrated Primary School	22	216
Annsborough Integrated Primary School	41	4
All Children's Integrated Primary School	115	70
Loughview Integrated Primary School	68	62
Cedar Integrated Primary School	59	48
Oakwood Integrated Primary School	58	39
Kilbroney Integrated Primary School	35	23
Bridge Integrated Primary School	189	162
Portadown Integrated Primary School	87	65
Windmill Integrated Primary School	78	66
Saints and Scholars Integrated Primary School	91	55

Integrated secondary school

School name	*Roman Catholic*	*Protestant*
Hazelwood College	364	249
Malone Integrated College	193	162
Oakgrove Integrated College	498	241
Erne Integrated College	226	116
Drumragh College	341	169
Slemish Integrated College	139	183
North Coast Integrated College	83	178
Priory College	25	301
Fort Hill College	48	650
Down Academy	34	211
Lagan College	336	419
Shimna Integrated College	243	149
Strangford Integrated College	75	131
Brownlow College	114	215
New Bridge Integrated College	248	117
Armagh/South Tyrone Integrated College	232	141

Note:
Some pupils in these schools may be classified as neither Protestant nor Roman Catholic

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Victim and Witness Support

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department in how many *(a)* Crown courts and *(b)* magistrates courts there are (i) formal arrangements for (1) victim support and (2) witness support and (ii) separate waiting areas for prosecution and defence witnesses; and in each case what proportion of the totals these figures represent. [114339]

Jane Kennedy: There are "witness support" services, run by Victim Support, in all Crown court centres. In February 1999 the Home Secretary announced that additional money had been provided to enable Victim Support to extend its witness services into the magistrates courts. The target is for all magistrates courts (around 420) to have a witness service by 31 March 2002. Interim targets of 20 per cent. and 40 per cent. have been set for 31 March 2000 and 2001 respectively. It is expected that these targets will be met.

Separate waiting areas for prosecution and defence witnesses are provided in all new court buildings and where refurbishment takes place. Where it is not possible to provide separate rooms, special arrangements can be made through the court or witness service. Forty Crown court centres have separate waiting areas for prosecution and defence witnesses out of a total of 93 Crown court centres, including satellites. The information for magistrates courts is not readily available.

Public Bodies

Dr. Tony Wright: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department as of 1 April 1999, which of the executive and advisory non-departmental public bodies sponsored by his Department *(a)* were required to publish annual reports, *(b)* were required to publish annual accounts, *(c)* were subject to a full audit by the National Audit Office, *(d)* were under the jurisdiction of the Parliamentary Ombudsman or other ombudsmen, *(e)* had their own complaints procedure, *(f)* were required to observe the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information, *(g)* possessed a register of Members' interests, *(h)* allowed the public to inspect a register of Members' interests, *(i)* were subject to a public right to attend board meetings or committee meetings, *(j)* were obliged to release reports of meetings, *(k)* were subject to a public right to inspect agendas of meetings, *(l)* were subject to a public right to see minutes of meetings, *(m)* were required to hold public meetings, *(n)* (i) maintained an internet site (ii) were developing an internet site and *(o)* had been subject to a quinquennial review within the last year, including a continuing review. [114167]

Jane Kennedy: My officials are providing a detailed response to my hon. Friend's points to be submitted to the Public Administration Committee by the end of the month. I shall place a copy in the Library of the House.

Lord Chancellors

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many former Lord Chancellors have continued to sit as judges after they ceased to be Lord Chancellor; and if he will list the number of cases tried by them in each of the last 20 years. [112814]

Mr. Lock *[holding answer 7 March 2000]:* Since 1980, four former Lord Chancellors have sat judicially after leaving office:

Lord Elwyn-Jones

Lord Hailsham of St. Marylebone

Lord Havers

Lord Mackay of Clashfern.

The appeals heard are listed in the table.

Number of appeals heard by former Lord Chancellors 1980–2000

Year	*Number of appeals heard*
1980	1
1981	5
1982	8
1983	8
1984	9
1985	7
1986	2
1987	4
1988	8
1989	1
1990	0
1991	0
1992	0
1993	0
1994	0
1995	0
1996	0
1997	5
1998	1
1999	6
2000	[1]4

[1] To date

Magistrates Courts (Safe Cells)

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if it is his policy that all magistrates courts shall have safe cells installed; and if he will make a statement. [113732]

Jane Kennedy *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* Custody areas in magistrates courts are not used for holding individuals overnight. They do not reflect, therefore, the design requirements of HM Prison Service's improved standard cell or "safe cell".

HEALTH

Generic Drugs

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he plans to publish the Government's response to the Health Committee's First report of Session 1999–2000 on the Cost and Availability of Generic Drugs to the National Health Service (HC105). [115217]

Mr. Denham: The Government's response to the Health Committee's Report on the Cost and Availability of Generic Drugs to the National Health Service is published today and copies will be placed in the Library.

Care in the Community

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to improve the quality of care in the community for people with learning disabilities; and if he will make a statement. [110799]

Mr. Hutton: Work is currently under way on developing a new national learning disability strategy. The strategy will look at a wide range of issues, including services for people with learning disabilities living in the community.

The National Health Service and local authorities have been asked to prepare Joint Investment Plans (JIPs) for people with learning disabilities from April 2001. The JIPs will provide a practical means for implementing the learning disability strategy and an excellent opportunity for the NHS and local authorities to consider how the flexibilities in the Health Act 1999 can best be used to improve outcomes for people with learning disabilities. Promoting independence and social inclusion are key themes of JIPs.

National Institute for Clinical Excellence

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many drugs have been evaluated by NICE; and how many are being evaluated. [111423]

Mr. Denham: The National Institute for Clinical Excellence's first work programme was announced on 4 November last year and includes 13 appraisals of drugs or groups of drugs. NICE has so far completed the fast track appraisal of the flu drug zanamivir (Relenza), and the remainder are currently being evaluated.

Contraceptive Drugs

Mrs. Ann Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was the cost to the NHS of emergency contraceptive drugs in each of the years 1990 to 1997. [113166]

Yvette Cooper: The available information is shown in the tables.

Table 1 shows the number of prescriptions and the net ingredient cost of emergency contraceptive drug (Schering PC4) dispensed in the community in England.

Table 2 shows the number of prescriptions and net ingredient cost of hormonal emergency contraceptives prescribed at Family Planning Clinics in England.

Table 1: Number of prescriptions and the net ingredient cost of emergency contraceptive drugs, (Schering PC4), prescribed in the community 1990 to 1997—England

Year	*Number (000s)*	*Net ingredient cost (£000)*
1990	189.6	274.5
1991	232.8	337.5
1992	272.2	391.8
1993	313.3	450.8
1994	363.8	520.8
1995	475.4	678.5
1996	565.6	900.2
1997	552.8	897.7

Notes:
1. The prescription information was obtained from the Prescription Cost Analysis (PCA) system. Please note that the data in 1990 are not strictly consistent with data from 1991 onwards. Figures for 1990 are based on fees and on a sample of 1 in 200 prescriptions dispensed by community pharmacists and appliance contractors only. Figures for 1991 onwards are based on items and cover all prescriptions dispensed by community pharmacists, appliance contractors dispensing doctors and prescriptions submitted by prescribing doctors for items personally administered. The data do not cover drugs dispensed in hospital, Family Planning Clinics, or on private prescriptions.
2. The net ingredient cost (NIC) is the basic cost of a drug and does not take account of discounts, dispensing costs, fees or prescription charges income.

Table 2: Occasions on which hormonal emergency contraceptives prescribed by Family Planning Clinics and the net ingredient cost, 1990 to 1997—England

	Hormonal emergency contraceptive	
Year	*Number (000s)*	*Assumed net ingredient cost[1] (£000)*
1990	45.5	63.7
1991	63.0	88.2
1992	76.7	107.4
1993	92.2	129.1
1994	112.1	156.9
1995	157.6	220.6
1996	193.7	271.2
1997	205.1	287.1

[1] Costs are calculated using the assumption that the cost of hormonal emergency contraceptives used in Family Planning Clinics is the same as that for Schering PC4 prescribed in the community.
Source:
KT31
Department of Health Statistics division SD2B

Psychiatric Secure Beds

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what (1) analysis he has made of the shortage of secure beds in psychiatric hospitals broken down by *(a)* region and *(b)* trust; what plans he has to meet the shortfall; and if he will make a statement; [113592]

(2) what have been the locations of the secure places in the mental health service provided in the last six months; what plans he has to increase the number in the next financial year; and if he will make a statement. [113564]

Mr. Hutton: As the consultation document on the findings of the National Bed Enquiry shows, there is a significant shortage of medium secure provision across the country.

The immediate priority is to use the additional investment through the National Health Service modernisation fund to enable the development of balanced mental health systems. In this first year, NHS Modernisation Fund investment has been targeted where the need is greatest. This has resulted in plans for significant numbers of extra secure beds.

During 1999–2000, £14.5 million of the Fund was allocated to improve overall secure capacity by increasing the number of medium and low secure places, and intensive care beds in mental health services. By April 2001 the intention is to have an extra 250 NHS secure places in addition to the 221 places funded in 1999–2000, exceeding the target set out in Mental Health National Service Framework of 300 extra places by April 2002.

I will write to the hon. Member giving details of the exact locations of where these places have been provided in the last six months.

Patient Referrals

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what rights general practitioners have to refer patients to hospitals other than those with service agreements with their primary care group on non-medical grounds; [113860]

(2) what arrangements have been made to remunerate hospitals for treating patients referred to them by general practitioners exercising their legal right to select a hospital with no service agreement with their local primary care group; [113855]

(3) what measures exist to discourage general practitioners from referring patients to hospitals other than those with service agreements with their primary care group; [113861]

(4) in what circumstances a patient may receive out of area treatment. [113857]

Mr. Denham: Long-term service agreements should reflect the views of all local general practitioners and their community health colleagues in primary care groups (PCGs). These arrangements do not impinge on the clinical responsibility of GPs and consultants to make appropriate referrals.

PCGs do not alter the National Health Service (General Medical Services) Regulations 1992 which state

> general practitioners may arrange for the referral of patients, as appropriate, for the provision of services.

The arrangements for out of area treatment (OATs) are set out in HSC 1999/117 "The New NHS: Guidance on Out of Area Treatment". Copies are available in the Library. The OAT arrangements are used where pre-arranged service agreements are impractical. They are primarily for emergency situations, but also for cases where a patient's personal circumstances, such as the need to recuperate with a faraway relative, require referral outside the normal arrangements.

There is no formal prior approval mechanism for referrals under the OAT arrangements. Local accountability arrangements should be in place to govern the way PCGs, primary care trusts and GPs refer patients in general. These may also include agreed protocols about referrals to highly specialised services and the way that the OAT arrangements are utilised.

Under the OAT arrangements, each NHS trust has a main commissioner. The main commissioner is funded for OATs through a non-recurrent adjustment to allocations as part of the overall process for setting cash limits for the financial year. NHS trusts are funded by their main commissioners.

Out-of-area Treatments

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many out-of-area treatments there have been since April 1999 *(a)* in England, *(b)* in West Hertfordshire Health Authority, *(c)* in East and North Hertfordshire Health Authority, *(d)* of patients resident in West Hertfordshire Health Authority area in other areas and *(e)* of patients resident in East and North Hertfordshire Health Authority area in other areas. [113852]

Mr. Denham: The monitoring of out-of-area treatments and other referrals is a matter for local management. This information is not collected centrally.

Drug Treatment Programmes

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what measures he plans to take to reduce the average waiting time for drug treatment programmes. [113955]

Mr. Denham: We have made available an additional £70.5 million over three years for health authorities and local authorities to expand treatment services for drug misusers. This is intended to support a step change in services, whereby waiting times will be cut and equity of access achieved. We have this week launched a campaign to recruit an additional 300 drugs counsellors for the health service, prison service, probation service, police, voluntary sector and local authorities.

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people are on waiting lists for methadone maintenance or withdrawal programmes; and what is the average waiting time for treatment. [113957]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is not available centrally. Information is available from the Regional Drug Misuse Databases on the number of users presenting to services for treatment and the drugs misused. Reliable information is not available centrally on waiting times for treatment. Revised clinical guidelines for the treatment of drug misusers were issued last year which recommend that methadone maintenance treatment should form an important part of drug misuse services. Substantial additional resources are being allocated to health authorities and local authorities to expand treatment services and thus cut waiting times and achieve equity of access to treatment services.

Clinical Indicators

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to publish *(a)* mortality rates and *(b)* frequency of performing medical procedures for (i) individual consultants and (ii) hospitals. [113850]

Mr. Denham: In 1999 the Department published six Clinical Indicators, which included headline indicator sets of mortality and hospital readmission rates by National Health Service trust. This information allowed NHS organisations to explore their position relative to other similar organisations and to take action to review variations in performance. A similar set of clinical indicators are due to be published in June 2000.

Section 64 Grants

Dr. Stoate: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will announce his decision on the awarding of section 64 grants for the coming financial years. [113841]

Mr. Hutton: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Mr. Hope) on 8 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 117W.

Dr. Stoate: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to increase the percentage allocation of section 64 grants to charities which specialise in long-term medical conditions. [113842]

Mr. Hutton: Around 20 per cent. of the section 64 budget for 1999–2000 was allocated to voluntary bodies that provide various forms of support for people with disabilities and medical conditions. The allocation of section 64 funds across the voluntary sector is kept under review in light of the Department's priorities.

Long-term Care

Mr. Burnett: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the Government plans to implement the report from the Royal Commission on long-term care for the elderly chaired by Sir Stewart Sunderland. [114740]

Mr. Hutton: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Belfast, South (Rev. Martin Smyth) on 1 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 321W.

Waiting Lists (Somerset)

Mr. Ashdown: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is his estimate of the number of people waiting for outpatient appointments at the *(a)* East Somerset Health Trust and *(b)* Taunton and Somerset Health Trust on 1 February for each of the years (i) 1995–96, (ii) 1996–97, (iii) 1997–98, (iv) 1998–99 and (v) 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [114180]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 14 March 2000]:* The Department does not collect information on the total number of people waiting for outpatient appointments on any given day. Because of the high turnover of outpatient waiting lists (75 per cent. of patients are seen within 13 weeks) it would not be a useful indicator to have the total number of waiting at the last day of the quarter.

Race Relations (Amendment) Bill

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the impact on *(a)* his Department, *(b)* health authorities, *(c)* NHS trusts and *(d)* NHS primary care groups of the extension to all duties of public authorities of the provisions on indirect discrimination contained in the Race Relations Act 1976. [114539]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 14 March 2000]:* The Department is currently working with lawyers to assess the impact of the extension to all duties of public authorities of the provisions on indirect discrimination contained in the Race Relations Act 1976. This includes implications for the Department, health authorities and National Health Service trusts and primary care groups.

Circumcision

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what guidance he has offered to health authorities on the priority which they should give to non-medical circumcision. [114538]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 14 March 2000]:* We issue guidance on national priorities for treatment. For all other services local health authorities and primary care groups are responsible for identifying local need and commissioning services in response to that need.

Beggars (Children)

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to deal with the problem of children being used for the purposes of begging; and if he will make a statement. [114723]

Mr. Hutton: We are very concerned about the exploitation of children, and are committed to ensuring that all children are safeguarded and protected from harm. The police can act to prevent children being used for begging under Section 4 of the Children and Young Persons Act 1933. Local authorities have a statutory duty under Section 47 of the Children Act 1989 to make inquiries where they have reasonable cause for concern that a child may need protection.

Children in Care

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the role of residential care as a placement option for looked-after children; and if he will make a statement. [114722]

Mr. Hutton: Residential child care remains a valued placement option for some children who are looked after by local authorities. About 6,300 children were living in children's homes at 31 March 1999. This figure is much the same as the previous year.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Minimum Income Guarantee

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to eliminate the backlog of payments of minimum income guarantee to pensioners in Norfolk. [113829]

Mr. Rooker: I understand that although my hon. Friend refers to Minimum Income Guarantee, for which there are no backlogs, the question should have referred to delays in payments arising because of NIRS2.

In Benefits Agency offices in Norwich and King's Lynn there are a total of 1,064 pension cases which were affected by the delayed implementation of NIRS2 that are still to be reviewed. Not all these cases, however, will result in the current rate of benefit being revised.

Where awards of pension cannot be immediately calculated using information from NIRS2 a clerical calculation is made. This arrangement will continue until all cases can be calculated using NIRS2. Extra staff have been made available for this.

Departmental Buildings

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list *(a)* the offices (i) owned and (ii) rented by his Department and its agencies in Scotland and *(b)* the number of staff *(y)* employed and *(z)* that can be accommodated (1) in total and (2) at each site. [114235]

Angela Eagle: This Department no longer owns nor rents any offices. Since the PRIME contract began in April 1998, the Department has purchased serviced office accommodation from our private sector partners, Trillium plc.

A list of the buildings in Scotland where Trillium provides serviced office accommodation to the Department, as the major occupier, is given in the table. The table gives details of the total number of staff employed and a breakdown, by business unit, of the number of staff at each site.

Information about the numbers of staff that could feasibly be accommodated within the space currently occupied is not held centrally but details of the total business square metres available to each business unit is provided in the table. An average square metre allocation per member of staff is also given. This is a "notional" figure, however, and takes no account of the purpose for which the accommodation is maintained nor of less populated areas such as public caller areas and reception areas.

Trillium are contractually obliged to help business units to plan the effective and efficient management of their own accommodation and are actively working with the Department to achieve a greater degree of sophistication in our space utilisation plans. The ultimate aim is to maximise the benefit of the accommodation for all users, while maintaining an effective service to the customer.

Property	*Occupier*	*Number of staff*	*Square metres/head*	*Total Business Square Metres (BSM)*
Benefits Agency				
Cumbernauld Fleming House	AD 12	109	20.40	2,224
Dumfries Irish Street	AD 12	107	12.70	1,359
Campbeltown Hall Street	AD 12	19	21.76	413
Glasgow Minerva Street	AD 12	0	0.00	910
Largs Brisbane Road	AD 12	5	19.84	99
Ayr Wallacetoun House	AD 12	209	12.48	2,608
Stranraer Ashwood Drive	AD 12	43	15.82	680
Stornaway Castle Street	AD 12	40	16.90	676
Wick Girnigoe Street	AD 12	51	14.97	763
48 Princes Street, Ardrossan	AD 12	0	0.00	75
Glasgow Benalder Street	AD 12	81	16.72	1,354
Fort William Tweeddale	AD 12	29	17.59	510
Glasgow Shettleston Road	AD 12	160	14.61	2,337
Glasgow Coustonholm Road	AD 12	216	14.91	3,220
Kirkintilloch Townhead	AD 12	2	38.40	77
Paisley Lonend	AD 12	256	11.81	3,023
Traill House Olrig Street, Thurso	AD 12	1	105	105
Girvan Montgomerie Street	AD 12	0	0.00	72
Glasgow Nitshill Road	AD 12	0	0.00	476
Johnstone William Street	AD 12	5	33.50	168
Cumnock Glaisnock Street	AD 12	7	22.57	158
Glasgow West Regent House	AD 12	222	12.57	2,790
Dingwall Castle Street	AD 12	0	0.00	73
Elgin Trinity Road	AD 12	60	20.41	1,225
Glasgow Herschell Street	AD 12	153	15.21	2,327
Glasgow Stepps Road	AD 12	98	26.06	2,554
Greenock Dalrymple Street	AD 12	187	13.93	2,606
Kilmarnock Woodstock Street	AD 12	102	17.88	1,823
Glasgow Paisley Road West (1479)	AD 12	122	6.97	850
Oban Mathieson House	AD 12	21	33.34	700
East Kilbride Murray House	AD 12	123	13.78	1,695
Glasgow Muslin Street	AD 12	130	17.40	2,262
Glasgow Mitchell Arcade	AD 12	16	22.22	355
Irvine Bank Street	AD 12	188	11.27	2,120
Clydebank Radnor House	AD 12	176	13.90	2,446
Inverness Church Street	AD 12	157	12.48	1,960
Glasgow Laurieston House	AD 12	227	16.49	3,744
Benbecula Druim Na H'Airde	AD 12	1	43.00	43
Glasgow Atlas Road	AD 12	199	16.68	3,319
Port Glasgow Scarlow Street	AD 12	30	53.77	1,613
Glasgow Maryhill Road	AD 12	103	21.67	2,232
Alexandria Mitchell Way	AD 12	2	53.65	107
Alloa Bank Street	AD 13	2	36.73	73
Coatbridge South Circular Road	AD 13	12	160.51	1,926
Airdrie Graham Street	AD 13	12	43.63	524

Property	Occupier	Number of staff	Square metres/head	Total Business Square Metres (BSM)
Aberdeen Greyfriars House	AD 13	222	15.24	3,384
Bathgate Whitburn Road	AD 13	252	11.25	2,834
Wishaw Alexander Street	AD 13	0	0.00	695
Shotts Dyfrig Street	AD 13	2	169.00	338
Peterhead Government Buildings	AD 13	54	19.96	1,078
Falkirk Heron House	AD 13	0	0.00	2,185
Leven Walton House	AD 13	52	28.85	1,500
Falkirk Heron House (PAU)	AD 13	119	1.34	159
Edinburgh Murrayburn House	AD 13	8	59.38	475
Hamilton Douglas Street	AD 13	140	13.64	1,909
Blairgowrie Leslie Street	AD 13	0	0.00	71
Edinburgh Argyle House	AD 13	206	51.53	10,615
Cowdenbeath Factory Road	AD 13	58	16.54	959
Units 9 and 10 Block 4 Blantyre Industrial Estate, DIRC	AD 13	17	55.24	939
Motherwell Fleminton House	AD 13	137	19.78	2,709
Glenrothes North House	AD 13	5	30.40	152
Bellshill Bowling Green St. (New Bldg.)	AD 13	10	155.50	1,555
Montrose Murray Street	AD 13	0	0.00	91
Dalkeith Eskdaill Street	AD 13	12	10.99	132
Coatbridge Unit 2	AD 13	103	4.86	501
Larkhall Union Street	AD 13	3	39.33	118
Wishaw Main Street	AD 13	4	81.50	326
Dunfermline Merchiston House	AD 13	72	17.10	1,231
Kirkcaldy Victoria Road	AD 13	120	22.61	2,713
Perth Mill Street	AD 13	83	20.49	1,700
Edinburgh Haymarket House	AD 13	11	32.28	355
Galashiels Market Street	AD 13	79	14.06	1,111
Stirling St. Ninian's Road	AD 13	126	16.68	2,102
Forfar Castle Street	AD 13	0	0.00	73
Dundee Magdalene Yard Road	AD 13	0	0.00	293
Arbroath Grant Road	AD 13	73	18.69	1,364
Edinburgh High Street—Portobello	AD 13	124	15.87	1,967
Lerwick Charlotte House	AD 13	18	28.78	518
Dundee Lindsay House	AD 13	238	13.52	3,219
Edinburgh Leith Lyndean House	AD 13	106	23.78	2,521
St. Andrews South Street	AD 13	0	0.00	88
Glasgow Northgate	AD 2	767	11.63	8,924
Glasgow Pentagon Centre	AD 2	36	47.75	1,719
Glasgow Corunna House (29)	DCBD	175	16.67	2,917
Glasgow Corunna House (39)	DCBD	63	41.03	2,585
Child Support Agency				
Aberdeen Greyfiars House	CSA	5	20.05	100
Bathgate Whitburn Road	CSA	0	0.00	91
Campbeltown Hall Street	CSA	1	26.18	26
Clydebank Radnor House	CSA	3	14.25	43
Cowdenbeath Factory Road	CSA	6	13.17	79
Cumbernauld Fleming House	CSA	1	43.07	43
Dumfries Irish Street	CSA	2	49.56	99
Dundee Lindsay House	CSA	9	17.05	153
Edinburgh Argyle House	CSA	37	13.78	510
Edinburgh High Street—Portobello	CSA	0	0.00	12
Elgin Trinity Road	CSA	2	20.12	40
Falkirk Antonine House	CSA	141	21.29	3,001
Falkirk Callendar Park	CSA	798	9.46	7,552
Falkirk Heron House	CSA	8	11.53	92
Galashiels Market Street	CSA	1	28.39	28
Glasgow Muslin Street	CSA	5	11.12	56
Glasgow Paisley Road West (1479)	CSA	61	12.08	737
Glasgow West Regent House	CSA	12	9.04	109
Greenock Dalrymple Street	CSA	10	24.81	248
Hamilton Douglas Street	CSA	11	18.34	202
Inverness Church Street	CSA	11	5.27	58
Irvine Bank Street	CSA	14	17.76	249
Oban Mathieson House	CSA	1	11.87	12
Paisley Lonend	CSA	4	23.37	93
Perth Mill Street	CSA	11	16.22	178
Peterhead Government Buildings	CSA	3	31.23	94
Stirling St. Ninian's Road	CSA	10	8.96	90
Stranraer Ashwood Drive	CSA	1	14.32	14
Wick Girnigoe Street	CSA	5	21.03	105

Property	Occupier	Number of staff	Square metres/head	Total Business Square Metres (BSM)
War Pensions Agency				
Aberdeen Greyfriars House	WPA	2	21.55	43.09
Dundee Lindsay House	WPA	0	0.00	26.11
Edinburgh Argyle House	WPA	7	20.46	143.23
Glasgow West Regent House	WPA	9	17.51	157.55
Information Technology Services Agency				
Buchanan House Livingstone	EDS[1]	[1]0	0.00	15,080
Livingstone Firth Road Store	EDS[1]	[1]0	0.00	1,923
Headquarters				
Edinburgh Argyle House	HQ	34	16.12	548
Appeals Service				
Wellington House Glasgow	AS	141	14.62	2,060.74
Total		8,543	—	171,823

AD 12—West of Scotland Area Directorate
AD 13—East of Scotland Area Directorate
AD 2—Chilterns Area Directorate
DCBD—Disability and Carers Benefits Directorate
Note:
No DSS staff—occupied by service provider, EDS staff

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Museums, Galleries and Archives Council

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has to ensure that the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council co-operates with local authorities and with their representative bodies. [114466]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 14 March 2000]:* One of the key strategic objectives of the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLAC) as set out in their consultation document of January 2000 is to develop new links and partnerships within and outside the sector.

I am certain that MLAC will explore the ways in which constructive relationships can be forged between the local authorities and their representative bodies and MLAC.

Regional Cultural Consortiums

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will publish the membership of each regional cultural consortium. [114451]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 14 March 2000]:* Membership of some Consortiums is not yet complete. Current membership is as follows:

Consortium/Members	
East of England Cultural Consortium	
Chair: Graham Creelman	Managing Director, Anglia TV
Amanda Arrowsmith	English Heritage Regional Commissioner
Peter Battrick	East of England Environment Forum
Jonathan Bowman	Chair, East of England Tourist Board
John Burgess	Chair, of Sport England (East)
Julian Campbell	Regional Screen Commissioner
Jeremy Clover	Suffolk County Council
Lorna Davies	Chair, COVER (Home Office sponsored voluntary sector network)
Barry George	Regional Library Service
Irene Macdonald	Kings Lynn and West Norfolk Borough Council
Anthony Rowlands	St. Albans City and District Council
Jacqualine Russell	East of England Development Agency
Wendy Silby	Cambridgeshire County Council
Hazel Simmons	Luton Borough Council
Elizabeth Stazicker	Chair, Regional Archives Council
Stuart Timperley	Chair, Eastern Arts
Marion Williams	Area Museums Council
East Midlands Cultural Consortium	
Chair: Venu Dhupa	Executive Director, Nottingham Playhouse
Sandra Barnes	South Northamptonshire District Council
Heather Broughton	Head of Museums and Arts, Leicestershire County Council
Ted Cassidy	Deputy Chairman, East Midlands Development Agency
Ian Croft	Lincolnshire County Council
Devon Daly	BBC Radio Nottingham
John Dickie	Northampton Borough Council
Tim Garfield	Regional Director, Sport England (East Midlands)
HRH Duke of Gloucester	English Heritage Regional Commissioner
David Johnson	Year of the Artist
David Lathrope	Assistant Director, Libraries, Archives and Information, Nottinghamshire County Council
Alan McAinish	Chief Executive, Castle Ashby, Northampton
Ian McLennan	Nottingham City Council
Ned Newitt	Leicester City Council
Christine Rose	Chesterfield Borough Council
Rachel Watson	County Archivist, Northamptonshire County Records Office
Janet Wootton	Independent Television Commission (Midlands)
Culture North East	
Chair: George Gill	Leader of Gateshead MBC
John Burton	Sedgefield District Council
Patrick Conway	Regional Library System
Jane Darbyshire	Chartered Architect
Sarah Drummond	Head of BBC Radio Newcastle
David Fleming	Director, Tyne and Wear Museums
Scott Henshall	Fashion designer
Deborah Hunter	Freelance film producer
George Loggie	Northern Arts
Winnie Lowes	Northumberland County Council
Hugh Morgan Williams	One North East
Bob Pendlebury	Northumbria Tourist Board
Liz Rees	Chief Archivist, Tyne and Wear Archive Services
Ione Rippeth	Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council

Consortium/Members	
Don Robson	Chair, Northern Sport
Jacqui Taylor	Director, The Image Group (advertising agency)
Sue Underwood	English Heritage Regional Commissioner
James Wright	Vice-Chancellor, Newcastle University
North West Cultural Consortium	
Chair: Felicity Goodey	Broadcaster
Liz Bruen	North West Arts Board
Paul Catcheside	Chair, North West Library System
John Commons	Manchester City Council
Colin Doyle	North West and Cumbria Tourist Boards
Jim Gristenthwaite	Chair, Regional Archives Council
Lloyd Grossman	North West Heritage Regional Commissioner
Guy Harkin	Bolton Metropolitan Borough Council
Pam Hayward	Chair, North West Museums Service
Stephen Matthews	Cumbria County Council
Graham Morgan	Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council
David Newton	Chair, North West Sport
Peter Pimbley	Wyre Borough Council
Kath Reade	Regional Development Agency
Kath Robinson	Manchester City Council
Brenda Smith	Managing Director, Granada TV
South East Cultural Consortium	
Chair: Sir David Watson	Director, University of Brighton
Mary Baldwin	Aylesbury Vale District Council
Fred Bullock	Regional Library System
Richard Childs	Chief Archivist, West Sussex
David Dolman	Sport England
Freddie Emery-Wallis	Hampshire County Council
Cheryl Hall	Kent County Council
Jon Hartley	Reading Borough Council
Heather Hawker	Surrey County Council
Mary McAnally	Regional Development Agency (Managing Director, Meridian TV)
Kirsty McLeod	English Heritage Regional Commissioner
Stephen Phillips	Regional Arts Board
Robert Taylor	South Eastern Museums Service
Roger Thomas	Regional Tourist Board
South West Cultural Consortium	
Chair: Adrian Vinken	Chief Executive, Theatre Royal (Plymouth) Ltd.
Paul Brough	City Archivist, Plymouth and West Devon Record Office
Robin Bush	Somerset County Council
Sue Clifford	Director, Common Ground Environment and Countryside
Caroline Dudley	Chair, South West Museums Council
Pauline Dyer	Head of Libraries and Heritage, Wiltshire County Council
Lady Elizabeth Gass	English Heritage Regional Commissioner
Edward Gillespie	Managing Director, Cheltenham Racecourse
Alan Livingstone	Principal, Falmouth College for Art; Chair, South West Arts
Andrew May	Bristol City Council
Jeremy Payne	Managing Director, HTV West
Stella Pirie	Director, Regional Development Agency; Chair, Endeavour International
Pat Roberts	Bristol City Council; Vice Chair, Westcountry Tourist Board
Norman Thompson	Restormel District Council
Viv Vines	Chair, South West Sports
West Midlands Cultural Consortium	
Chair: Baroness Christine Crawley	Member of the House of Lords
Derrick Anderson	Chief Executive, Wolverhampton Metropolitan Borough Council
Jeff Carpenter	West Midlands Regional Museums Council
Stephen Clee	Worcester City and District Council
Maureen Compton	Stafford Borough Council
John Craven	BBC Birmingham (rural issues)
Philip Davis	English Heritage Regional Commissioner
Elizabeth Edmondson	Wolverhampton Metropolitan Borough Council
John Fletcher	Coventry City Council
Mike Freeman	Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council
Mary Heaney	West Midlands Regional Library System
Jean Holder	Stratford-on-Avon District Council
Peter Jenkinson	New Walsall Art Gallery
Christine King	Advantage West Midlands
William Lawrence	Heart of England Tourist Board
Sarah Montgomery	General Manager, Warwick Castle
David Moorcroft	Chief Executive, UK Athletics

Consortium/Members	
Nina Nannar	BBC Midlands Today
Rod Natkiel	Regional Arts Board
Carl Rice	Birmingham City Council
Gwyn Roberts	West Midlands Sports Board
Richard Slawson	Associated Architects
Ian Squires	Managing Director, Central Region Carlton Broadcasting
Roger Vaughan	Chair of Regional Archives Council
Clare Venables	Royal Shakespeare Company Education Officer
Yorkshire and the Humber Cultural Consortium	
Chair: Chris Heinitz	Chair of Local Government Association Cultural Services Executive
David Ashton	Regional Assembly for Yorkshire and Humberside
Rita Britton	Pollyanna Ltd.
Tina Davy	Leeds City Council
David Gemmell	Regional Tourist Board
Richard Gregory	Managing Director, Yorkshire Television
Sue Knowles	Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council
Reg Littleboy	Association of Yorks and Humber Library Services
Pat Marsh	Harrogate Borough Council
Richard Morris	English Heritage Regional Commissioner
Christopher Price	Regional Arts Board
Peter Price	Sport England
Mike Pye	Area Museums Council
Novlette Rennie	National Sports Development Co-ordinator for Sporting Equals
Liz Rymer	Yorkshire Screen Commission
Alan Smith	North Lincolnshire Council
Margaret Talbot	Leeds Metropolitan University
Margaret Turner	Regional Archives Council
Phil Wood	Manager, Humberside Creative Town Initiative

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the objectives of the regional cultural consortiums and make a statement on progress to date in meeting these objectives. [114452]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 14 March 2000]:* The aims of the eight Regional Cultural Consortiums are to:

(i) Represent and champion the whole spectrum of cultural and creative interests in each region, including tourism and sport;

(ii) forge links across this spectrum, encouraging a cross-cutting approach and creating a common vision expressed in a cultural strategy for the region; and

(iii) assist in improving the delivery of cultural services.

The Consortiums have made an excellent start towards meeting these aims. Their diverse membership, recruited from across the range of cultural, creative and local government bodies in each region will enable them to represent and bring together effectively all their sectors and all the consortiums are currently working towards producing regional cultural strategies.

Athletics Stadium

Mr. Faber: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when the proposal for a national athletics stadium was first discussed by his Department with *(a)* UK Athletics and *(b)* Sport England. [113944]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 14 March 2000]:* The concept of a national athletics stadium emerged in discussions with UK Athletics, the British Olympic Association and Sport England about non-Wembley options for staging athletics events shortly after the announcement made to the House by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on 1 December 1999, *Official Report*, columns 305–13.

Mr. Faber: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what representations he has received since 3 March from Sport England on the subject of a possible venue for the 2005 World Athletics Championships. [113943]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 14 March 2000]:* Sport England have submitted an analysis of the cost and design issues related to the brief for a venue for the 2005 World Athletics Championships proposed by UK Athletics along with an evaluation of potential sites against criteria discussed and agreed between my Department, the Government Office for London, UK Sport, UK Athletics, the 2005 Bid Team and the BOA.

Mr. Faber: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what financial and other support he proposes to give to support bids for venues for major athletics events in England. [113935]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 14 March 2000]:* My Department offers, and will continue to offer, full support to the work being taken forward by Sport England, UK Sport, UK Athletics and the British Olympic Association to establish a venue for major athletics events in England. The Government's decision not to proceed with the Wembley athletics option, combined with the extra £20 million which the Football Association proposes is returned, will create a real opportunity for athletics to develop a permanent legacy for future generations of UK athletes and one which will not rule out a future Olympic bid.

National Stadium Monitoring Committee

Mr. Faber: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if representatives of English Partnerships were members of the National Stadium Monitoring Committee; and if he will make a statement. [113936]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 14 March 2000]:* Representatives of English Partnerships did not attend the first meeting of the Committee on 17 February. Following informal discussions between my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and the Chief Executive of English Partnerships in February 1999 about the concept of establishing a Task Force to co-ordinate the regeneration around the stadium, representatives of English Partnerships were invited to attend subsequent meetings held on 20 May 1999 and 15 July 1999.

National Sports Museum

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions he has had since May 1997 about the establishment of a national sports museum. [113736]

Kate Hoey: The Secretary of State and the previous Minister for Sport had two discussions about a proposal for a Museum of British Sport on London's South Bank, and one on a proposal for a National Museum of Sport near the Britannia Stadium, Stoke-on-Trent.

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what representations he has received since May 1997 from individuals and organisations requesting that a national sports museum be established. [113735]

Kate Hoey: My Department has received three representations: One for a museum of British Sport on London's South Bank, one for a National Museum of Sport near the Britannia Stadium, Stoke-on-Trent and one for a Museum of Sport and a new sporting arena in Coventry.

Sports Links (Schools)

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what action he is taking to encourage links between schools and local sports clubs; and if he will make a statement. [113656]

Kate Hoey: The Government are committed to encouraging links between schools and sport clubs that have quality junior sections.

A role of the new School Sports Co-ordinators will be to promote links between schools and clubs. Sports Colleges, supported by the Youth Sport Trust, are beginning to develop excellent models of good practice of links between primary schools, secondary schools and sports clubs.

New Millennium Experience Company

Mr. Page: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will place in the Library the financial accounts of the Millennium Experience as at the end of January. [R] [113116]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* The New Millennium Experience Company's Annual Report and Financial Statements for the period 1 April–31 December 1999 are due to be published by 30 June. The full year of operation will be covered in the Annual Report and Financial Statements for the period 1 January 2000 to 31 December 2000 which will be published in 2001. I will arrange for copies to be placed in the House Libraries.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the creditors of the New Millennium Experience Company whose bills are disputed; when such bills were invoiced; and the amount in dispute in each case. [114118]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 10 March 2000]:* I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave him on 10 March 2000, *Official Report,* column 838W.

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what are the terms and conditions of contract of new *(a)* directors and *(b)* officers appointed to the New Millennium Experience Company since 1 January; and if he will provide details of all financial payments and benefits to be provided in each case. [110475]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 17 February 2000]:* I refer my hon. and learned Friend to the reply I gave the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) on 28 February 2000, *Official Report,* column 90W. No other directors have been appointed since 1 January. NMEC will continue to publish details of Directors' remuneration and benefits in its Annual Report and Financial Statements.

Free Television Licences

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on his proposals for the rescinding of free TV licences in households where the sole person aged 75 years or over dies; what period of time will be given after such a death before members of the household are informed of the rescinding of the free licence; who will be responsible for informing the household of the decision to rescind; and what consideration he has given to introducing a grace period in such cases. [112852]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 7 March 2000]:* The Government have made no such proposals. A free television licence issued to a person aged 75 or over will not be rescinded but will remain in force until it expires, even if that person dies and there is no other person of qualifying age within that household.

Millennium Dome

Dr. Brand: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many accounts and what value of accounts are *(a)* outstanding and *(b)* under dispute between suppliers to the Millennium Dome and the management company. [113896]

Janet Anderson: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave the hon. Member for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth) on 10 March 2000, *Official Report,* column 838W.

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what recent discussions he has had with zone sponsors in the Dome about access by the public. [111376]

Janet Anderson: I have had no recent discussions with any sponsors of the Millennium Experience exhibit zones about access by the public.

Government Policy

Mr. Faber: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if the statements in paragraph 27 of his Department's memorandum to the Culture, Media and Sport Committee of December 1998 (HC124-II, Session 1998–99, page 169) represent the Government's current policy. [113779]

Kate Hoey: The statement in paragraph 27 of my Department's memorandum to the Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee Inquiry into Staging Major Events remains Government policy. We recognise that a flexible approach is needed to ensure that governing bodies are able to put forward a bid which maximises Britain's chances of securing the event in question.

Subtitling

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what the new targets are for subtitling on *(a)* BBC and *(b)* other digital television services. [114246]

Janet Anderson: The provision of subtitling on BBC services is a matter for the BBC Governors and their policy is at least to match the targets set for any other broadcaster. The BBC has recently increased its targets for its new digital channels to 50 per cent. of subtitling within five years and 100 per cent. within 10 years. For other digital television services, the Broadcasting Act 1996 requires digital terrestrial broadcasters to provide subtitles on at least 50 per cent. of their services within 10 years of the start of the service. We will be beginning a review of this target in early summer.

Peat Compost

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what steps he is taking to phase out the use of peat compost in gardens *(a)* owned and *(b)* tended by his Department; and if he will make a statement. [110728]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The gardens owned by or in the care of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport are managed and tended by more than one body. The steps taken to phase out the use of peat compost by each of those bodies are as follows:

(i) Historic Royal Palaces, which manages the unoccupied Historic Royal Palaces, no longer uses peat to condition soil for planting. However, it does use a moss peat based compost for growing plants in its nursery at Hampton Court Palace. It has carried out trials of non-peat based products but has found them unsatisfactory in terms of both performance and cost. HRP will continue to try alternatives to peat based products in the nursery, and should something be found that performs well and is affordable, it will continue to use it.

(ii) The Royal Household, which manages the occupied Royal Palaces, has been using peat-free compost since August 1999 and will continue to do so.

(iii) The Royal Parks Agency, which manages the eight Royal Parks, avoids using peat compost in the Royal Parks unless there is no effective, horticultural alternative to doing so.

(iv) English Heritage, which manages properties in the care of the Secretary of State, seeks to avoid the use of peat wherever possible, and encourages its gardening staff to use peat alternatives.

Sport in Schools

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) when he last met representatives of the Central Council for Physical Recreation to discuss sport in schools; [114441]

(2) when he last met representatives of the National Playing Fields Association to discuss sport in schools; [114440]

(3) when he last met representatives of the Local Government Association to discuss sport in schools. [114439]

Kate Hoey: I meet all of these organisations regularly to discuss a number of issues relating to sport including sport in schools. I met the Local Government Association most recently on 8 March, the National Playing Fields Association on 15 February and attended the Central Council for Physical Recreation conference on 8 December 1999.

Multiplex Digital Radio

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if it is his policy that multiplex digital radio should extend diversity and choice within the radio broadcasting spectrum. [114476]

Janet Anderson: Government policy is to ensure plurality and diversity of national and local digital radio services, which cater for the tastes and interests of a broad cross section of the UK population, subject to constraints on spectrum available for new services. Digital radio is at an early stage of development and present spectrum allocations enable only one national multiplex for BBC services and one national commercial multiplex operated by Digital One. The Radio Authority is continuing to advertise one local digital multiplex licence a month during 2000.

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if the restrictions that apply to applications for digital multiplex broadcast licences extend to the provision of programme streams within the multiplex. [114475]

Janet Anderson: The Broadcasting Act 1990 (as amended by the Broadcasting Act 1996) disqualifies certain persons from holding licences to provide digital programme services or digital sound programme services. However, it may be possible for persons disqualified under the religious ownership rules to provide programmes for a licensee, subject to compliance with the appropriate Independent Television Commission and Radio Authority Codes.

CABINET OFFICE

Regional Policy

Mr. Norman: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what representations the Performance and Innovation Unit has received in relation to its recommendation that a new unit be set up to co-ordinate the Government's approach to the regions. [113159]

Mr. Stringer: The PIU consulted extensively and received representations from a wide range of interests in the course of its study on the role of central Government at regional and local level. The PIU's report was endorsed by Ministers and published on 16 February; and views on its conclusions are still being received.

Press Office

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if he will list the *(a)* Civil Service grade and *(b)* areas of responsibility of each of the staff employed in the Cabinet Office Press Office. [114751]

Mr. Stringer: The Cabinet Office Press Office is arranged as follows:

Senior Civil Servant—Director of Information

One Band A—Head of News and Deputy Director of Information

One Band A and one Band 2—Minister for the Cabinet Office, Duchy of Lancaster, Security and Intelligence Matters, Social Exclusion policies

Two Band B2s—Minister of State for the Cabinet Office, Better Government for Older People, Central IT Unit, Performance and Innovation Unit and Public Service Delivery

Two Band B2s—The Government's policy on the misuse of drugs and the UK Anti-Drugs Co-ordinator and his Deputy

Three Band B2s—Parliamentary Secretary—Cabinet Office (Graham Stringer), Regulatory Impact Unit, Civil Service Issues, Charter Mark and Centre for Policy and Management Studies

One Band A and two Band B2s—Ministerial Group on Biotechnology and Genetic Modification and Co-ordination of the Government's policy

One Band A and two Band B2s—Leader of the House of Lords, Women's Issues and Modernisation of the House of Lords. Minister of State for the Cabinet Office (Lord Falconer) including his responsibilities for the Millennium Dome and Active Communities

One Band A and one Band B2—Leader of the House of Commons, Parliamentary Secretary—Privy Council Office (Paddy Tipping), Commissioner for Public Appointments, Ministers' and MPs' pay, Ministerial Code, Government Car and Despatch Agency (GCDA), Non-Departmental Public Bodies (NDPBs) and Honours

Two Band B2s—Publication and Publicity

One Band B2—Forward Planning and Finance.

In addition the following staff are employed to support the above press offices: One B2, three B1s, three C2s and one C1.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what was the budget for running the Cabinet Office Press Office in each of the last 10 financial years. [114752]

Mr. Stringer: The actual cost for running the Cabinet Office Press Office, including all staff costs, running costs and capital spend, has been:

Year	*£*
1995–96	585,110
1996–97	1,562,000
1997–98	1,322,560
1998–99	1,640,480
1999–2000	[1]1,918,000

[1] Allocated Budget

Note:
Figures for previous years are not available

The figures have been rising steadily due to the increased range of Cabinet Office responsibilities.

Since 1996–97 the Cabinet Office Press Office has administered a regional network of press officers to carry out work on behalf of central Government.

GM Communications Unit

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will make a statement on the role of the GM Communications Unit. [114753]

Mr. Stringer: The GM Communications Unit is staffed by civil servants. They work strictly in accordance with the principles set out in the Guidance on the work of the Government Information Service.

The unit co-ordinates and liaises with the key Government Departments which have policy interests on GM issues. They also act as a first port of call for journalists. By setting up the communications unit the Government have positively responded to a key recommendation from the House of Commons Select Committee on Science and Technology, that the Government provide leadership in the GM debate.

More recently (7 March 2000) the Agriculture Select Committee published a report calling for confusion over GM issues to be replaced by rational debate and education. The unit aims to help meet that challenge.

The unit's role is to communicate Government policy. It is stated Government policy to raise public understanding of the facts about GM issues.

Regional Initiatives

Mr. Norman: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office which of her Department's regional initiatives will come under the remit of the new unit to co-ordinate the Government's approach to the regions. [113154]

Mr. Stringer: The PIU report "Reaching Out: The Role of Central Government at Regional and Local Level" sets out the intended key functions of the co-ordinating unit—these are listed on page 115 of the report, copies of which have been placed in the Libraries of the House.

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 16 March 2000

PRIME MINISTER

Welfare Reform

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the Prime Minister what further progress the Government have made in their welfare reform programme; and if he will make a statement. [115348]

The Prime Minister: Welfare reform is central to this government's agenda of modernisation, and to our goals of tackling poverty and social exclusion. Today I am announcing plans for the next stage of welfare reform which will radically change the way the Government provides support for people of working age. The aim is to accelerate the move from a welfare system that primarily provide passive support to one that provides active support to help people become more independent, based on work for those who can and security for those who cannot.

During 2001 a brand new, modern agency will be established with a clear focus on work. This will draw together the Employment Service and the parts of the Benefits Agency which support people of working age. It will deliver a single, integrated service to benefit claimants of working age and to employers. The agency will continue and develop the partnership approach to working with local authorities and the private and voluntary sectors which the Government have adopted in implementing their welfare to work policies.

Already the New Deal has helped around 260,000 people back into work. The national minimum wage and tax credits are helping work pay. And the ONE pilots are showing how, working together, the Benefits Agency and the Employment Service can provide a radically improved service to clients and employers alike. The new agency will have a new culture, and will be firmly focused on helping people to become independent. It will help further to embed a culture of rights and responsibilities within the welfare system. Personal advisers will steer clients towards work or training, help them claim the benefits they need, and provide additional support tailored to their needs. Help will be directed to those that need it, while fraud will be squeezed out of the system.

The agency will provide a proactive and responsive service to employers—helping people to find jobs and helping employers to fill their vacancies with the right people.

The agency will also help and support working age people who are out of the labour market for whatever reason. A single agency will provide a better and more responsive benefits service to all people of working age, tailored to individual needs and asking the question "what can we do to help you become independent".

The agency will provide a single point of contact for all working age people to access the following benefits: Jobseeker's Allowance, Income Support, Incapacity Benefit, Severe Disablement Allowance, Maternity Allowance, Widows' Benefit, Industrial Injury Disablement Benefits and Invalid Care Allowance. The administration of the Social Fund is under review.

The new agency will be in the front line of the drive to modernise government. It will have the technology to provide the most up-to-date service to more than 10 million customers each year. Job vacancies, information about services and benefits and availability of child care will all be on hand at the press of a button. Located in high streets and town centres across the country this new service will represent the face of 21st century government. Over time the new agency will produce efficiency savings compared with the current arrangements.

Design and development of the new agency will be carried out jointly by the Secretaries of State for Education and Employment and for Social Security. I am asking them to establish the agency as soon as possible in 2001 so that, alongside the new service for pensioners announced yesterday, it can start to deliver our vision of a modern welfare state and contribute to reducing poverty and expanding opportunity.

Local Elections

Mr. Darvill: To ask the Prime Minister what advice has been given to civil servants on the conduct of Government business during the forthcoming elections to the Greater London Authority and to local councils on 4 May. [115349]

The Prime Minister: The Government have issued guidance to civil servants on the principles which they should observe in relation to the conduct of Government business in the period before the forthcoming elections.

The guidance stresses that civil servants should conduct themselves in accordance with the Civil Service Code and is based on the need to maintain political impartiality of the Civil Service and the need to ensure that public resources are not used for party political purposes.

The guidance will come into force on 13 April.

Copies of the guidance have been placed in the Libraries of the House, and are also available from the Vote Office.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) Bill

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the annual number of convicted offenders who would receive a shorter custodial sentence than at present if the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No. 2) Bill became law; how many offenders convicted of each type of offence would receive shorter sentences; what estimate he has made of the average reduction in the length of sentence *(a)* received and *(b)* served; and if he will make a statement. [112532]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 2 March 2000]:* It is estimated that 5,400 convicted offenders would receive shorter custodial sentences because their cases would be dealt with in the magistrates courts. This covers all categories of either-way offences. It is also assumed that the average reduction in the length of sentence *(a)* received would be 4.6 months and *(b)* served would be 2.3 months.

Senator Pinochet

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the cost to the Metropolitan police of the presence of Senator Augusto Pinochet in Surrey for 17 months; what discussions he has had with the Chief Constable of Surrey relating to such costs incurred by his force; and what payments have been made by his Department to each force in reimbursement of those costs. [113559]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information as regards the estimated cost to the Metropolitan police of the presence of Senator Augusto Pinochet in the United Kingdom cannot be provided for security reasons.

In relation to the costs incurred by Surrey Constabulary, the Chief Constable asked for additional financial assistance in January. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary approved a special payment in the financial years 1998–99 of £200,000 for Surrey police. There was no commitment to provide any further assistance.

No special payment was provided to the Metropolitan police for their involvement with the policing of Senator Pinochet.

Beggars

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps he is taking to deal with beggars and squeegee merchants on the streets of Croydon. [114259]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis informs me that there have been a number of operations during the past year in the Croydon area to address these problems and that his officers will continue to respond appropriately to any complaints.

The Commissioner has also advised me that he proposes next month to launch a drive to reduce street crime. Under the new initiative, specialist task forces will be introduced to assist boroughs with particular problems. Aggressive begging, which is intimidatory and often uses force, will be part of the focus of this initiative.

Crime and Disorder Act 1998

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what response he has had to his letter to local authorities and chief constables asking for comment on the operation of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 with respect to *(a)* child curfews and *(b)* anti-social behaviour orders; [114532]

(2) how many child curfews have been agreed using powers given by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998; [114531]

(3) what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the child curfew powers; and if he will make a statement. [114533]

Mr. Charles Clarke: No applications have been received from local authorities to establish child curfew schemes under section 14 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary wrote on 15 October 1999 to local authority chief executives and chief officers of police about the provisions in the 1998 Act to tackle problems caused by unruly and anti-social behaviour.

Responses have been received from a number of local authorities and police forces and from professional and staff associations. They are being studied with a view in the operation of the Crime and Disorder Act provisions. An action group has also been established, involving local authority representatives and others, to consider issues relating to the use of anti-social behaviour orders. Regional seminars arranged by the group are currently being held and provide an opportunity to share good practice.

Kerb Crawlers

Mr. Fabian Hamilton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what assessment he has made of the impact on re-offending of the kerb crawlers re-education programme in West Yorkshire; [114563]

(2) if he will introduce a nationwide kerb crawlers re-education programme. [114562]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Home Office have not been involved in the Kerb Crawlers Rehabilitation Programme in West Yorkshire. We have, however, received a copy of the evaluation of the programme carried out by West Yorkshire Police.

We hope to discuss the programme with interested parties to see what lessons can be learned but we have no current plans to introduce such a programme nationwide.

Harmondsworth Detention Centre

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what disciplinary action has been taken against staff at Harmondsworth Detention Centre as a result of incidents involving injuries to detainees over the period 1 March 1999 and 29 February 2000. [114432]

Mrs. Roche: No disciplinary action has been taken against staff at Harmondsworth Detention Centre between 1 March 1999 and 29 February 2000, as a result of any incidents involving injuries to detainees.

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will publish the staffing structure of the Harmondsworth Detention Centre, including the ratio of staff on duty to detainees. [114433]

Mrs. Roche: The staffing structure and ratio of staff to detainees employed by the contractor at Harmondsworth is commercially sensitive information and it would not be appropriate to publish it.

The contractor was appointed after a competitive tendering exercise and one of the factors taken into account during the evaluation was the proposal for staff coverage.

City Status

Jane Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the criteria, including those related to population, for a town to be eligible to receive city status; and if he will make a statement. [114711]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: City status is an honour conferred by the Sovereign by Letters Patent. Population size is among the matters taken into account in submitting advice to Her Majesty, there are no specific eligibility criteria.

Baboons

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how long the journey time was on each occasion wild-caught baboons were imported into the UK in *(a)* 1998 and *(b)* 1999; and if he will make a statement; [114106]

(2) if he will make it his policy to end the importation of wild-caught baboons for research; and if he will make a statement; [114107]

(3) when approval was last given for baboons to be imported into the UK; and if he will make a statement; [114104]

(4) when an inspector from his Department last visited Mr. Richard Mann's wildlife trading premises near Nairobi, Kenya; and if he will make a statement; [114108]

(5) how many wild-caught baboons from Kenya have been imported into the UK for research during *(a)* 1998 and *(b)* 1999; and if he will make a statement. [114105]

Mr. Mike O'Brien *[holding answer 14 March]:* All but a small number of primates used in scientific procedures in the United Kingdom are captive-bred and not taken from the wild. Under measures introduced in 1996, authority to use wild-caught primates will be given only if the applicant can establish exceptional and specific justification. Such cases are very rare. We must also be satisfied that the applicant has made (and continues to make) appropriate efforts to find suitable captive-bred primates. All applications to use wild-caught primates are referred to the Animal Procedures Committee for its advice.

The last authorisation was given in 1998 for up to 40 wild-caught baboons to be imported into the United Kingdom for use in scientific research into aspects of xenotransplantation. The first part of this consignment—28 animals—arrived from Kenya in May 1999. No more have been imported since then and none were imported in 1998.

The work with these baboons is to improve transplant procedures. Xenotransplantation includes the transplantation of organs such as hearts and kidneys between different animal species and from animals into humans. Organ transplantation is a hugely successful medical procedure—one that has transformed the lives of tens of thousands of people across the world. The critical shortage of human donor organs has led scientists to investigate xenotransplantation as an alternative potential source of organs. This is policy on which the Department of Health leads. Baboons are used in heart xenotransplantation procedures because of the need to use primates of suitable body weight to sustain the size of the heart. They are extremely difficult to breed in captivity. Captive-bred animals are therefore available on the world market only in very limited numbers, and United Kingdom researchers have been unable to become "preferred clients" of the captive-bred sources.

The total journey time for the May 1999 consignment was 34 hours from placing the animals in transport crates at the supplier's premises in Kenya to their receipt at the designated establishment in the United Kingdom. All of the animals arrived in good condition.

The Inspectorate last visited Richard Mann's premises in Kenya in November 1995. This visit revealed that standards were not satisfactory and the Secretary of State was advised that approval of this establishment would be withheld unless and until substantial improvements were made to the accommodation and care offered to wild-caught baboons destined for supply to the United Kingdom.

By February 1997 documentary evidence confirmed that the necessary improvements had been made and the establishments "approved status" was restored. Animals destined for the United Kingdom are group-housed in large, modern outdoor enclosures. The Home Office is aware that the "sub-standard" areas remain in use for animals for supply to non-United Kingdom customers. We cannot regulate premises in Kenya used to accommodate animals that will never be shipped to the United Kingdom. Confirmation has been obtained that all animals destined for shipment to the United Kingdom have been held in the improved accommodation.

Crown Dependencies (Financial Regulation)

Maria Eagle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the implementation by the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man of the Edwards report on Financial Regulation in the Crown Dependencies. [115188]

Mr. Straw: Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man have produced reports setting out the steps that they have taken and are continuing to take to give effect to the conclusions of the Edwards Report. I have today placed copies of the Islands' reports in the Library.

I am encouraged by the positive and constructive way in which the authorities in the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man have responded to the challenge of the Edwards Report. Although the Report placed them in the top division of offshore centres, the authorities in all three jurisdictions have been implementing programmes of further improvement in their systems of financial regulation which had begun even before the publication of the Report in November 1998. These programmes are still being taken forward; the islands recognise that the process of improving financial regulation must be a continuing one that works for the benefits of their economies and will strengthen the integrity of offshore financial centres.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many appeals against refusal to grant asylum are waiting to be heard; and how many of them were lodged in the last six months and in each preceding six month period. [114682]

Mrs. Roche: At the end of February 2000, a total of 5,615 asylum appeals were outstanding at the Immigration Appellate Authority. This figure includes 3,580 Adjudicator appeals, 310 applications for leave to appeal to the Tribunal and 1,725 appeals to the Tribunal.

Information on the number of appeals against asylum decisions on a quarterly basis, in 1998 and 1997, is given in Table 8.1 of Home Office Statistical Bulletin "Asylum Statistics United Kingdom, 1998", a copy of which is available in the Library. Information covering earlier years can be found in previous editions of the Statistical Bulletin.

It is planned that quarterly figures for the calendar year 1999 will be included in the next Asylum Bulletin which is due to be published in June of this year.

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the criteria for detention of asylum seekers at Oakington Reception Centre. [115345]

Mrs. Roche: Oakington Reception Centre will strengthen our ability to deal quickly with asylum applications, many of which prove to be unfounded. In addition to the existing detention criteria, applicants will be detained at Oakington where it appears that their application can be decided quickly, including those which may be certified as manifestly unfounded. Oakington will consider applications from adults and families with children, for whom separate accommodation is being provided, but not from unaccompanied minors. Detention will initially be for a period of about seven days to enable applicants to be interviewed and an initial decision to be made. Legal advice will be available on site.

If the claim cannot be decided in that period, the applicant will be granted temporary admission or, if necessary in line with existing criteria, moved to another place of detention. If the claim is refused, a decision about further detention will similarly be made in accordance with existing criteria. Thus, detention in this latter category of cases will normally be to effect removal or where it has become apparent that the person will fail to keep in contact with the Immigration Service.

Mr. Darvill: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what support arrangements exist for asylum seekers to submit material in support of their claim for asylum. [115346]

Mrs. Roche: The White paper 'Fairer, Faster and Firmer—A Modern Approach to Immigration and Asylum' published in July 1998, standardised the period allowed for asylum seekers to submit further material after a substantive interview at five days. We have decided that some adjustment to this policy is needed to deliver faster asylum decisions, while at the same time ensuring that asylum seekers have a proper opportunity to establish their claim.

In the case of applications considered at Oakington Reception Centre, we are arranging for the Refugee Legal Centre and Immigration Advisory Service to provide legal advice on-site. It has been agreed with those organisations that the consideration process should operate so that such advice may be provided both before and after the substantive interview. Other than in very exceptional circumstances, the substantive interview will take place on the third day at the centre and so there will normally be two more days after the interview in which to submit additional representations. The five day period for submission of supporting material will in these cases therefore commence as soon as the asylum application has been made, rather than from the date of the substantive interview.

We have also decided that the five day period for submission of further supporting evidence will not apply to asylum claims where no substantive interview is conducted at the time the claim is made. In those cases, applicants are issued a Statement of Evidence form which they are required to submit to the Immigration and Nationality Directorate within 14 days. We think this gives applicants a reasonable period to set out their claim, and time to seek legal representation if they wish. Where an application is not granted on the basis of the evidence in the Statement of Evidence form, applicants are interviewed and in these cases a decision will be made immediately after this substantive interview.

The five day standard period for applicants to submit further material after substantive interview, as set out in the White Paper, will continue to apply in all other cases.

Discretion will be exercised to permit an extension of the applicable period for the making of post interview representations where exceptional circumstances require—for example, where possible torture victims are identified.

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to review the policy of considering applications for permission to work by asylum seekers who have been in the UK for six months or more; and if he will make a statement. [114566]

Mrs. Roche: As we announced in the information document "Asylum Seekers Support", which we published in March last year, we intend to end, with effect from 3 April 2000, that element of the employment concession whereby asylum seekers who are appealing against the refusal of asylum are, on application, granted permission to work. However, we have no plans at present to withdraw the remainder of the employment concession whereby asylum seekers who have not received a first determination of their case within six months are, on application, given permission to work. We will, however, be keeping this under review, particularly with regard to whether, in the light of progress in processing all asylum claims within an average of six months, such a concession can continue to be justified.

Prison Service

Mr. Hope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if Prison Service areas are to be reorganised so as to improve alignment of criminal justice boundaries. [115347]

Mr. Boateng: The response to a consultation document issued in December 1999 was overwhelmingly supportive of Prison Service proposals to continue its predominantly geographic structure but to re-align its boundaries so that they match those of police areas and planned probation areas, the English regions and Wales. From April 2000, 12 area managers will manage establishments grouped by police areas within the boundaries of the nine English regions. Three regions—the South-East, the North-West

and the East Midlands—will have two area managers each. There will be a further, thirteenth, manager for Wales. Two functional managers will continue to manage the higher security estate and the women's estate.

These arrangements will improve alignment of criminal justice boundaries around the nine Government Offices for the Regions and Wales and provide the Prison Service with a platform for further joint working regionally and locally with other agencies. The move to a criminal justice focus on the 42 police areas is accelerating. The Crown Prosecution Service is organised on that basis already. Crown Courts Circuits are being organised on the basis of groups of police areas, and 42 criminal justice strategy committees and trial issues groups are being established this year. Forty-two magistrates courts' committees and probation areas are planned from April 2001.

Essex Constabulary

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police officers and constables there were in the Chelmsford Division of the Essex Constabulary *(a)* on 1 May 1997 and *(b)* at the latest available date; and what reports he has received from the Chief Constable about the number of (i) officers and (ii) constables there will be in that division in the next three years. [114784]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information requested has been provided by the Chief Constable of Essex and is set out in the table. I have not received any reports on the Chief Constable's future plans for the policing of Chelmsford. Ministers have no direct control over police numbers. Under legislation passed by the previous Government in 1994 it is for individual chief constables to determine the number of police officers in their force within the resources that are available. It will also be for the Chief Constable to consider how he wishes to deploy the 103 police recruits that have been allocated to the Essex police under the Crime Fighting Fund over the next three years.

Chelmsford Division

Year	*Total number of officers*	*Constables*
1 May 1997	207.5	162.5
1 March 2000	195.5	153

Correspondence

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton will receive a reply to his letter of 27 January regarding Mrs. Janet Kirkwood, a constituent. [114970]

Mrs. Roche: I apologise to the hon. Member for the fact that he has not yet received a reply to his letter of 27 January. I shall write shortly with a substantive response to the queries his constituent has raised.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will reply to the correspondence from the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich relating to Mr. Gugaueshau and the loss of passports by the Passport Office. [115031]

Mrs. Roche: I replied to my hon. Friend on 16 March. I am sorry for the delay.

Official Secrets Act

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the compatibility of current legislation relating to official secrets with the European Convention on Human Rights; and if he will make a statement. [114975]

Mr. Straw: Reviewing legislation in the light of the Convention is a continuous process. I am aware that the issue of the compatibility of section 1(1) of the Official Secrets Act 1989 with the European Convention on Human Rights has recently been before the Judicial Committee of the House of Lords in the case of Blake *v.* Attorney-General and judgment is awaited.

Immigration Detainees (Health Needs)

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will publish the report of Dr. Geraint Thomas into the health needs of immigration detainees. [114450]

Mrs. Roche: I have no objection in principle to the publication of this report. However, we will need to consult with Dr. Thomas. I will provide a substantive reply after we have consulted with him.

Metropolitan Police Officers (Suspension from Duty)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women officers of the Metropolitan police were under suspension from duty for alleged misconduct on 1 February. [114993]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis tells me that 98 men and four women officers were under suspension from duty on 1 February 2000.

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the cost, including salary, was of the suspension of each Metropolitan police officer suspended in the past 10 years, the period of each officer's suspension, and the date of determination of each case, indicating in each case the results of suspension broken down into *(a)* reinstatement, *(b)* retirement, *(c)* dismissal and *(d)* successful criminal prosecution. [114952]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis tells me that the information requested is not held centrally.

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how long *(a)* Detective Inspector John Redgrave and *(b)* Detective Constable Charman of the Metropolitan police have been suspended from duty and for what reasons; when he expects their futures to be determined; and if he will make a statement. [114969]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis tells me that Detective Inspector Redgrave was suspended on 6 February 1997 and Detective Constable Charman on 4 February 1997. The inquiries into the allegations that led to their suspension are ongoing and it would not be appropriate for him to comment further at this stage.

Kosovo

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on his Department's representations made at the recent conference in Sweden on drug trafficking in Kosovo. [114927]

Mr. Charles Clarke: My Department has not been invited to participate in any recent conferences in Sweden to discuss drug trafficking in Kosovo and has not made any representations.

Police Complaints

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what arrangements exist to ensure that the allocation of papers for consideration by Treasury Counsel, which have been received consequent upon a complaint having been investigated in relation to the conduct of police officers, is handled by counsel removed from any relationship either with earlier related cases, or those with police officers who are the subject of complaint; and if he will make a statement. [114966]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis tells me the Metropolitan Police Solicitors Department forward papers to Treasury Counsel for advice. It is for the individual appointed to undertake the case to declare whether he or she would be professionally disqualified from dealing with the matter.

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) when the results of the Metropolitan police inquiries relating to the referral by the Police Complaints Authority of the complaint by Mr. Keith Green was passed to Treasury Counsel; and if he will make a statement; [114965]

(2) for what reason on 16 December 1997 Mr. Keith Green was taken from the hospital wing of Brixton Prison for interview by two police officers; for what reasons *(a)* the interview was not recorded or notes taken; *(b)* no solicitor was present; and *(c)* the Prison Doctor was not informed; and if he will make a statement. [114967]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis tells me that detailed information about Mr. Green's case is not readily available. I will write to my hon. Friend when I have received it.

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what disciplinary action has been taken in relation to the joint CIB/Kent Police investigation; and if he will make a statement. [114960]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis tells me that no disciplinary action has been taken in relation to this investigation.

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many complaints made over the last five years by *(a)* serving police officers, *(b)* retired police officers and *(c)* other members of the public against the conduct of (i) CIB and (ii) the Serious Crime Squad have been investigated by (1) current and (2) former officers of CIB or the Serious Crime Squad; and if he will make a statement. [114963]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis tells me that the information requested is not readily available. I will write to my hon. Friend when I have received it.

Operation Nightshade

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what details of arms shipments to, and via, West Africa were revealed by Operation Nightshade; and if he will make a statement. [114957]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis tells me that no such details were revealed as a result of Operation Nightshade.

Rachel Nickell

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what action has been taken to prevent retired police officers publishing criticism of the conduct and stewardship into the investigation of the murder of Rachel Nickell in 1992; and under what powers such action was taken. [114958]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis tells me that no such action has been taken.

Detective Keith Pedder

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the investigation into the complaint made by former Detective Keith Pedder will be completed; and if he will make a statement. [114955]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis tells me that the inquiry is expected to be completed by May 2000.

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if manuscripts and other documents belongings to former Detective Keith Pedder have been returned to him following their seizure by the Metropolitan police; and if he will make a statement. [114956]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis tells me that the documentation forms part of any ongoing investigation and that it would not be appropriate for him to comment further at this stage.

Mr. Roger Crooks

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department on what dates in 1993 and 1994 Roger Crooks was interviewed by the Anti-Terrorist Squad. [114953]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis tells me that officers of S013, known as the Anti-Terrorist Branch, interviewed Roger Crooks on 24 June 1994.

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department for what purpose in 1993 and 1994 Metropolitan police officers serving under the direction of Detective Inspector John Redgrave met Mr. Geoffrey Brennan to discuss arms sales and shipments; at which of these discussions Mr. Roger Crooks and other representatives of the prospective vendor and importer were present; and if he will make a statement. [114959]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis tells me that he is unaware of any such meeting.

Mr. Keith Green

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the Metropolitan police received from the Police Complaints Authority its referral of the complaint of Mr. Keith Green; for what reason it was passed for investigation to an officer due to retire; when the results of the Metropolitan Police Complaints Department inquiries into this matter were completed; what were the reasons for the length of time for the inquiries' completion; and if he will make a statement. [114964]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis tells me that the Police Complaints Authority authorises the appointment of investigating officers for individual cases, based on their ability to conduct the inquiry. Detailed information about Mr. Green's case is not readily available. I will write to my hon. Friend when I have received it.

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department for what reason *(a)* on 9 December 1997 Mr. Keith Green was offered accommodation in a safe house, *(b)* this offer was made in the absence of a solicitor, *(c)* no tape recording of the interview was made and *(d)* no caution was given; and if he will make a statement. [114961]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis informs me that no such offer was made. The purpose of the interview on 9 December was to obtain intelligence and not evidence and, therefore, did not have to be carried out in accordance with Code C of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984.

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department for what reason the Police Complaints Authority passed the complaint of Mr. Keith Green of 16 February 1999, against CIB to the Metropolitan Police Complaints Department for investigation; and if he will make a statement. [114962]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The appropriate authority for the investigation of a complaint in relation to the Metropolitan police is the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis. As a matter of course, the Police Complaints Authority passes any such complaint that it receives to the Commissioner. It is for the Commissioner to decide the manner in which the complaint is to be investigated. I am advised that in this instance, the then Commissioner directed that the complaint be investigated by an independent officer attached to a Metropolitan police area different from that where the respondents were based.

Operation Cornwall

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the cost of Operation Cornwall. [114954]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis tells me that Operation Cornwall is ongoing.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

National Minimum Wage

Mr. Ashdown: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many employers have been prosecuted *(a)* successfully and *(b)* unsuccessfully for non-compliance with minimum wage legislation over the last two years; and if he will make a statement. [113144]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 8 March 2000]:* There have been no criminal prosecutions under Section 31 of the National Minimum Wage Act 1999 since it came into force 11 months ago.

This is because the Act also contains a number of provisions empowering enforcement offices to take civil action against non-paying employers and the enforcement body will always use these in the first instance. However, there will be criminal prosecutions where the enforcement body considers them necessary.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to revise the present level of the accommodation offset within the National Minimum Wage Regulations. [114974]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I have no plans to change the level of the accommodation offset. The Low Pay Commission has recommended that it should be retained at its present rate and the level considered again when the national minimum wage is next reviewed. The Government have accepted this recommendation.

Inward Investment (South Humberside)

Shona McIsaac: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what action his Department is taking to attract inward investment into the former South Humberside area. [113903]

Mr. Caborn: Promotion of Inward Investment in the regions is undertaken by Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) which were established by this Government in April 1999. My Department funds Yorkshire Forward (the Yorkshire and Humber's RDA) Inward Investment activities to the tune of £1.4 million. The Government and Yorkshire Forward are keen to attract Inward Investment to the former South Humberside area. Yorkshire Forward is actively developing a Sub-Regional Action Plan for the Humber area in conjunction with national and regional partners including the Government Office and DTI's Invest In Britain Bureau. The action plan is scheduled for completion in June 2000.

One of Yorkshire Forward's key objectives is to attract and retain more investment. An important feature of the Humber Sub-Regional Action Plan will be the development of a Humber Trade Zone. This should help exploit the significant advantages of the estuary's deep water ports and provide the foundation for attracting new industry. In addition, the Humber Chemical Forum, with an active DTI contribution, is playing an increasingly important role in helping the development of the chemical industry along the South Bank.

Yorkshire Forward statistics indicate that, since May 1997, there have been 11 Inward Investment projects in the former South Humberside area. These projects are expected to lead to the creation/safeguarding of around 1,000 jobs.

GDP Statistics (West Cumbria)

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will review the reliability of statistics on gross domestic product per capita in respect of West Cumbria. [114074]

Mr. Caborn: Statisticians from my Department are in regular contact with the Office for National Statistics on a range of outputs, including regional GDP. Methodology is regularly reviewed to ensure the best possible estimates.

Regional Selective Assistance

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the implications for West Cumbria of the current review of assisted area status levels of regional assistance. [114073]

Mr. Caborn: During the review process, the Commission notified the Government that Cumbria was one of 19 areas that have unemployment below and GDP above the EU average. The regional aid guidelines stipulate that, if approved for Assisted Area status, such areas may not benefit from aid to enterprises of more than 10 per cent. eligible costs.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what discussions are taking place between the Government and the European Commission on the eligibility of areas of the United Kingdom for regional selective assistance; and if he will make a statement. [114072]

Mr. Caborn: My officials have met officials from the Commission on a number of occasions to discuss the proposals which we submitted for new Assisted Areas. In addition, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, has held discussions with Commissioner Monti. In all of our discussions, we have sought to obtain early approval of our proposals.

Hawley Group

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) if he will make a statement about the establishment of the Review of the Engineering Council by the Hawley Group; [114130]

(2) what representations he has received from outside bodies concerning the Hawley Group Review of the Engineering Council; [114129]

(3) what representations he has received from other Government departments following the first report of the Hawley Group; [114127]

(4) what criteria he used in deciding which representative bodies of the engineering industry were included in the Working Group of the Hawley Group; [114125]

(5) what representations he has received from other Government departments on the establishment of the Hawley Group; [114128]

(6) if he will list the representative bodies of the engineering industry included in the Hawley Group. [114126]

Mr. Alan Johnson *[holding answer 10 March 2000]:* I refer to the written answer I gave on 21 December 1999, *Official Report*, columns 463–66W. The first stage of the review was completed at the end of January with the publication of the Hawley Group Stage I Report. My noble Friend Lord Sainsbury and the Minister with responsibility for lifelong learning, my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, North (Mr. Wicks) have welcomed the report and congratulated Dr. Hawley on the progress of the review. A copy of the report has been placed in the Library of the House.

The proposition for the review was endorsed at a meeting in November between Lord Sainsbury and a wide range of senior representatives of the engineering community. Although some of those present expressed a wish to see more industrial representation in the membership of the Group, the large majority supported Lord Sainsbury's view that for the Group to be effective there should be a minimum number of members. It was also recognised that Dr. Hawley's experience as a leading industrialist would be highly valuable in leading the Group.

My noble Friend Lord Sainsbury has received a small number of representations from individuals and bodies on various issues relating to the review and some of those who have responded to Dr. Hawley have copied their replies to him. He has also had discussions with his counterpart in DfEE. Other Government Departments have contributed to the review process at official level. I understand also that following the extensive first stage consultation exercise Dr. Hawley has received nearly 100 detailed responses from a range of individuals and organisations. These are providing helpful contributions towards the Group's continuing work.

Social Enterprise

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the role of social enterprises in overcoming social exclusion; and if he will make a statement. [114635]

Mr. Byers: The Government recognise the important contribution role that social enterprises have to play in the nation's economy, including helping to overcome problems of social exclusion. They can be effective at developing services which the private and public sectors may be unable or unwilling to provide. Social enterprises can also be valuable in engaging local communities in economic activities that they would otherwise not have undertaken. Some estimates put the number of people employed in the not for profit sector nationally as high as 2.6 million.

The Social Exclusion Unit's Policy Action Team's (PAT 3) Report "Enterprise and Social Exclusion" which was published on 2 November 1999, included recommendations on the role of social enterprises in encouraging enterprise in disadvantaged groups and communities. The Small Business Service (SBS) is taking forward the Report's recommendations about support for social enterprises and about enhancing the potential of these businesses.

The SBS's Social Inclusion Unit is working with the British Bankers Association and Social Enterprise London to produce guidance about the sector for banks as well as

Business Links and other support organisations. The Unit will also be participating in a study visit to Spain in April to examine approaches to supporting social enterprises in that country.

On 10 November 1999 I announced the establishment of a national Phoenix Fund, with a budget of £30 million over three years. The Phoenix Fund will support entrepreneurship in deprived areas and respond to issues raised in the PAT 3 Report. It will be open to social enterprises as well as other businesses. The Phoenix Fund will provide funding for:

piloting of the Business Volunteers Mentoring Association;

support for new and existing Community Finance Initiatives;

a development fund for innovative ways of supporting enterprise in deprived areas.

My Department is currently considering ways of developing the Fund for the benefit of businesses.

Business Volunteer Mentoring Association

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) how much money has been paid in the current financial year to the Business Volunteer Mentoring Association; and to what use it has been put; [114391]

(2) how much money his Department has paid to the Business Volunteer Mentoring Association; and to what use the funds have been put. [114388]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* The Business Volunteer Mentoring Association initiative is being piloted by the National Federation of Enterprise Agencies, supported by this Department. The aim is to attract 1,000 volunteers, drawn from all sections of the business community to provide mentoring support to pre and early start-up businesses.

For this financial year, the NFEA and local partnerships have been paid £100K to cover their costs in setting up and developing the initiative on the ground.

Telecommunications

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to introduce a Communications Bill covering telecommunications; and what the nature and timetable of the consultation process will be, following the revision of the Utilities Bill. [114473]

Mr. Byers: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and I propose to publish a White Paper later this year setting out the Government's proposals for reform of the framework of communications legislation. This will include proposals for changing both the Telecommunications and Broadcasting Acts as a basis for legislation when parliamentary time allows. We expect to consult on proposed changes both before and after publication of the White Paper.

Adoption

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what *(a)* leave and *(b)* payment entitlements employers are required to give male and female employees after they have adopted a child. [114841]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The Maternity and Parental Leave Regulations 1999 confer a right for employees who adopt a child on or after 15 December 1999 to take parental leave from work to care for the child. The right applies to any employee who has completed one year's qualifying service with his or her employer; the amount of leave provided for is thirteen weeks' leave for each parent. This has to be taken over the first five years after the child is placed with the parents for adoption.

Employees can take the leave in accordance with arrangements agreed with the employer through a workforce or collective agreement. If there is no agreement in place, the fallback scheme provided for in the Regulations applies. That provides for an employee to take up to four weeks' leave in a year. This leave can be taken at the time of the placement provided the notice provisions are followed.

The leave is unpaid. We will be encouraging employers to build on the minimum standard as part of the Government's commitment to help employees achieve a better balance between their work and the rest of their lives.

KONVER Programme

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent discussions he has had with his EU counterparts concerning the KONVER programme. [114781]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The KONVER Programme II Initiative is aimed to accelerate the diversification of economic activity in areas heavily dependent on the defence industry. It was operated from 1994–99 and was preceded by the KONVER I initiative which operated during 1993. The programme will not be renewed and there have been no recent ministerial discussions concerning it.

Postal Services Commission

Mr. Quinn: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement about the membership of the Postal Services Commission. [115479]

Mr. Byers: Mr. Graham Corbett is being appointed as the Chairman of the Postal Services Commission (PSC). He will start work on 1 April when the PSC takes up its functions and duties under the Postal Services Regulations 1999. It is anticipated that he will be appointed as Chairman of the statutory body of the same name that is expected to be created following the passing of the Postal Services Bill currently before Parliament.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Museums and Galleries Commission

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the future of the Museums and Galleries Commission's Conservation Register. [114467]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 14 March 2000]:* The Museums and Galleries Commission (MGC) will be replaced by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLAC) on 3 April 2000. Options for the future of

functions currently carried out by the MGC were presented in a consultation document issued by MLAC in January this year.

In that document, MLAC suggests that the maintenance of the MGC Conservation Register should not be carried out by MLAC. The MGC is currently exploring the options for a future alternative home for the Conservation Register where its potential as a public information resource and as an endorsement of high quality conservation practice can be further realised.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when he last met representatives of *(a)* the film company Alchymie and *(b)* the finance company Flashpoint; and if he will make a statement. [114973]

Mr. Chris Smith: I met directors of Flashpoint in May 1999 and attended the launch of Alchymie in October 1999.

As Secretary of State for the Department with responsibility for film policy, I frequently have meetings with representatives of the film industry and attend industry events. Given that our policy, as set out in the 1998 report of the Film Policy Review Group, is to encourage the growth of a self-sustaining, commercial film sector, I welcome efforts by the industry to establish new initiatives, such as Alchymie, which combine the production and commercial exploitation of British films. The success of such initiatives, however, depends not on any Government involvement, but on their commercial performance in a competitive and volatile market.

National Minimum Wage

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what representations he has received from the British Activity Holiday Association regarding the impact of the level of accommodation offset within the National Minimum Wage Regulations. [114972]

Mr. Chris Smith: We received a copy of the British Activity Holiday Association (BAHA) comments in late 1998 on the accommodation offset during consultation on the then draft National Minimum Wage Regulations. These comments were also copied to the Department of Trade and Industry.

More recently, I am aware that the BAHA gave written and oral evidence to the Low Pay Commission on the offset as part of the review which the Government asked the Commission to carry out to evaluate the introduction of the minimum wage.

Nautical Archaeology

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what progress he has made in promoting nautical archaeology. [114930]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The Department for Culture, Media and Sport is currently engaged in providing additional wreck marker buoys and interpretative signs at a number of sites designated under the Protection of Wrecks Act 1973.

In 2000–01 we will continue to support, through the Heritage Grant Fund administered by English Heritage, two nautical archaeological projects: the activities of the Hampshire and Wight Trust and the Nautical Archaeological Society's course programme.

Film Funding

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, pursuant to his answer of 8 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 736W, on film funding, how much National Lottery funding was recouped in each case where repayments have been made. [114976]

Mr. Chris Smith: The publication of information on amounts of National Lottery funding recouped from individual films could damage the prospects of films which had not been fully exploited in all territories and media. The information could also make it possible to deduce the terms of the contract between the Lottery distributor and the other backers of the film, which are confidential.

The total amount recouped by date by the Arts Council of England is £5,974,018.

British Museum

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, pursuant to his reply of 3 March 2000, column 432W, how many British Museum staff have been dismissed over the past 12 months; at what cost; and with what period of notice, in each case. [112380]

Mr. Alan Howarth: I regret that the figures in my original answer were incorrect. The correct figures are in the table:

Number of staff and their category	*Reason for terminations*	*Period of notice*	*Total cost*
11 aged 60+ who are being compulsorily retired	Museum reorganisation	6 to 9 months	48,529
9 aged between 50 and 60 who are taking early retirement but on a compulsory basis	Museum reorganisation	6 months	[1]90,470
22 persons under 50 who are taking compulsory early severance	Museum reorganisation	6 months	1,035,510
3 others	Performance or health grounds	2—no notice 1—13 weeks	Nil

[1] Additionally these staff will be paid an annual compensation cost until they reach age 60. The total cost in the current year is £89,838. Over the next few years this annual sum will reduce as people reach age 60. The overall present value of this payment, at current money values, is estimated to be £555,343. There will also be other one-off costs estimated at £253,989 relating to pension preservation and the bringing forward of lump sums.

Notes:

1. All the compensating amounts shown above derive from Civil Service Pension Scheme standard terms and conditions.

2. The above table does not include staff whose fixed-term contracts have not been renewed. These terminations do not carry a cost to the Museum.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Parades Commission

Mr. Peter Robinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what kind of protection has been afforded to the members of the Parades Commission since its establishment; and what has been the cost of providing protection to members of the Commission over the past 12 months. [113831]

Mr. Ingram: It is the long standing policy both of this Government and previous Governments that we do not discuss the security measures provided to individuals or groups. The cost of installing and maintaining security measures for members of the Parades Commission over the period in question was £74,004.96.

Departmental Expenditure Limit

Mr. McCabe: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what plans he has to amend the Northern Ireland Departments' Departmental Expenditure Limit for 1999–2000. [115343]

Mr. Ingram: The Northern Ireland Departments' Departmental Expenditure Limit for 1999–2000 has been increased by £94,327,000 from £4,856,247,000 to £4,950,574,000. The increase is the net effect of:

the take up of end-year flexibility entitlement of £98,341,000;

net transfers to other Government Departments of £18,134,000 as detailed;

an increase in the provision for Hill Livestock Compensatory Allowances of £8,500,000;

increases resulting from additions to "The Giving Age" and Health of £4,293,000;

an increase in Housing Loan Charges of £1,147,000; and

an increase in the Capital Modernisation Fund of £180,000.

There is also a decrease in the provision for Welfare to Work of £31,144,000.

The net transfers to other Government Departments are made up as follows:

net transfers to the Northern Ireland Office of £8,144,000;

a transfer to the Inland Revenue of £6,689,000;

transfers to the Scottish Executive of £1,788,000;

transfers to the Department of Health of £1,098,000;

a transfer to the Department for Education and Employment of £653,000;

transfers to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food of £257,000;

a transfer to the Privy Council Office of £10,000;

a transfer from the Department of Trade and Industry of £500,000; and

a transfer from the National Assembly for Wales of £5,000.

The net increase in the Northern Ireland Departments' Departmental Expenditure Limit is a charge on the Departmental Expenditure Limit Reserve and will not, therefore, add to the planned total of public expenditure.

Forensic Science Agency

Mr. McCabe: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what key targets are set for the Forensic Science Agency of Northern Ireland in 1999–2000; what forward plans have been prepared by the Agency; and what arrangements have been made for the publication of this year's plans. [115344]

Mr. Ingram: The following key targets are set for the Forensic Science Agency of Northern Ireland in 1999–2000.

Quality of Service

To turnaround 85 per cent. of those cases in which a file is required to be submitted to the DPP within 85 days of notification or final submissions whichever is later for cases received from 1 April 1999.

Quality of Science

Maintain UKAS accreditation for those scientific processes identified by the Ministerial Advisory Board.

Achieve supplier status for the National DNA database by 31 December 1999.

Service Provision

To have obtained the agreement of the User Board that the Agency is effectively meeting the needs of the RUC as defined in the Service Level Agreement for the year ending 31 March 2000.

Financial Performance

To recover from Customers the full cash costs of the services to them.

To reduce by 2 per cent. the Unit Cost of the Agency.

Achievement against these key targets will be recorded in the Agency's Annual Report for 1999–2000 which will be published in July 2000.

The Agency has published a summary of its Corporate Plan 1999–2002 and Annual Business Plan 1999–2000 which explains its business and organisation, describes its key targets for 1999–2000 and sets out the assumptions about workloads and resources which support its planned activities. Publication has been held back pending the resolution of technical issues concerning the Agency's cost recovery key target. Copies of the summary plans have been placed in the Library. Copies will be available to the public from the Agency.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Universal Primary Education

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what response she has made to Oxfam's campaign for universal primary education; and if she will make a statement. [114190]

Clare Short: I welcome the focus that Oxfam—and The Guardian "Read the World" campaign—have placed on raising awareness of the plight of the 125 million children who are not in school. Educational opportunity for all, especially at the primary level, is both a fundamental human right and a precondition for progress in development and the reduction of poverty. Our White Paper on International Development, published in 1997, committed us to seek to mobilise the international community to meet the international development targets which include universal primary education by 2015 and gender equity in primary and secondary education by 2005. In our bilateral programmes substantial resources are allocated to education for the achievement of these targets.

Four things need to be done if these targets are to be met. First, we need a real and sustained commitment by the Governments of developing countries to securing universal primary education. Secondly, we need to address the issue of resourcing for education. There is a clear need to increase the level of resources that developing country Governments commit to primary and basic education. And development agencies should allocate significant additional resources where Governments have developed well-focused education strategies. Thirdly, we need to shift from a projects-based approach to a sector-wide approach to basic and primary education, and we need to pull together the work of all the different development donors around a focused, agreed strategy drawn up by the Government of the country concerned.

The fourth thing we need to do is link education policy with the wider development strategy of the country, including policies on health, sanitation, livelihoods and rural transport.

This is the agenda that I will be taking to the World Education Forum in Dakar next month, which I will attend on behalf of the British Government. The Dakar meeting provides an important opportunity for Governments, development agencies and non-governmental organisations—from North and South—to recommit themselves to Education for All (including the achievement of universal primary education by 2015, and gender equality in primary and secondary education by 2005).

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

McKenzie Friends

30. **Mr. Ruffley:** To ask the Solicitor-General what recent discussions he has had regarding McKenzie Friends with other Government Departments. [113402]

The Solicitor-General: As hon. Members may know, a McKenzie Friend is someone who attends a court hearing with a litigant in person. The friend can assist that litigant in person in conducting their case but is not formally representing them and is not entitled to address the court on their behalf. The use of McKenzie Friends is part of the operation of the Court Service and therefore primarily the concern of the Lord Chancellor's Department. I personally have not had any recent discussions with other Government Departments on this subject.

Justice System (Reform)

Mr. Geraint Davies: To ask the Solicitor-General if he will make a statement on the progress of joint working by the CPS, police and courts to reduce the average time taken between suspects being charged to being convicted or found not guilty. [113407]

The Solicitor-General: The CPS is continuing to work closely with the police and courts to improve performance. Measures include: advance disclosure in every early hearing case; a reduction in the number of adjournments after first hearings; more lawyer time spent on preparing for trials through the deployment of designated caseworkers to deal with straightforward guilty pleas; a reduction in duplication and delay by co-locating CPS lawyers in police criminal justice file preparation units.

Government Legal Service

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: To ask the Solicitor-General what proportion of lawyers in the Government Legal Service are women. [113400]

The Solicitor-General: The proportion of women lawyers in the Government Legal Service is around 49 per cent.

DEFENCE

Naval Recruiting and Training Agency

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* those targets of the Naval Recruiting and Training agency for 1998–99 which (i) were and (ii) were not achieved, giving the factors affecting the outcome in each case and *(b)* action taken by the agency to improve target achievement performance in 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [111760]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Naval Recruiting and Training Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the right hon. and learned Member.

Letter from John Chadwick to Mr. Menzies Campbell, dated 1 March 2000:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence, concerning Key Targets of the Naval Recruiting and Training Agency, as this matter falls within my area of responsibility as the Chief Executive of the Agency.

I am pleased to report that the NRTA achieved 6 of the 8 Key Targets set against it in 1998–99. Details of the outcomes, the principal factors affecting them, and measures taken to improve performance further in the current financial year, are at Annex A.

FY98–99 NRTA Key Targets

Targets Achieved

KT2—To obtain a Customer Satisfaction Rating of a least 90%.

94% of feedback forms received from employers of ex-NRTA trainees indicated that the training received had satisfactorily fitted the trainee for his or her subsequent employment.

The principal factor behind this achievement is the fact that the RN Systems Approach to Training produces training courses which focus accurately on the skills and knowledge required by the trainee to be effective in his or her operational role.

The target was raised to 95% for 99–00. At Min(AF)'s office's request, it is now described as "Fitness for Purpose" rather than "Customer Satisfaction".

KT3—To maintain success rates of 95% in Career Training and 97% in examined Pre-joining Training.

Achieved with success rates of 97% and 99% respectively.

The principal factors are the generally strong motivation of the trainees to succeed in their RN careers, and the fact that, wherever appropriate, training is delivered by uniformed staff who have themselves carried out, at sea, the tasks towards which the training is directed.

To seek further improvement in these success rates would not be cost-effective as some residual failure due to trainee attitude or aptitude is inevitable. Nonetheless, the target remains key as a drop in the success rate is likely to be the first indicator of any loss in training quality.

KT5—To retain tasked capacity while operating NRTA within its 1998–99 cash allocation of £233M, a reduction of £7M (3%) from 1997–98 figures.

Assessment of achievement against this target is complicated by in-year adjustments to the programme and the cash allocation and in-year requirements for additional savings. After adjustment for these factors, the final outturn was 0.6% over the final allocation of £238M, within the Department's ± 1% tolerance.

It remains the Agency's intention to replace this target with a more focused measurement of efficiency in due course.

KT6—To break even over the year in respect of the partnering arrangement with Flagship Training Ltd.

The final figure showed a net benefit of £2.3M.

The break-even target anticipated significant startup costs and contingencies linked with the transfer of the first tranche of Service Provision activities, which were expected to cancel out the gains from Income Generation. In the event, these costs did not arise and the target was achieved quite easily.

In the light of the increasing momentum of this Public Private Partnering arrangement, a very challenging target of £8.1M net benefit was set for 99–00.

KT7—To review the NRTA's Corporate Information Systems Strategy and produce a supporting Action Plan for its implementation, by 31 March 1999.

The March Agency Management Board meeting endorsed the conclusions, recommendations and action plan produced by the review of the Corporate Information Systems Strategy. The review aligned the Information Systems strategy to the business needs of the Agency, encompassing the changes brought about by the transfer of the management of Administration Information Systems to Flagship and aligning it with the Information Systems strategies of the wider naval and MOD community.

No follow-on target was set for 99–00.

KT8—To include satisfactory dummy auditable accounts in the Agency Annual Report for Financial Year 97–98, in preparation for meeting the Treasury Accounts Direction by including fully audited accounts for FY 98–99 in the following year's Report.

Achieved on publication of the Report.

The Treasury Accounts Direction was not received in respect of FY 98–99. Min(AF)'s Office directed that this target should not be rolled forward for 99–00.

98–99 Targets not Achieved

KT1—To deliver personnel to the trained strength (or to other training organisations) within 10% variance from the tasked requirement.

The final variance figure was −12%.

Although this target was narrowly missed performance against it was again improved compared with outcomes of −16% in 97–98, and −26% in 96–97.

The principal factors contributing to the outcome were the high requirement against which the variance is calculated, which has increased fourfold since 1994, a difficult recruiting climate, and the wastage of personnel from training pipelines which are running at full capacity.

In 99–00, recruiting performance has improved substantially, including the particularly difficult area of Engineer Officers where a number of initiatives are showing signs of success. However, the length of some of the training pipelines means that this improvement will not be fully reflected in the 99–00 delivery figures.

Wastage remains a difficult area. Failures during training are being reduced by backclassing and remedial training with many trainees achieving the required standards. However, although allowed for when setting the recruiting targets, other forms of wastage (medical, administrative and voluntary) are unpredictable.

The target has been tightened to 5% for 99–00.

KT4—To increase the strength of the RNR to at least 3100.

The strength of the RNR on 31 March 1999 was 2,962, up from 2,862 on 31 March 1998.

The principal factor in this shortfall was a downturn in recruiting following the good results in the previous year, which probably resulted in an over-optimistic target. In 98–99 an initiative to improve RNR recruiting was agreed whereby new satellite training units would be set up in areas previously without an RNR presence. To date, 2 are in operation (Dundee and Oxford) and further sites are being investigated.

The target for 99–00 has been redefined to measure the more critical indicator of the variance of the RNR Trained Strength from the Total Requirement.

Serle's House, Winchester

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if he will make a statement on the sale of Serle's House, Winchester; [113961]

(2) what plans he has to protect the Garden of Remembrance at Serle's House, Winchester, in the event of the sale of Serle's House; [113901]

(3) if he will review his plans for the sale of Serle's House, Winchester to take account of its use as a dedicated garden of remembrance; [114169]

(4) if he will offer the purchase of Serle's House, Winchester to Hampshire County Council at a price below the market level in order to protect the museum and garden; and if he will make a statement. [114191]

Dr. Moonie: The decision to sell Serle's House was taken following a review which examined a number of sites upon which MOD has Museums and Regimental Headquarters in Winchester. It was concluded that all the Museums and Regimental Headquarters should be co-located in the Upper Barracks. The MOD is well aware of Serle's House status as a Grade II listed property and of its associated memorial garden and will consider disposal options that best preserve its future. Defence Estates, who are responsible for managing this disposal, are consulting with the Trustees of the Regimental Museum over the level of access required and intend to impose a restrictive covenant on the purchaser which would ensure the retention and upkeep of the memorial garden and continued access to it.

Serle's House has already attracted interest from a number of potential purchasers including Hampshire County Council. In taking forward its disposal, Defence Estates will expose the property to the open market, while seeking to ensure that the historic building and its memorial garden are protected.

Reservists

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what measures are being taken to protect reservists in the armed forces from dismissal by their civilian employers; and if he will make a statement. [114916]

Mr. Spellar: Reservists are afforded protection under the terms of the Reserve Forces (Safeguard of Employment) Act 1985, which is sponsored by the Department of Trade and Industry. This Act makes dismissal between notification of call-out and actual mobilisation a criminal offence. After demobilisation, the Act requires the employer to reinstate the reservist on

application, or to offer him or her the most favourable alternative work available. The Act provides for a Reinstatement Committee to consider applications for reinstatement which are rejected by employers, and to make orders for reinstatement or the payment of compensation, or both. Over 5,000 reservists have been called out for service since NATO operations commenced in the former Yugoslavia. We are aware of only one application to a Reinstatement Committee in that time. It is our policy to seek the employer's agreement before any reservist is mobilised.

The National Employers' Liaison Committee (NELC) works hard to win and retain the support of employers for the Reserve Forces. NELC can also act in an advisory capacity where difficulties related to Reserve liability arise in the employer/employee relationship. Over 6,000 companies, employing around 70 per cent. of the nation's workforce, have now affirmed their support. These companies have recognised that they get a good deal from employing reservists. Reserve service teaches skills that can be used in the civilian workplace, such as teamwork, leadership, and the ability to take sound decisions quickly.

The Reserve Forces Act 1996 and subsequent legislation introduced new safeguards for employers. The Act enables employers to apply for their employees to be exempted from call-out or for that call-out to be deferred. The Reserve Forces (Call-out and Recall) (Financial Assistance) Regulations 1997 (SI 1997/309), enable employers to claim financial assistance to cover the costs associated with the loss of a member of staff who is mobilised for reserve service, and for any necessary retraining for that individual on his or her return to the workplace.

Live Firing Exercises

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans his Department has for *(a)* the suspension and *(b)* the termination of live firing exercises for the Royal Navy; for what reasons he has made these plans; what plans his Department has to review live firing exercises for the Royal Navy; and if he will make a statement. [114545]

Mr. Spellar: There are no plans to suspend or terminate live firing exercises for the Royal Navy, although the balance between simulation and live firing is kept under review to ensure an appropriate and cost-effective mix.

Spacie Report

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will place a copy of Major-General (Retired) Spacie's report "Welfare in the Army" in the Library; and if he will make a statement. [114914]

Mr. Spellar: Major-General (Retired) Spacie was commissioned to examine the area of Welfare provision across the Army and to help formulate a conceptual framework for that provision. This work will inform the Army's personnel management policies. There are currently no plans to publish the report externally.

Naval Aircraft Repair Organisation

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* those targets of the Naval Aircraft Repair Organisation for 1998–99 which (i) were and (ii) were not achieved, giving the factors affecting the outcome in each case and *(b)* action taken by the agency to improve target achievement performance in 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [111762]

Dr. Moonie: Pursuant to the reply I gave on 8 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 708W, the Naval Repair Aircraft Organisation (NARO) was subsumed by the Defence Aviation Repair Agency (DARA) with effect from 1 April 1999. I have therefore asked the Chief Executive of DARA to write to the right hon. and learned Member.

Letter from Steve Hill to Mr. Menzies Campbell, dated 16 March 2000:

Naval Aircraft Repair Organisation—1998–99 Performance

1. I am replying to your Question to the Secretary of State for Defence about the performance of the Naval Aircraft Repair Organisation (NARO) as this matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief Executive of the Defence Aviation Repair Agency (DARA). As you may know, the DARA subsumed the NARO with effect from 1 April 1999.

2. The NARO's Annual Report for 1998–99 was placed in the House of Commons Library and gives full details of the Agency's performance. The NARO had five performance targets in the year 1998–99. These are listed, along with a description of the actual performance, below:

a. Cost—Target: To achieve a full operating cost of £117.5M by 1 April 1999, assuming Constant Output.

Performance: Target achieved

b. Quantity—Target: To achieve 98% of the scheduled quantity of MoD sales orders in year and thereby achieve the Master Schedule.

Performance: Target achieved

c. Timeliness—Target: To achieve 93% of the delivery dates agreed with the MoD customer

Performance: 73% achieved. Factors affecting this outcome included the Agency's lack of control over external input dependencies and difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff.

d. Customer Satisfaction—Target: To achieve no more than 56 customer complaints.

Performance: Target achieved

e. Volume—Target: To utilise 100% of the available capacity by ensuring existing, and when required, additional customers furnish the programmes of work against which resources have been allocated.

Performance: 95% achieved. Factors affecting this outcome included delays in the migration from legacy systems to the new NARO Business System (NBS) and a shortfall in the timely arisings of repairable assets.

As I mentioned, the NARO no longer exists. However, I can assure you that the DARA is working very hard to deliver the most flexible and cost effective support to the front line.

WALES

Central Government Expenditure

Mr. Rowlands: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales (1) what was the actual total contribution from central funds to the cost of local authority expenditure in Wales in *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1998–99 and *(c)* 1999–2000; and what his estimate is of the contribution in 2000–01; [111616]

(2) what is the percentage contribution of central Government funding towards local authority expenditure in Wales in *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1998–99 and *(c)* 1999–2000; and if he will estimate the percentage in 2000–01. [111614]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The contribution from central Government towards the funding of local authority expenditure (county/county borough councils and police authorities) for 1997–98, 1998–99 and 1999–2000 is as shown. Figures for 2000–01 will be available from the National Assembly for Wales from 1 April 2000.

	Central Government support (£ million) [1]	*Percentage of local authority expenditure* [2]
1997–98	3,078	85.8
1998–99	3,176	84.7
1999–2000	3,276	84.2

[1] Central Government support includes revenue support grant, share of non-domestic rates, council tax reduction scheme grant and specific grants

[2] Local authority expenditure is the total revenue expenditure excluding interest receipts (and includes specific grants)

CABINET OFFICE

GM Technology

Mr. Ruffley: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what recent meetings the Government have held with representatives of the US Government on the subject of genetically modified technology. [113390]

Mr. Stringer: The Government have met representatives of the US Government on a number of occasions in order to discuss genetically modified technology as well as other issues. This forms part of the Government's ongoing dialogue with the US Government. The UK's commitment to a science-based approach to biotechnology which protects public health and the environment is made clear in all such discussions.

IT Projects

Mr. Ennis: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office when the Government will respond to the Public Accounts Committee report entitled "Improving the Delivery of Government: IT Projects"; and if she will make a statement. [115507]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Government's formal response to the report was laid before the House today, as Command Paper 4656.

Earlier this year we announced a range of recommendations to drive up performance with major IT projects. The recommendations are already tackling many of the issues raised in the report.

These recommendations were set out in detail in my reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon (Angela Smith) of 21 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 739W. They include measures to address the role of Ministers in IT projects and to improve our management of IT suppliers.

These recommendations are the first of a series to implement best practice across Government and to ensure that the pillars that support successful IT projects are in place in the future.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

GCHQ

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what percentage of costs of the construction of the new GCHQ building and contents at Cheltenham are being met from non-UK Government sources. [114110]

Mr. Robin Cook *[holding answer 14 March 2000]:* The cost of GCHQ's new accommodation falls to the UK Government. However, the provision of the new building will be met under a private finance initiative which means that the finance for the construction costs will be raised by the private sector.

Kashmir

Mr. McCabe: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the current situation in Kashmir. [114702]

Mr. Hain: We are deeply concerned by the situation in Kashmir, including violent clashes across the line of control and denial of human rights, and we regularly raise this with the Indian and Pakistani authorities. In January the Foreign Secretary raised Kashmir with his Indian counterpart during talks in London. We have also condemned in the strongest terms externally sponsored terrorism. We hope that India and Pakistan will return to bilateral dialogue to find a solution to this and the other issues that divide them.

Pakistan

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to the evidence of HC 541-i, 3 November 1999 to the Defence and other Committees, what discussions he has had with the United Kingdom's European Union partners about an arms embargo on Pakistan. [114730]

Mr. Hain: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave in reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr. Cohen) on 24 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 36W.

Kosovo

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) if he will list the main families in Kosovo dealing in heroin; [114923]

(2) how many persons have been apprehended in Kosovo for trafficking in heroin since police from NATO countries arrived; [114925]

Mr. Battle: We have no information about the number of persons apprehended in Kosovo for trafficking in heroin since police from NATO countries arrived. The UN have asked us to help set up a Criminal Intelligence Unit in Kosovo to provide information which can be used by law enforcement agencies to attack organised criminal activity, including drug trafficking.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, announced on 15 March that the UK would contribute 20 police and Customs officers to this Central Intelligence Unit.

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many international policemen were promised by NATO countries for service in Kosovo; and how many have arrived. [114924]

Mr. Hain: As of 1 March, figures provided by the United Nations Secretariat show that NATO member states have pledged 1,617 civilian police officers (49 per cent. of the total number pledged) to the United Nations International Police force in Kosovo. Of these, 1,184 have been deployed (50 per cent. of the total number deployed).

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs for what reasons NATO expelled the 4 Unit of the Narcotics Squad of the Serb Army from Kosovo. [114922]

Mr. Vaz: In accordance with the Military Technical Agreement between NATO and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) all FRY forces were required to withdraw from Kosovo to locations in Serbia outside Kosovo.

Mr. Roger Crooks

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on what occasions since 1993 his *(a)* Department's officials, *(b)* Ministry of Defence personnel and *(c)* Ministers met Mr. Roger Crooks to discuss (i) the security situation in Sierra Leone and West Africa, (ii) the political situation in Sierra Leone and West Africa, (iii) the supplying of arms in Sierra Leone and West Africa, (iv) the supplying of military assistance and advisers in Sierra Leone and West Africa, (v) logistical support in Sierra Leone and West Africa; and if he will make a statement. [114968]

Mr. Hain: Mr. Crooks, a US citizen with interests in Sierra Leone, has been known to various members of the High Commission for some time. He assisted in the evacuation of UK, US and other foreign nationals in 1997. He is refurbishing one of the main hotels in Freetown, to be used as the Headquarters of UNAMSIL. FCO and MOD personnel have had occasional contacts with him over the last few years. Discussions have focused on the general situation in Sierra Leone, not arms or military matters.

World Education Forum

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which Ministers will be attending the World Education Forum in Dakar. [114915]

Mr. Hain: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister on 7 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 563W.

British Overseas Territories

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 14 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 221W, on British Overseas Territories, what plans his Department has to introduce an order in council to ensure that the British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands and the Turks and Caicos Islands change their existing legislation on homosexual acts. [114774]

Mr. Battle: In keeping with the new relationship based on partnership, Britain preferred that the Overseas Territories should enact the necessary human right reforms themselves. The relevant territories were forewarned that progress would be reviewed by the end of the year and if necessary the changes, including the de-criminalisation of homosexual acts by consenting adults in private, would be imposed by Orders in Council. The deadline having passed we are reviewing the situation.

Sudan

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what presentations he has made to British companies involved in the extraction of oil in Sudan in connection with the recommendations made in the document, "Human Security in Sudan: The report of a Canadian Assessment Mission". [114780]

Mr. Hain: We shall continue to offer full and frank advice to British companies which inquire about the oil industry in the Sudan. We have of course studied the Canadian report and take it into account in framing our advice to British companies.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports his Department has received on the use of revenues received by the Government of Sudan from the exploration of oil and development projects. [114783]

Mr. Hain: We have pressed for oil revenues to be used for development projects and for transparency in the oil account. The Government of Sudan have made a public assurance that this will happen.

Exports of oil began only in August 1999 and they do not yet have reports on expenditure. We will remain focused on this issue as reports become available and we shall look to the Government of Sudan to honour the assurances they have made.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 3 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 738W, on Sudan, what discussions he has had with his Canadian counterpart concerning the recommendations made in the study, "Human Security in Sudan: The report of a Canadian Assessment Mission"; and if he will make a statement. [114773]

Mr. Hain: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has not had the opportunity to meet his Canadian counterpart since the beginning of February. We have however studied the report that I referred to in my previous answer.

Raul Reyes

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with his EU counterparts concerning the European tour of Raul Reyes, the senior Colombian FARC commander. [114777]

Mr. Battle: In February, the Colombian Government's High Commissioner for Peace, Victor G. Ricardo, together with Raul Reyes, the FARC's leading spokesperson, visited some European capitals (none in the UK) to seek support for the peace process. The aim of the trip was also to study the economic models in a variety of countries.

They visited Sweden, Norway, Switzerland, Italy, Holy See, Spain and France. We have obtained reports of the visits from Italy, Spain and France. Sweden have undertaken to report on the visit shortly.

In addition, we have had discussions on the visit with our EU Partners in the context of the regular EU/Latin America Working Groups (COLAT) in Brussels.

Congo

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations he has received concerning violence in the Ituri region of north-eastern Congo. [114776]

Mr. Hain: We are concerned at recent reports of massacres. We condemn all such incidents and have called on all parties to exercise restraint. During my meeting with President Museveni on 22 February I noted that Ugandan forces currently control the area and urged him to do all he could to stop such events. Along with our EU partners we also raised this issue with the Ugandan Government. With our UN partners we have called for an international investigation into all such events with a view to bringing all those responsible to justice.

UN Reform

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what proposals for reform of the United Nations, Her Majesty's Government will be putting forward at the Millennium Assembly and Summit in September this year. [114779]

Mr. Hain: The Government, along with our EU partners, are pressing for a high-level discussion on strengthening the United Nations at the Millennium Summit. At the Millennium Assembly, we will work for further modernisation of the UN along the lines of the Secretary-General's 1997 "Track II" package of reform recommendations in order to make the UN more efficient and effective and better able to meet the needs of all its members.

Latvia

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make representations to the Latvian authorities regarding the prosecution for war crimes of a Latvian citizen who had fought against the Nazis. [114938]

Mr. Vaz: We are aware of the case of Vassily Kononov, which is currently the subject of an appeal at the Supreme Court of Latvia. The matter is still sub judice.

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Latvian authorities regarding the non-prosecution of Nazi war criminals. [114939]

Mr. Vaz: We take our international obligation to bring to account those responsible for war crimes very seriously and have been in the forefront of international efforts to achieve restitution for victims of Nazi persecution. While the UK has no jurisdiction in the case, we have been assisting the Latvian authorities with their inquiries into Konrad Kalejs. A team of three Metropolitan police officers attended a meeting in Riga on 16–17 January to discuss this case with officers from Australia, Canada and the United States. Latvian police officials have been invited to London to examine material on war crimes in Latvia held by the Metropolitan police.

Ministerial Visits

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is the estimated cost of his visit to Brazil; and how many staff will travel with him. [115019]

Mr. Battle: I understand that the hon. Member is referring to the visit of my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister.

My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister is in Brazil at the request of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to build on the close relationship between the UK and Brazil established during President Cardoso's state visit to the UK in December 1997, and to expand trade and investment links with the UK's largest trading partner in Latin America.

My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister is visiting Sao Paulo, Brasilia and Rio de Janeiro and will meet with President Cardoso, Vice President Maciel, Foreign Minister Lampreia and other Ministers, businessmen and business organisations.

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is the purpose of his visit to Brazil; and if he will publish his itinerary. [115018]

Mr. Battle: I understand the hon. Member is referring to the visit of my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister.

My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister is in Brazil at the request of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to build on the close relationship between the UK and Brazil established during President Cardoso's state visit to the UK in December 1997, and to expand trade and investment links with the UK's largest trading partner in Latin America.

My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister is visiting Sao Paulo, Brasilia and Rio de Janeiro and I will meet with President Cardoso, Vice President Maciel, Foreign Minister Lampreia and other Ministers, businessmen and business organisations.

TREASURY

Global Cultural Diversity Congress

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he was informed of the cancellation of the Global Cultural Diversity Congress and the collapse of Global Cultural Diversity Congress 2000 Ltd., and by whom; and if he will make a statement. [112792]

Mr. Andrew Smith *[holding answer 3 March 2000]:* The Treasury became aware of the cancellation of the Global Cultural Diversity Congress on 21 February.

Micro-credit

Mr. Love: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the role of micro-credit in assisting the growth of enterprise in deprived communities; and if he will make a statement. [114636]

Mr. Timms: The role of micro-credit was considered at length by the Policy Action Team 3 in their report, "Enterprise and Social Exclusion". People in deprived communities often find it difficult to find capital to start or grow businesses, for several reasons:

they are themselves capital poor, and lack collateral to support small firm lending;

a more fragile local economy increases the risk to lenders of business failure;

the high unit cost of making small firm loans makes them less profitable to lenders; and

accessibility to lenders, where banks can appear to be unapproachable.

While UK commercial banks are the major formal suppliers of external finance, new intermediaries such as Community Finance Initiatives (CFIs) can play a valuable role by acting as additional sources of credit in the community, including micro-credit facilities. The launch of the £30 million Phoenix Fund, which will be implemented in 2000–01, will include a challenge fund to help resource CFIs and provide loan guarantees to help co-finance commercial lending to CFIs.

New Deal (Hospitality Industry)

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many jobs have been created in the hospitality industry by the New Deal; and if he will indicate the methods by which he calculated this figure. [111118]

Ms Jowell: I have been asked to reply.

The New Deal is not a job-creation programme; rather it is designed to help unemployed people improve their skills and compete effectively for vacancies.

The latest figures to the end of December 1999 show that this policy is working; nationally, 185,250 young people have found jobs under the New Deal. We do not hold detailed figures for the jobs taken in the hospitality sector. However, the Employment Service is working closely with 15 companies who are members of the British Hospitality Association to address ways of enhancing the sector's image to increase the number of New Deal participants. This work includes development of a sector specific gateway that will tap into the many vacancies that will arise this year. In the last year there were some 385,000 vacancies notified in this sector.

Kosovo

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) if he will estimate the amount of heroin which was sent via Kosovo in each of the last 12 months; and if he will make a statement; [114929]

(2) how much heroin sourced from Kosovo has been surrendered at UK ports by HM Customs and Excise in the past 12 months; [114926]

(3) what is his estimate of the percentage of heroin sold in the *(a)* UK and *(b)* EEC which came from smuggling through Kosovo in the last 12 months. [114928]

Mr. Timms: There is no evidence that any heroin detected in the United Kingdom in the last 12 months has originated from, or transited through, any area of the former Yugoslavia.

HM Customs and Excise hold no data on heroin seizures in the EU either sourced from or transiting through Kosovo or any area of the former Yugoslavia.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

New Deal

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will state the percentage of participants in the New Deal for 18 to 24-year-olds in *(a)* Great Britain, *(b)* Scotland and *(c)* Wales who have left the gateway to unsubsidised employment; and if he will list the areas in Scotland where a smaller percentage then the (i) Great Britain and (ii) Scottish average figures have entered unsubsidised employment at the gateway stage, including the number and percentage for each of these areas. [111279]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 22 February 2000]:* The information requested is shown in the tables.

New Deal (18 to 24-year-olds) gaining unsubsidised employment from the Gateway

	Percentage
Scotland	20
Wales	22
GB	22

Scottish units of delivery with a smaller percentage of participants (New Deal 25+) entering unsubsidised employment from the Gateway stage, than the GB average

	Unsubsidised jobs from the Gateway	*As a percentage of New Deal starts*
Tayside	797	19
Ayrshire	841	19
Dumfries and Galloway	214	18
Edinburgh, East and Mid Lothian	744	21
Fife	700	20
Glasgow	1,376	16
Renfrewshire	595	21
Caithness and Sutherland	49	19
Western Isles	36	17

Scottish units of delivery with a smaller percentage of participants (New Deal 25+) entering unsubsidised employment from the Gateway stage, than the Scotland average

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Western Isles	36	17

A recent survey has shown that 57 per cent. of young people leaving the New Deal for unknown destinations had found a job.

Sex Education

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he will publish his proposed guidelines on the teaching of sex and relationship education in schools. [112914]

Jacqui Smith: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is today issuing for consultation new draft sex and relationship education (SRE) guidance. The text of the guidance will today be placed on the Department's website. Copies will also be placed in the Libraries.

Peat Compost

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to his answer of 2 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 391W, on peat compost, what percentage of the compost used in his Department's estate gardens is peat; when use of peat compost will be phased out on his Department's estates; and if he will make a statement. [114142]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 10 March 2000]:* Peat compost is no longer purchased by my Department, or used in the Department's estate gardens. A small amount of peat remains in some planted areas. This will dissipate with the use of organic peat substitutes which are now used at all of our sites.

Education Funding (North Tyneside)

Mr. Alan Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much funding was awarded to North Tyneside Local Education Authority in each year from 1997–98 to 1999–2000 in respect of *(a)* reduction in infant class sizes, broken down by (i) revenue and (ii) capital, *(b)* the national grid for learning, *(c)* literacy programmes, *(d)* numeracy programmes, *(e)* books for schools, *(f)* truancy initiatives, *(g)* school security, *(h)* standards fund, school effectiveness, *(i)* excellence in cities, *(j)* new deal for schools, *(k)* voluntary aided school capital grant, *(l)* energy efficiency, *(m)* music programmes, *(n)* year 6 booster classes and *(o)* education SSA. [114535]

Ms Estelle Morris: The figures requested are shown in the table. For Standards Fund grants, the figures include both the Government's and the local education authority's contributions where appropriate. The figures shown for Education Standard Spending Assessment also include provision for the Authority's contribution to the Standards Fund.

Allocations to North Tyneside 1997–98 to 1999–2000

£

Initiative	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*
(a) Reduction of infant class sizes:			
(i) revenue	[1]—	—	192,000
(ii) capital	[1]—	352,000	241,000
(b) National grid for learning (Standards Fund)	[1]—	563,533	669,000
(c) Literacy programmes (Standards Fund)	20,900	276,073	347,283
(d) Numeracy programmes (Standards Fund)	[1]—	9,845	247,910
(e) Books for schools	87,500	94,781	189,562
(f) Truancy (Standards Fund)	288,400	350,607	634,440
(g) School security (Standards Fund)	85,600	85,842	87,173
(h) School effectiveness (Standards Fund)	550,700	615,917	935,253
(i) Excellence in cities (Standards Fund)	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—
(j) New Deal for Schools	406,000	613,000	1,363,628
(k) Voluntary Aided Schools Capital	348,000	87,000	109,000
(l) Energy efficiency	[1]—	—	[1]—
(m) Music programmes	[1]—	[1]—	78,289
(n) Year 6 booster classes	[1]—	50,140	170,539
(o) Education standard spending assessment[2]	67,840,000	74,460,000	77,620,000

[1] Not applicable
[2] In 1997–98 £527 million was removed from Education Standard Spending at national level for the Nursery Voucher Scheme

Class Sizes (Taunton)

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is his estimate of the average class sizes for *(a)* five, *(b)* six, *(c)* seven, *(d)* eight, *(e)* nine, *(f)* 10, *(g)* 11, *(h)* 12, *(i)* 13, *(j)* 14, *(k)* 15, *(l)* 16 and *(m)* 17-year-olds, for schools within the Taunton constituency, for (i) 1995–96, (ii) 1996–97, (iii) 1997–98, (iv) 1998–99 and (v) 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [114685]

Ms Estelle Morris: The available information on average class sizes collected in January for the Parliamentary constituency of Taunton is shown in the tables. The class size count for January 2000 is currently being undertaken, and provisional national estimates are expected to be published in April.

The Government are well on course to deliver their pledge to limit infant classes for 5, 6 and 7-year-olds to 30 or below by September 2001. In Taunton Parliamentary constituency, the latest infant class size count carried out in September 1999 showed the average size of class to be 26.2 pupils per class.

Average size of classes taught by one teacher by year group in maintained primary schools in the Parliamentary constituency of Taunton: 1996–99

Position as at January	Year groups									
	Reception	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Mixed	Overall [1]
1999										
Average class size	26.2	28.1	28.6	29.1	29.5	28.8	28.1	[2]—	29.2	28.9
Pupils	1,020	451	522	571	517	471	463	[2]—	4,144	8,212
Classes	39	16	18	19	17	15	15	[2]—	142	284
1998										
Average class size	25.6	28.7	29.6	30.9	31.1	30.8	33.1	[3]—	28.7	28.8
Pupils	920	516	533	433	436	370	397	[3]—	4,340	8,004
Classes	36	18	18	14	14	12	12	[3]—	151	278
1997										
Average class size	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	28.4
Pupils	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	7,773
Classes	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	274
1996										
Average class size	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	28.0
Pupils	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	7,481
Classes	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	[3]—	267

[1] Includes all year groups and nursery classes
[2] Not applicable (no classes of this type)
[3] Not available

Average size of classes taught by one teacher by age band in maintained secondary schools in the Parliamentary constituency of Taunton: 1996–99

Position as at January	Ages [1]				
	Middle classes	Mainly under 14s	Mainly 14 and 15	16 or older	Overall
1999					
Average class size	29.0	26.0	21.8	[2]—	24.3
Pupils	29	3,281	1,965	[2]—	—
Classes	1	126	90	[2]—	—
1998					
Average class size	22.3	25.5	22.9	[2]—	24.4
Pupils	89	3,188	2,018	[2]—	—
Classes	4	125	88	[2]—	—
1997					
Average class size	18.1	24.2	22.7	[2]—	23.4
Pupils	127	3,071	2,041	[2]—	—
Classes	7	127	90	[2]—	—
1996					
Average class size	17.8	24.9	22.3	[2]—	23.5
Pupils	142	2,767	1,982	[2]—	—
Classes	8	111	89	[2]—	—

[1] Ages at the start of the academic year (August 31)
[2] Not applicable (no classes of this type)

Performance-related Pay

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is his most recent estimate of the total cost of administering the assessment scheme in respect of performance-related pay. [114438]

Ms Estelle Morris: Headteachers will be responsible for assessing teachers against national standards at a Performance Threshold to move to the new upper pay spine proposed by the Government. DfEE has contracted Cambridge Education Associates Limited (CEA) to manage the appointment, deployment and quality assurance of external assessors who will verify, through sampling, headteachers' assessments.

The payment of external assessors is a matter for CEA, but it will be made on a pro rata basis dependent upon the number of applicants in each school.

The number of external assessors to be deployed will be dependent upon the number and distribution of teachers who apply to cross the Performance Threshold. This number will not be known until summer 2000. The total cost of administering the scheme will be dependent upon the number of assessments carried out and again this will not be known until later in 2000.

Departmental Buildings

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list *(a)* the offices (i) owned and (ii) rented by his Department and its agencies in

Scotland and *(b)* the number of staff (i) employed and (ii) that can be accommodated (1) in total and (2) at each site. [114241]

Mr. Wills: The Department has no offices in Scotland. Details of Employment Service offices in Scotland and numbers of staff employed have been placed in the Library. The Employment Service is unable to provide details of the maximum number of staff that could be accommodated at each site.

Loans (Part-time Students)

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if the proposed loan for part-time students will be *(a)* confined to hardship cases and *(b)* made available to Open University students. [115000]

Mr. Wicks: Loans for part-time students, which are being introduced later this year, will provide financial support to students on low incomes. It is our intention to make loans available to Open University students.

HEALTH

Public Consultation

Dr. Tony Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the public consultation exercises on policy matters carried out by his Department and its agencies in each of the last five years; who was consulted and by what means; how responses were analysed; how and in what form the results were transmitted to those responsible for the consultation; how the results of the consultation were published; and what analysis has been carried out of the extent and nature of policy changes resulting from the consultation. [106299]

Yvette Cooper: The Department is fully committed to public consultation, and a great many consultative exercises are carried out by the Department and throughout the NHS. However, I regret that the information sought is not collated centrally on a regular basis and an answer could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Viagra

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if people without pituitary glands qualify to receive Viagra on the NHS without referral to a consultant; and what is the basis for this approach. [111572]

Yvette Cooper: No. We consulted widely before introducing regulations on 1 July 1999 restricting the prescribing by general practitioners of treatments for impotence, including Viagra. No representations were made suggesting that men without pituitary glands should be included in the groups of patients for whom such treatments can be prescribed. We shall be reviewing the operation of the regulations after a year.

Breast Cancer Screening (Greater London)

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what changes he plans to make to the breast cancer screening service in Greater London; and if he will make a statement. [111980]

Yvette Cooper: The national National Health Service Breast Screening Programme constantly reviews standards in all breast screening units, including those in Greater London. The NHS Executive, London Regional Office is currently reviewing breast screening services in the north of Greater London.

Departmental Plant Buying

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list his Department's expenditure on plants in its *(a)* Richmond House, *(b)* Wellington House and *(c)* Skipton House buildings for each of the last two financial years. [112943]

Yvette Cooper: The cost of the provision and maintenance of internal and external plants is included as part of the overall contract cost for the provision of cleaning services to the Department's central London buildings. It is not budgeted for separately. However, our best estimate is an annual cost to the Department of about £4,000 for Wellington House and £2,000 for Skipton House.

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what expenditure his Department has incurred on the renewal or replacement since 1 January of plants at Wellington House. [112944]

Yvette Cooper: The cost of the renewal and replacement of internal and external plants forms an integral part of a lease maintenance agreement which is included in an overall contract to provide cleaning services to the Department's central London buildings. The costs of the provision and maintenance of plants are not identified separately. However, our best estimate for the cost of plant provision, maintenance and replacement since 1 January is £700.

Pilot Schemes

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many pilot schemes with end dates his Department has created in each of the last three years; what the end dates were; and if the pilot schemes have been rolled out by their end dates. [112803]

Ms Stuart: The Department regularly instigates a large number of pilot projects across a wide range of policy areas to assess their feasibility for possible national application, generally on a three year basis. The main areas covered in the last three years, with the number of projects involved, are:

Personal Medical Services

Phase 1—with effect from April 1998: 85

Phase 2—with effect from October 1999: 106

General Practitioner Commissioning Groups

with effect from April 1998 for one year only: 39

Walk-in Centres

with effect from March 2000: 07; to be followed by December by a further 29

NHS Direct

Phase 1—with effect from March 1998: 3

Phase 2—with effect from January 1999: 10 new schemes

Phase 3—with effect from November 1999: 04 new schemes

Phase 4—with effect from October 2000: 5 new schemes to follow

National Booked Admission

Phase 1—with effect from November 1998: 24

Phase 2—with effect from September 1999: 60

9 Cancer networks—with effect from September 1999: covering 43 projects

Personal Dental Services

Phase 1—with effect from October 1998: 15

Phase 2—with effect from October 1999: 23.

In addition a small number of more focused studies into more discrete, but limited, topics are also proceeding.

Details of the end dates and roll-out dates of each individual scheme could be obtained only at disproportionate cost, particularly as there is no universally agreed definition of a pilot scheme in this context. However, if the hon. Member would like specific information on any individual scheme and would let me have appropriate details, I will ensure that this information is provided.

NHS Staff

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the current average starting pay for *(a)* hospital cleaners, *(b)* hospital porters and *(c)* trainee medical laboratory science officers in the NHS. [113195]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* It is not possible to identify separately the average starting pay for hospital porters or cleaners on national terms and conditions. It is a matter for individual employers to determine the appropriate pay scales for each occupational group within the ancillary pay structure, based upon the grading definitions contained within the Ancillary Staffs Handbook.

The current pay scale for Trainee Medical Laboratory Scientific Officers (MLSOs) is:

Pay scale	£
00	7,476
01	7,726
02	7,988
03	8,260
04	8,544
05	8,839
06	9,146
07	9,463
08	9,796

Pay is negotiated in the Professional and Technical Staffs B Whitley Council. The NHS Management Side has offered to improve the pay of Trainee MLSOs. If accepted this offer would produce a new pay scale for Trainee MLSOs, effective from 1 April 1999, of:

Pay scale	£
00	9,420
01	9,747
02	10,090
03	10,443

NHS Trusts

Mr. Tony Clarke: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much money is currently owed to NHS trusts by *(a)* health care insurers and *(b)* independent providers for the care of private patients in the NHS; and for how long these debts have been outstanding. [113640]

Ms Stuart: Information on the amount of money currently owed to National Health Service trusts by healthcare insurers and independent providers cannot be separately identified.

Mobile Phones

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what plans he has to publish the findings of the investigations of the National Radiological Protection Board; [113866]

(2) what plans he has to fund further research into the health effects of emissions from mobile telecommunications masts. [113865]

Yvette Cooper: The National Radiological Protection Board was asked last year to set up an independent expert group on mobile phones. The group, chaired by Sir William Stewart FRS FRSE, is currently considering the possible health effects from the use of mobile phones, base stations and transmitters and is conducting a comprehensive assessment of existing research. The group is expected to finalise its report in April for publication in May. Detailed research plans are currently being developed and will take into account the expert group's report.

Methadone

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people are involved in methadone treatment programmes in England and Wales. [113964]

Yvette Cooper: The information requested is not available centrally. Information is available from the Regional Drug Misuse Databases on the number of users presenting to services for treatment and the drugs misused. Reliable information is not available centrally on the treatment given.

Patient Referrals

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) on how many occasions since April 1999 general practitioners have exercised their legal right to refer patients to a hospital other than that selected by their primary care group *(a)* in England and *(b)* in primary care groups in Hitchen or Harpenden; [113851]

(2) what plans he has to alter the legal right of general practitioners to refer patients to the NHS hospital of their choice; and what legislative change would be required to remove that right; [113856]

(3) if information is collected about the number of patients asking to be referred to a hospital other than that selected by their primary care group; and if he will give the outcome of such requests; [113853]

(4) if he proposes to inform *(a)* general practitioners and *(b)* patients of the legal right of general practitioners to refer their patients to a hospital other than those selected by their primary care group. [113859]

Mr. Denham: Information about individual general practitioners' referral of patients to specific hospitals or the number of patients asking to be referred to a hospital, other than the one selected by the primary care group, is not collected.

Primary care groups do not alter the general practitioner's ability to refer patients for health care services that they consider appropriate and it is for the individual general practitioner to assess their patients' health needs.

We have no plans to alter any legislation that would alter general practitioners ability to refer patients for appropriate health care services. Changes could be made only by amending the terms and conditions of services of general practitioners within the National Health Service (General Medical Services) Regulations 1992.

Creutzfeldt Jakob Disease

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what steps his Department takes to monitor the way coroners and pathologists *(a)* handle issues of contact between grieving relatives and deceased victims of CJD and *(b)* implement relevant Government guidelines; [114317]

(2) what assessment his Department has made as to whether new variant CJD can be contracted by means other than ingestion; [114315]

(3) what guidelines his Department has issued to coroners and pathologists concerning superficial contact between *(a)* grieving relatives and *(b)* bodies of deceased victims of CJD. [114316]

Yvette Cooper: The Department gets feedback from patient groups. The Human Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy Foundation, a voluntary organisation run by families of variant Creutzfeldt Jakob Disease (vCJD) patients and funded by the Department, brought to our attention that some families had been caused unnecessary distress by inappropriate restrictions placed on them regarding funeral arrangements.

The Department has recently reminded coroners, pathologists and others of the extant guidance from the Advisory Committee on Dangerous Pathogens (ACDP) and the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee (SEAC) (published in April 1998) in relation to contact with those who have died from CJD.

The guidance states that there is no need for special precautions to be taken for either burial or cremation (where the risk is described as likely to be negligible), and that superficial contact, such as touching the face, need not be discouraged. The reminder was sent to:

Pathologists

The Coroners Association

Consultants in Communicable Disease Control

Local Authorities

Funeral Directors' professional associations

Morticians.

SEAC's view is that the most likely explanation of vCJD cases to date is exposure to Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE). However, we do not know the route of infection.

The ACDP/SEAC guidance states that available epidemiological evidence suggests that normal social or routine clinical contact with a CJD patient does not represent a risk to healthcare workers, relatives and the community. The National Creutzfeldt Jakob Disease Surveillance Unit continues to gather and analyse data on dietary, occupational and medical history on vCJD cases to identify any common risk factors. So far none have emerged.

Gammahydroxybutyrate

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the health problems caused by the misuse of gammahydroxybutyrate. [114160]

Ms Stuart: We are aware that gammahydroxybutyrate can present acute health problems for some misusers. The effects are exacerbated when mixed with alcohol or other drugs and can include collapse, coma and death. Information on the dangers of gammahydroxybutyrate is included in many of the resources produced by the Health Education Authority on behalf of the Department as part of a campaign to educate 11 to 25-year-olds and parents about substance misuse.

The Government look to the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs for advice on whether a substance should be controlled under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. ACMD last considered gammahydroxybutyrate in May 1998 and concluded that misuse did not present a sufficient social problem to be controlled under this Act.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research his Department has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated on the side effects from gammahydroxybutyrate misuse in the last five years. [114247]

Ms Stuart: The Department has not commissioned any research into gammahydroxybutyrate but are aware that side effects and acute health problems including collapse, coma and death can arise from misuse. The Department has access to the research findings of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs which last considered gammahydroxybutyrate in May 1998. ACMD looked at a range of evidence including data from the National Poisons Information Service, publications in scientific journals and press reports.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what guidance he has given on the prosecution of illicit manufacturers of gammahydroxybutyrate. [114161]

Ms Stuart: Gammahydroxybutyrate (GHB) is a medicinal product and is controlled under the Medicines for Human Use (Marketing Authorisations etc.) Regulations 1994 and the Medicines Act 1968. The manufacture and supply of GHB without a licence is a criminal offence under the legislation and where there is sufficient evidence the Medicines Control Agency (MCA) will prosecute.

Briefings on GHB have been given by the MCA to:

Heads of Police Force Intelligence Bureaux

Trading Standards Officers

Environmental Health Officers.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the use of the internet as a vehicle for the purchase of gammahydroxybutyrate. [114163]

Ms Stuart: Gammahydroxybutyrate (GHB) is a medicinal product and is controlled under the Medicines for Human Use (Marketing Authorisations etc.) Regulations 1994 and the Medicines Act 1968. The Medicines Control Agency (MCA) investigates all referrals of breaches of medicines legislation.

In 1999 discussions were held with law enforcement bodies that deal with pharmaceutical crime including the use of the internet in the United States of America and European Union member states. The result was the information of an International security forum on pharmaceutical Intelligence service, Interpol and the Forum.

A special Inquiry Unit has been established by the MCA to investigate alleged breaches of medicines regulations on the internet.

Public Health

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many residents he estimates were suffering from *(a)* sexually transmitted diseases and *(b)* AIDS/HIV infections in the NHS London region in the current financial year, and in each of the last 10 financial years; [113810]

(2) how many people were being treated by the NHS for *(a)* sexually transmitted diseases and *(b)* AIDS/HIV, in the London Region in (i) the current financial year and (ii) each of the last 10 financial years; [113811]

(3) how much has been allocated by the NHS to care for and treat *(a)* sexually transmitted diseases and *(b)* AIDS/HIV in the NHS London region for (i) the next financial year, (ii) the current financial year and (iii) each of the last 10 financial years. [113812]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 10 March 2000]:* We are unable to provide an estimate as data from Genito Urinary Medicine clinics, where most sexually transmitted diseases are treated, do not include residence information.

Diagnosed HIV infected people resident in London form 60 per cent. of the total country-wide and, assuming this applies to the undiagnosed fraction as well, would result in 17,500 London residents who are HIV infected, about one third of whom have not yet had their infection diagnosed.

Using data from the annual survey of prevalent HIV infection and the unlinked anonymous surveys the following estimates have been produced from 1995 onwards. Approximately one third of these infections will be undiagnosed. These figures are based on annual surveys.

	Number
At end of:	
1998	17,500
1997	16,000
1996	15,500

Source:
PHLS (earlier data are not available and data by financial year are not available)

As statistical returns from genitourinary medicine clinics provide information on new diagnoses rather than the number of individuals treated we are unable to answer this specific question. However, readily available data on diagnoses are as follows and provide an indication of patient numbers but individuals may have more than one infection. Data for 1999 are not available yet.

Diagnoses of sexually transmitted diseases in the NHS London Region

Calendar year	*Number of STD diagnoses (excluding HIV/AIDS)*
1995	143,207
1996	143,654
1997	154,305
1998	157,324

Source:
PHLS

There are no current HIV prevalence data collected regionally or nationally for financial years. The Annual Survey of Prevalent HIV infections that are diagnosed will be able to give data for 1999 calendar year but this will not be available until later in the summer of 2000.

This annual prevalence survey of HIV infected people receiving care began to collect data nationally in 1995 and the estimated figures for London adjusted for under reporting give the following totals.

HIV infected people treated calendar year in London

	Number
1995	10,600
1996	10,600
1997	11,500
1998	13,000

Separate allocations are not made for sexually transmitted diseases. The HIV/AIDS treatment and care allocation to London health authorities for 1996–97 to 1999–2000 is as shown. Prior to 1996–97 allocations were made to regional health authorities and information on London HAs is not held centrally. Allocations for 2000–01 have not yet been determined.

£ million

	Allocations to London HAs
1996–97	134.8
1997–98	144.4
1998–99	163.6
1999–2000	164.3

The movement between years reflects adjustments to the baseline allocations in year as well as the annual cash increase.

Broomfield Hospital

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will order the three closed wards at Broomfield Hospital to be reopened until he has reached a decision on the appeal against closure being brought by the Mid Essex community health councils. [114212]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* Consultation has been carried out on these proposals, and as yet, no appeal has been received from Mid Essex Community Health Council regarding the beds at Broomfield Hospital. The community health council's appeal will be considered in line with due process, if and when it is received.

Natal Intensive Care Unit

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what annual number of obstetric deliveries is deemed to be the threshold for a trust to be able to support a natal intensive care unit. [114571]

Yvette Cooper: There are no specific thresholds. Health authorities are required to commission health care services to serve the needs of their resident populations according to local demand and circumstances.

Overseas Doctors

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the future of the Professional and Linguistic Assessment Board test for overseas doctors. [114447]

Ms Stuart: The administration of the Professional and Linguistic Assessment Board test, including both content and standards required to pass, are entirely a matter for the General Medical Council to determine.

Cancer Deaths

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the Government's proposals for reducing cancer deaths among people living in poverty in the UK. [114174]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* The "Saving Lives—Our Healthier Nation" White Paper has a central aim to improve the health of the worst off in society and narrow the health gap. It set a target to reduce death rates from cancer by 20 per cent. in those under 75 by 2010. This will involve dealing with the broader determinants of health (eg poverty, social exclusion etc.), addressing risk factors (eg by providing smoking cessation clinics in Health Action Zones), encouraging early detection and uptake of screening (especially in deprived groups and ethnic minorities), and by ensuring equity of access to high quality cancer treatment across the country as part of our national strategy to improve cancer services.

Schoolchildren (Weight Bearing)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the health risks of schoolchildren carrying excessive weight in unsuitable school bags. [114382]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* Weight bearing exercise is an important contributor to health. However, carrying excessive and unbalanced weights has the potential to contribute to musculo-skeletal injury. The risk is likely to be increased in the young, those with pre-existing skeletal problems and those who are overweight.

Through the National Healthy Schools Standards we are asking schools to consider all the factors that impact on the health of the school community. Safety is one of the specific themes of the standard and this includes the need for regular risk assessments by an identified Health and Safety representative.

Pathology

Mr. Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much was spent on Agency staff in Pathology in each NHS region in the last year for which figures are available. [114746]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is not centrally available.

Equal Opportunities

Mr. Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the membership of the boards of Primary Care Groups broken down by *(a)* ethnic origin and *(b)* gender. [114747]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 15 March 2000]:* Primary Care Group board members were asked to complete equal opportunities forms when they became accepted to a PCG board. This is not a mandatory requirement but where volunteered the information is in the table.

Primary Care Group boards

	Number of board members		
Ethnicity	*Unspecified*	*Male*	*Female*
Unspecified	1,535	722	428
Other	2	56	14
White	53	1,378	958
Pakistani	—	23	2
Indian	3	174	28
Chinese	—	9	4
Black Caribbean	—	7	11
Black African	—	14	7
Bangladeshi	1	31	4
Total	1,594	2,414	1,456
Overall total			5,464

Mr. Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many nurses, midwives and health visitors have received discretionary increments in the last three financial years, broken down by gender and ethnic origin. [114749]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 15 March 2000]:* Responsibility for payment of discretionary points to nurses, midwives and health visitors is for local NHS employers. The information requested is not available centrally.

Hospital Waiting Lists (Essex)

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the total number of people waiting for hospital treatment in the Mid-Essex Hospital Trust area; and how many have waited 12 months or more. [114724]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 15 March 2000]:* The information requested is given in the table.

Total number of patients waiting and the number of patients waiting over 12 months for hospital treatment at Mid Essex Hospital Services National Health Service Trust in January 2000

Month	*Total waiting*	*Number waiting over 12 months*
January 2000	10,233	1,118

Source:
Monthly waiting list return

Correspondence

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the hon. Member for Walsall, North will receive a reply to his letter of 18 January concerning an MRI scanner, ref: POH(3) 5608/38. [114808]

Yvette Cooper: I will let my hon. Friend have a reply to his letter as soon as possible.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Common Agricultural Policy

10. **Mr. Tynan:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what recent estimate he has made of the savings for consumers from the Agenda 2000 reform of the common agriculture policy. [113378]

Ms Quin: The Agenda 2000 reforms should result in savings of around £1 billion a year for UK consumers when all the changes have worked through. This will equate to a saving of around £65 per year for the average family of four.

14. **Mr. Cox:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what estimate he has made of the overall benefit to the UK economy of the Agenda 2000 reforms of the CAP. [113382]

Ms Quin: Once fully implemented the economic benefit to the UK is estimated to be worth around £0.5 billion per year.

17. **Mr. Borrow:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what estimate he has made of the savings to consumers that will arise from the Agenda 2000 reform of the common agricultural policy over the next three years. [113385]

Ms Quin: If price reductions are passed to retail, UK consumers will save around £250 million in 2001, £450 million in 2002 and £600 million in 2003 as a result of the Agenda 2000 reform.

Forestry Commission

12. **Mr. Chope:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he will next meet the chairman of the Forestry Commission to discuss the Commission's licensing responsibilities. [113380]

Mr. Morley: I often meet the Forestry Commission's Chairman and other senior staff to discuss current forestry issues and the Commission's responsibilities.

Animal Welfare Standards

13. **Mr. Baker:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will take steps to ensure that farmers receive prices for animal products which reward better welfare standards. [113381]

Mr. Nick Brown: The Government have always maintained that UK welfare standards offer the domestic livestock industry, particularly the pig industry, a strong marketing advantage. That is one reason why the Government have agreed to fund half of the £4.6 million welfare linked pork promotion campaign developed by the Meat and Livestock Commission.

21. **Mr. St. Aubyn:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what recent representations he has made to the European Commission concerning animal welfare standards in the agriculture sectors of member states. [113391]

Mr. Morley: My right hon. Friend the Minister wrote to Commissioner Byrne on 9 February pressing him to take action to ensure proper enforcement across the EU of the rules on welfare in transit and at slaughter.

Live Animal Exports

15. **Mr. Loughton:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what progress has been achieved since May 1997 in improving conditions for live animals exported from the UK and transported around the continent. [113383]

Mr. Morley: We introduced the overdue EU rules on animal welfare in transit immediately after coming into office, and tighter pre-export inspection procedures for livestock in May 1999. We ensure the rules are enforced strictly while live export consignments are on our territory: we have pressed the Commission to ensure the same standards throughout the EU, and welcome the review they are now carrying out.

Antibiotics (Animal Feed)

16. **Mr. Blunt:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement about the use of antibiotics in animal feed. [113384]

Ms Quin: Certain antibiotic feed additives authorised by the EU may be used as growth promoters in animals. They may be used only if they satisfy stringent statutory criteria including a requirement that, at the level permitted, they do not adversely affect human or animal health or the environment.

Genetically Modified Crops

18. **Mr. Webb:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if it is his policy that genetically modified crops should not be exploited for commercial purposes. [113386]

Ms Quin: Our policy is that UK industry should not be denied access to GM technology, provided that valid concerns are addressed. The GM industry has agreed that no GM crops will be grown on a commercial basis before the farm scale evaluation programme has been completed.

22. **Dr. Gibson:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what conclusions he has drawn from the recent OECD conference on genetically modified crops. [113392]

Ms Quin: The OECD conference held last week in Edinburgh was extremely useful in bringing together scientific experts, policy regulators and other parties interested in GM crops and food from around the world. The conference allowed a balanced debate, scrutinising the safety assessment systems for GM foods and considering whether and how GM foods and crops could serve the needs of society. It is too early to draw any firm conclusions but we await the chairman's final report with interest.

25. **Mr. Swayne:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what procedure he will follow when licensing genetically modified crop varieties. [113395]

Ms Quin: Genetically modified crops are not licensed. Releases of Genetically Modified Organisms are regulated by the Environmental Protection Act 1990 and secondary legislation made under it. The National Listing of plant varieties (which could include genetically modified varieties) is regulated by the Seeds (National Lists of Varieties) Regulations 1982. The relevant procedures are set out in the legislation.

26. **Dr. Naysmith:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what action he has taken to provide information to the public concerning the safety of genetically modified foods. [113396]

Ms Quin: The Advisory Committee on Novel Foods and Processes (ACNFP) is responsible for assessing the safety of genetically modified foods in the UK. The ACNFP already publishes agendas, reports and minutes of its meetings, committee papers and detailed assessment reports on individual GM food applications as well as an Annual Report. In addition the Committee has held a number of open meetings on issues such as postmarket surveillance.

Those seeking novel food approvals have been encouraged for many years to deposit data supporting their applications in the British Library. All new applications will however be made available electronically on the ACNFP website from now on and public comments invited, which the ACNFP can then take into account in reaching its preliminary conclusions. These conclusions will be made available for comment in turn before they are forwarded to the European Commission. The UK is encouraging other European member states to follow a similar approach.

General information about the safety of genetically modified foods is also contained on the Government GM website at www.gm-info.gov.uk. This has been widely publicised.

Mr. David Heath: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what restriction is placed on feeding chickens with unprocessed GM maize containing antibiotic-resistant marker genes in *(a)* the UK and *(b)* the EU. [113762]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* There are no restrictions on feeding GM maize to chickens, provided that the maize concerned has received a marketing consent under Council Directive 90/220 on the deliberate release of genetically modified organisms into the environment.

Mr. David Heath: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what controls are in place to prevent varieties of GM crops not approved for sale for planting in the EU being imported into the UK as animal feed. [113763]

Ms Quin: *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* Under Council Directive 90–220, on the Deliberate Release of Genetically Modified Organisms into the Environment, no viable GM material can either be grown or imported into the EU without a marketing consent.

Mr. David Heath: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what research he has commissioned into the implications for safety or welfare of animals of being fed on GM crops. [113768]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* Research to date has concentrated on the effects of processing on animal feed materials and the ability of DNA to survive processing and passage through an animal's gut. No incidental ill-effects have been detected in animals, nor have any been reported in countries where GM crops have been grown and fed to animals for a number of years.

Mr. David Heath: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what progress has been made on the proposed European Novel Feeds Regulation to ensure the labelling of GM animal feed. [113766]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* We have been pressing the Commission for some time to bring forward its proposed Novel Feeds Regulation which will contain labelling rules. Commissioner Byrne has given an undertaking to do this as soon as possible, and we expect a formal proposal to be submitted to Council later this year.

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when a decision will be taken on placing Avantis GM maize seeds on the national seed list. [114352]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* Ministers are presently considering whether or not to propose a GM forage maize variety (CHARDON LL) for addition to the National List. When this decision is taken it will be published in the *Plant Varieties and Seeds Gazette*, and persons affected by the proposed decision may then make representations and/or be heard by a person appointed by Ministers for that purpose.

Beef Farming

19. **Mr. Flight:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the economic prospects for the beef farming sector in the next twelve months. [113388]

Ms Quin: Assessment of the economic prospects for the beef farming sector is an ongoing exercise and the profitability of the sector is monitored by officials on a regular basis.

Exchange Rate

20. **Sir Robert Smith:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what recent assessment he has made of the impact of the value of the pound on the UK's agricultural sector. [113389]

Ms Quin: There is no doubt that the strength of sterling has contributed toward the present depressed state of farm incomes. Oversupply and weak prices in world commodity markets have also been important factors.

Bee Diseases

23. **Mr. Dalyell:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food pursuant to his answer of 29 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 20W, on bee diseases, what progress he has made in containing bee diseases, with special reference to the area next to the Scottish border. [113393]

Ms Quin: Measures to control bee diseases in areas close to the Scottish border are no different from elsewhere in England. The incidence of foulbrood in the border counties is low, with only one case in 1999. An advisory programme is in place to help beekeepers minimise the impact of varroosis.

Farm Incomes

24. **Mr. Liwyd:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he last met the farming unions to discuss the current levels of income in each sector of agriculture; and if he will make a statement. [113394]

Ms Quin: My right hon. Friend, the Minister's most recent meeting with the President of the NFU was on 22 February. My right hon. Friend and other MAFF Ministers are in frequent contact with the farming unions to discuss farming issues.

Organic Farming

27. **Mr. Kidney:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what recent representations he has received supporting the setting of targets to increase the level of conversions to organic farming. [113397]

Mr. Morley: I have received about 60 letters in support of the setting of targets. I have met my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Joan Ruddock) and the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler), with representatives of "Sustain", to discuss the Organic Food and Farming Targets Bill.

Pork

Mr. Hope: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what recent assistance the Government have provided to the Meat and Livestock Commission for the promotion of pork. [113379]

Mr. Morley: The Government have agreed to fund half of a £4.6 million welfare linked pork promotion campaign developed by the Meat and Livestock Commission.

Funding Schemes

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the funding schemes administered by his Department, indicating the total funds of each scheme and the administration costs of each scheme as a percentage of the total funds. [112495]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 2 March 2000]:* Information relating administration costs to expenditure by scheme is not available from existing cash-based systems. However, using information drawn from the 1998–99 Shadow Resource Accounts for the Department, the total cost of departmental objectives and the percentage that relates to administration costs are as follows:

£ million

MAFF objective	*Total cost*	*Administration cost*	*Percentage*
To protect public health in relation to food and animal diseases transmissible to humans	275.3	226	82.1
To sustain and enhance the rural and marine environments and public enjoyment of the amenities they provide and to promote forestry	101.3	39.9	39.4
To secure a more economically rational CAP which gives a better deal to consumers and taxpayers and pays due regard to the needs of the environment	72.6	2.7	3.7
To assist the development of efficient markets in which internationally competitive food, fish and agricultural industries can thrive	215.1	93.3	43.4
To enhance economic opportunity and social development in rural and coastal communities in a manner consistent with public enjoyment of the amenities which they offer	9.8	2.8	28.6
To administer payments under the CAP fairly and in full accordance with EU requirements	[1]1,690.6	70.5	42.
To conserve fish stocks for future generations and secure a sustainable future for the sea fishing industry	37.1	20.2	54.4
To ensure that farmed animals and fish are protected by high welfare standards and do not suffer unnecessary pain or distress	15.8	8	50.6
To reduce risk to people and the developed and natural environment from flooding and coastal erosion	73.6	5.1	6.9
To safeguard the continuing availability to the consumer of adequate supplies of wholesome, varied and reasonably priced food and drink	3.5	1.5	42.9

[1] Includes receipts from the EU

Pig Farmers

Mr. Cox: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how much was paid in subsidies to pig farmers in the UK for the year 1999. [113082]

Ms Quin: The CAP pigmeat regime contains no provision for paying subsidies direct to pig farmers. However, the European Commission spent over £200 million in 1999 supporting the pigmeat market, by the use of export refunds and aids to private storage.

Lindane

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what advice he has received regarding use of Lindane since the meeting of the Advisory Committee on Pesticides in York on 24 February; and when he expects a decision to be announced. [113616]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 9 March 2000]:* At its meeting on 24 February the Advisory Committee on Pesticides considered an evaluation of scientific data concerning the exposure to lindane of members of the public using lindane products in their gardens for controlling garden pests. The Committee concluded that these pose no unacceptable risk and have recommended that approvals for this particular use should continue. The Committee also suggested a number of steps that might be taken to improve the packaging of such products to minimise any potential risks in their usage. The Committee's recommendations are currently being considered by Ministers who will announce their conclusions shortly.

Farm Subsidies (Shropshire)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many farmers in *(a)* Shrewsbury and Atcham and *(b)* Shropshire received subsidy payments in each £10,000 band up to £100,000 in the last year for which information is available; and if he will make a statement. [114687]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 14 March 2000]:* The figures for Shrewsbury and Atcham could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

The figures for 1998 subsidy payments (UK and EU contributions) in Shropshire are as follows:

	Number
Up to £10,000	1,990
£10,001-£20,000	443
£20,001-£30,000	248
£30,001-£40,000	115
£40,001-£50,000	46
£50,001-£60,000	29
£60,001-£70,000	24
£70,001-£80,000	12
£80,001-£90,000	7
£90,001-£100,000	5

Agri-environmental Schemes

Mrs. Dean: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how much his Department has spent on agri-environmental schemes in the financial year to date; and how much was spent in 1996–97. [113376]

Mr. Nick Brown: Payments to farmers under agri-environmental schemes in England were £44.4 million in the 1996–97 financial year and are expected to be £87.4 million in 1999–2000. This is an increase of 97 per cent. over the three year period. Our target this year for the Countryside Stewardship Scheme is to enter into around 3,000 new agreements compared to around 1,300 in 1999.

"Agriculture in the United Kingdom"

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he expects the latest volume of "Agriculture in the United Kingdom" to be published. [115480]

Mr. Nick Brown: "Agriculture in the United Kingdom 1999" was published today and copies have been placed in the Library of the House.

Flood Defence

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on his response to the Flood Defence Emergency Response Project, established by the Environment Agency. [115481]

Mr. Morley: The Flood Defence Emergency Response (FDER) Project was established by the Environment Agency as part of its response to the Easter 1998 floods. Membership of the Project Team comprised representatives of the Environment Agency, the Local Government Association, the Association of Chief Police Officers, the Chief and Assistant Chief Fire Officers Association and the Association of Inland Navigation Authorities, represented by British Waterways.

The Project's general remit was to review existing local arrangements for responding to and exercising major flooding emergencies; to make recommendations for improvement; and to define the roles of the organisations involved.

I have seen the FDER Project Report and the Project team is to be congratulated on its positive contribution in helping to bring about improvements to the arrangements for flood emergency response. It is important that its recommendations are implemented at local level by the organisations involved in emergency response. I am not, however, persuaded that it is appropriate to establish a standing National Joint Strategic Flood Group in the terms described.

Bovine TB

Charlotte Atkins: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he expects to bring further areas into the badger culling trial recommended by Professor Krebs to address questions about the incidence of tuberculosis in cattle. [115516]

Ms Quin: The next two sets of badger culling trial areas have now been identified. One will be located in Staffordshire/Derbyshire, and the other in Devon/Somerset. These are the seventh and eighth areas to be enrolled in the trial, and we expect to announce the remaining areas later this year. The Government are committed to a wide-ranging research and control strategy

to find a science-based solution to TB in cattle. The badger culling trial is an important element of that strategy.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Public Trust Office

Mr. Love: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will report on the progress of the reform of the Public Trust Office; and if he will make a statement. [114698]

Jane Kennedy: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King) on 8 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 132W.

Starrs Case

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what progress the Government are making in considering the implications of the Starrs case in Scotland for the judicial system in England and Wales. [113405]

Mr. Lock: The Lord Chancellor announced on 29 November that he was considering the implications which the judgment in Scotland may have for the part-time judiciary in England and Wales. He is considering all part-time appointments, their terms and conditions and tenure with a view to considering whether any changes need to be made. That review is being undertaken with all deliberate speed and a statement will be made as soon as possible.

Cheshire Magistrates Courts Committee

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will list the membership of the County Committee for Cheshire indicating the home towns of the members and the bench on which they sit, and if he will list the county and magistrates' courts that the Committee is considering for closure. [115030]

Jane Kennedy: There are five members on the Cheshire Magistrates Courts Committee. Miss Baines and Mr. Darby, who sit on the Ellesmere Port & Neston Bench, reside in Neston; Mr. Fletcher, who sits on the Chester Bench, resides in Chester; Mrs. Mackenzie, who sits on the South Cheshire Bench, resides in Holmes Chapel; and Mr. Robinson, who sits on the Macclesfield Bench, resides in Altrincham.

Decisions on the future of magistrates courts are for the Cheshire Magistrates Courts Committee to determine, after consultation with the paying authority.

At present, no formal determination has been made by the Cheshire Magistrates Courts Committee to close any of its magistrates courts. However, the Committee recently consulted on proposals for the closure of the Park Green Court in Macclesfield and the Patten Hall Court in Warrington. The closing date for representations was 29 February 2000. The Committee proposes to make a final decision at its meeting scheduled for 17 March.

Proposals for the closure of a county court are not the responsibility of the Magistrates Courts Committee. They are dealt with by the Court Service.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Benefits Agency (Scotland)

Mr. Browne: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many *(a)* inquiries and *(b)* requests for assistance about constituency problems have been received from members of the Scottish Parliament by the Benefits Agency Scottish Parliamentary Relations Unit since it was established; and if he will list the numbers according to *(a)* constituency and *(b)* originating MSP. [113648]

Angela Eagle: The information is not available in the format requested as correspondence between Members of the Scottish Parliament and this Department is treated as confidential. Such information as is available is as follows.

The Benefits Agency, Scottish Parliamentary Relations Unit (SPRU) deals with correspondence received by the Chief Executive and Departmental Ministers. Since it was established in October 1999 SPRU has dealt with seven inquiries and five requests for assistance with customers' problems from MSPs. In addition 31 pieces of correspondence have been received from MPs who are also MSPs.

Staff Posts (Risk Assessments)

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what were the main results of the risk assessment of staff posts conducted by his Department last year; and if he will place a copy in the Library. [113782]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 9 March 2000]:* The risk assessment concluded that there are no additional posts that can be regarded as especially sensitive and that the most effective way of managing the risk of internal security breaches is through robust management controls and checks. Such controls are constantly reviewed and were recently strengthened. We are actively considering the introduction of criminal record checks for new recruits.

A copy of the document has been placed in the Library.

Child Poverty

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what measure he will use to assess progress towards the achievement of the Government's objective of eliminating child poverty. [114203]

Mr. Bayley: On 21 September 1999, we published the document "Opportunity for All" which sets out our strategy for tackling the causes of poverty and social exclusion. The report includes a range of indicators against which we can monitor our progress in tackling these causes and overcoming the problems of people living in poverty.

Further details on all the indicators in the "Opportunity for All" report have been placed in the Library.

Housing Benefit

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many private renting tenants were in receipt of Housing Benefit in *(a)* Greater London and *(b)* Enfield for each year since 1990; what was the average Housing Benefit paid in each of those years; and if he will make a statement. [114637]

Angela Eagle: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

February	*Total private renting tenants*	*Average Housing Benefit (£ per week)*
Greater London		
1993	279,000	52.90
1994	325,000	60.30
1995	351,000	66.60
1996	365,000	70.00
1997	353,000	72.40
1998	335,000	73.70
1999	318,000	75.30
Enfield		
1993	6,010	53.00
1994	7,080	60.70
1995	7,480	68.90
1996	8,530	75.10
1997	9,360	78.20
1998	8,920	79.40
1999	8,620	79.70

Notes:

1. The figures supplied are for February of each financial year.
2. The figures for caseload have been rounded to the nearest thousand for Great Britain and to the nearest 10 for the Local Authority.
3. The figures for average Housing Benefit have been rounded to the nearest 10 pence.
4. Data for any authority that did not supply information will have been estimated.

Source:

Housing Benefit Management Information System. Quarterly 100 per cent. caseload inquiries taken in February of each year since 1993.

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what progress has been made on the standardisation of Housing Benefit administration and delivery by local authorities; and if he will make a statement. [114697]

Angela Eagle: We aim to transform the delivery of Housing Benefit so that local authorities provide a faster, more accurate service which is more secure against fraud, and which provides value for money and takes account of the views and needs of residents and taxpayers.

We are using the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate to help drive up standards of administration through its programme of inspections, working in partnership with local authorities to identify both areas for improvement and good practices. In February 1999 the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate published a good practice guide that was sent to all local authorities which was followed by a programmed series of seminars for local authority managers. An updated version of the good practice guide will be published later this year.

In appropriate cases my right hon. Friend will be prepared to exercise powers under section 139D of the Social Security Administration Act 1992 to direct an authority to attain improved standards of administration following a report from the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate.

In addition, we are setting Best Value performance indicators from next month, which target key areas such as speed of delivery, accuracy and security. Local authorities will be required to set and meet challenging targets against these indicators and demonstrate that they are achieving continuous improvements in the standards of service they provide.

Disability Living Allowance

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what action he is taking to improve the uptake of Disability Living Allowance. [114726]

Mr. Bayley: The number of people receiving Disability Living Allowance and total expenditure on this benefit are continuing to increase. However, around 40 per cent. of claims are unsuccessful, because the claimant does not satisfy the qualifying conditions. Against this background, our priorities are to look at ways of improving the information we provide about these benefits and to make it easier for people to supply us with the details we need to decide entitlement. We are also trying to develop clearer and more secure gateways, so that it is easier for people to know whether they may be entitled. These initiatives have involved extensive and continuing discussions with disabled people and their representatives, and with disability experts.

Widows' SERPS

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he will make a decision on the future of widows' SERPS. [114971]

Mr. Rooker: As my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State announced on 15 March, if a person dies before 6 October 2002, their spouse can continue to inherit a maximum of 100 per cent. of their SERPS entitlement. The spouse of a person dying on or after that date will be able to inherit a maximum of 50 per cent. An Inherited SERPS Scheme will be established for people who may have relied on misleading information about SERPS inheritance provisions and who would otherwise have acted differently.

Leaflet Costs

Mr. Ashdown: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is his estimate of the cost to his Department of re-printing the leaflet, "You have a Choice", on the payment of benefits and pensions through post offices; and if he will make a statement. [114183]

Mr. Rooker: This was a joint DSS and Post Office exercise. The cost of re-printing the leaflet was split between the Post Office and the Department. Our contribution was £10,000.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Light Dues

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on light dues. [115342]

Mr. Hill: I am pleased to announce that there will be no changes to the light dues for 2000–01. Current rates were set in 1997, when charges were reduced by an average of 4.6 per cent., following four years of stability. The ability to maintain light dues at current levels is an indication of the General Lighthouse Authorities' continuing efforts to achieve greater efficiency.

Housing Transfers

Maria Eagle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will announce the 2000–01 housing transfers programme. [115220]

Mr. Raynsford: I am today announcing the names of the 22 local authorities which will be able to proceed, on a voluntary basis and subject to the approval of their tenants, with proposals to carry out 23 transfers of all or part of their housing stock to Registered Social Landlords in 2000–01. The programme will involve over 160,000 dwellings in large scale voluntary transfers, generating capital receipts of over £940 million.

Transfers can offer benefits for tenants. The new landlord must plan for proper maintenance and future repairs. Increased investment means that any backlog of repairs can be carried out more quickly than if the properties had remained in local authority ownership. Rent increases are normally limited by a guarantee that rents will not rise by more than 1 per cent. above inflation for the first five years.

But housing transfers are voluntary and may only take place if tenants are in favour. The consent of the Secretary of State is also required before a transfer can proceed and will not be granted if it appears that a majority of tenants do not wish the transfer to proceed.

The 2000–01 programme reflects the Government's commitment to support a continuing programme of transfers as a means of generating private finance to repair and improve the condition of social housing.

Sunderland City Council and Birmingham City Council have applied for a place on this year's programme but I have given them more time to develop their transfer proposals.

Four of the authorities on the 2000–01 programme—Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council, Calderdale Metropolitan Council, Coventry City Council and Walsall Metropolitan Council—expect to have housing debt remaining in their Housing Revenue Account (HRA) after their stock is transferred. This is because the capital receipt will not be sufficient to clear all of the debt in their HRA. Under the new arrangements, announced on 16 December 1999, the Government are prepared to use a one-off payment to assist those authorities repay their overhanging debt. A guidance note setting out the detailed arrangements has been issued to all local authorities and a copy is available on the DETR website.

The authorities who have successfully gained a place on the programme, together with the intended recipient RSL, are as follows:

(a) a disposal by Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council of not more than 606 dwelling-houses to a new subsidiary of Chantry Housing Association;

(b) a disposal by Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council of not more than 10,126 dwelling-houses to a registered social landlord;

(c) a disposal by Calderdale Metropolitan Borough Council of not more than 13,494 dwelling-houses to a registered social landlord;

(d) a disposal by Chester City Council of not more than 7,100 dwelling-houses to Chester and District Housing Trust;

(e) a disposal by Chichester District Council of not more than 5,510 dwelling-houses to Chichester District Community Housing;

(f) a disposal by Coventry City Council of not more than 22,104 dwelling-houses jointly to Whitefriars Homes North and Whitefriars Homes South;

(g) a disposal by East Northamptonshire District Council of not more than 3,540 dwelling-houses to East Northamptonshire Housing;

(h) a disposal by East Staffordshire Borough Council of not more than 6,015 dwelling-houses to Trent and Dove Housing;

(i) a disposal by Fylde Borough Council of not more than 1,964 dwelling-houses to New Fylde Housing;

(j) a disposal by Horsham District Council of not more than 4,807 dwelling-houses to Saxon Weald Homes Ltd.;

(k) disposals by Manchester City Council of not more than 468 dwelling-houses on the Knutsford estate to Manchester Methodist Housing Association, and not more than 669 dwelling-houses on the Handforth estate to a registered social landlord;

(l) a disposal by Mendip District Council of not more than 4,799 dwelling-houses to a registered social landlord;

(m) a disposal by the London Borough of Richmond of not more than 8,780 dwelling-houses to Richmond Housing Partnership;

(n) a disposal by South Bedfordshire District Council of not more than 6,282 dwelling-houses to a registered social landlord;

(o) a disposal by Staffordshire Moorlands District Council of not more than 3,274 dwelling-houses to a registered social landlord;

(p) a disposal by Torbay Council of not more than 3,127 dwelling-houses to Riviera Housing Trust Ltd.;

(q) five disposals by Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council of not more than 28,785 dwelling-houses to five registered social landlords which are part of Walsall Housing Group;

(r) a disposal by Waverley Borough Council of not more than 5,715 dwelling-house to a registered social landlord;

(s) a disposal by West Lancashire District Council of not more than 8,530 dwelling-houses to a registered social landlord;

(t) a disposal by West Oxfordshire District Council of not more than 3,884 dwelling-houses to a registered social landlord;

(u) a disposal by West Wiltshire District Council of not more than 3,438 dwelling-houses to West Wiltshire Housing Society;

(v) a disposal by Wycombe District Council of not more than 7,659 dwelling-houses to Wycombe 2000 Housing.

Water Pollution

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many aquifers in England have been polluted to the extent that the water was unfit for human consumption in each year since 1995. [112816]

Mr. Mullin: The Environment Agency does not have evidence that pollution events have led to any major aquifer becoming unsuitable for the supply of water for human consumption since 1995. Water from aquifers is, however, treated by water companies before being put into public supply using disinfection and such other processes as are necessary to comply with the standards for drinking water quality.

London Underground Escalators

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the arrangements are for assisting *(a)* disabled and *(b)* elderly passengers when London Underground escalators are taken out of service. [113078]

Mr. Hill: These are operational matters for the London Underground who have informed me that regular announcements are being made at the affected stations and there is a comprehensive poster campaign to keep customers informed. London Transport's Unit for Disabled Passengers provides a comprehensive advice and information service for disabled people and is providing guidance on other routes to specified destinations. In addition Customer Care Assistants are trained to help people who need orientation or special assistance.

Sites of Special Scientific Interest

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) how many of the schemes to protect sites of special scientific interest from the impact of *(a)* abstraction and *(b)* sewage effluent allowed for in Ofwat's final determination of water prices are due for completion in *(a)* 2001–02, *(b)* 2002–03, *(c)* 2003–04, *(d)* 2004–05 and *(e)* 2005–06; [114152]

(2) how many schemes have been allowed for in Ofwat's final determination on water and sewerage charges to protect sites of special scientific interest from *(a)* abstraction and *(b)* sewage effluent. [114151]

Mr. Mullin: Price limits set by the Director General of Water Services include provision for the financing of 53 schemes to protect SSSIs in England and Wales from over-abstraction and 104 schemes aimed wholly or partially at protecting SSSIs from the effects of sewage effluent. The phasing of these schemes in relation to others being carried out as part of the total programme of environmental investment is still under discussion. The Environment Agency will publish the final programme, with completion dates for individual schemes, shortly. I will ensure that the hon. Gentleman receives a copy of the final programme.

Renewable Energy

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if it is his policy to regard energy from waste schemes as renewable energy; and if he will make a statement. [114149]

Mr. Mullin: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my hon. Friend the Minister for Competitiveness on 15 March 2000, *Official Report*, columns 198–99W.

London Underground

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list those stations and length of line which are currently the responsibility of London Underground Limited which under his PPP proposals would become the responsibility of *(a)* London Underground's proposed supervisory subsidiary companies and *(b)* the PPP contracting companies and their sub-contractors; and if he will make a statement. [114192]

Mr. Hill: London Underground Limited will retain responsibility for the operation of services and for safety at all those stations and on all those lines for which it is currently responsible. Under the PPP proposals an infrastructure company will enter into a long term service contract with London Underground for the provision of infrastructure services—primarily, maintenance and renewal—for each of three groupings of lines:

(i) "sub-surface", comprising the Circle, District, East London, Hammersmith and City and Metropolitan lines;

(ii) "BCV", comprising the Bakerloo, Central, Victoria and Waterloo and City lines; and

(iii) "JNP", comprising the Jubilee, Northern and Piccadilly lines.

In each case, the contractor will be responsible for the maintenance, and where appropriate enhancement and renewal, of the infrastructure that London Underground uses to deliver its passenger services, including rolling stock, track, signalling, stations and other civil structures such as tunnels and bridges.

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the latest date by which decisions will be taken about the two deep-level tube PPP contracts; and what residual powers the Mayor of London will have on this matter once the contracts have been allocated. [114193]

Mr. Hill: Bids for the two deep tube infrastructure contracts are due to be returned at the end of this month. No timetable has been set for the completion of contract negotiations. The Mayor will be responsible from July for a range of transport services in London excluding the London Underground, and will take over full responsibility for the Underground after the PPP is established.

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will place in the Library the evidence which underlay his conclusion in respect of the value for money provided by *(a)* the PPP for the London Underground and *(b)* the letting of separate contracts for the same work by London Underground; and if he will make a statement. [114194]

Mr. Hill: The Government are confident that the PPP for London Underground will deliver better value for money than a wholly public sector option. We shall approve the contracts only if the private sector bids demonstrate best value when compared with a rigorously constructed public sector comparator benchmark.

The comparator will be published once the PPP negotiations are complete. To publish the results any earlier would expose the taxpayer's negotiating position, and so jeopardise our chances of getting best value.

To let a series of separate contracts could be expected to create serious scale diseconomies when compared with the PPP approach.

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was his Department's role in the authorisation of London Underground Ltd.'s expenditure, between 20 March 1998 and 13 November 1999, on consultancy work in respect of the PPP and restructuring of London Underground; what estimate he has made of the final cost of the consultancy for this purpose; and if he will list *(a)* the consultants concerned, and the amount paid to each, and *(b)* summarise the work each of them has been asked to do. [114197]

Mr. Hill: London Transport's expenditure on external consultants for the public-private partnership for the London Underground is regularly monitored by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. London Transport will not know the overall requirements or costs for external advice until the PPP transactions have been completed, but the Government are working with LT to ensure that we receive the best advice while minimising the overall costs of implementing the PPP.

The main consultants employed by London Transport, and the areas on which they provide professional advice, are:

PriceWaterhouseCoopers (financial)

Freshfields (legal)

Ove Arup and Partners (engineering)

Arthur Andersen (operations entity design)

PA Consulting (infrastructure entities design and financial modelling)

Hornagold and Hills (project management)

Insignia Richard Ellis (property)

Marsh (insurance)

Bacon & Woodrow (pensions).

For reasons of commercial confidentiality, it is not possible to give a figure for the value of individual contracts, though we will continue to publish updated aggregate figures periodically in line with the commitment given by the then Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Ms Jackson) on 13 January last year.

Vehicle Operating Licences

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what provision there is *(a)* for prescribing in which newspapers public notices of applications for vehicle operating licences must be posted, and *(b)* of stipulating whether these should be (i) local and (ii) regional newspapers. [114319]

Mr. Hill: The Goods Vehicles (Licensing of Operators) Act 1995 requires a goods vehicle operator to arrange for notice of his application for an operator's license to be

published in one or more local newspapers circulating in the locality.

If a Traffic Commissioner believes that the application has not been correctly advertised in this way he may refuse the application.

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will amend the regulations and processes involved in granting vehicle operating licences for premises to bring them within the process for determining planning applications. [114320]

Mr. Hill: We have no immediate plans to amend legislation. Local authority planning powers are entirely separate from those of Traffic Commissioners. The two systems are designed to complement each other.

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make an assessment of the effectiveness of the process of posting public notices of applications for vehicle operating licences in a newspaper circulating in the place where the premises to be licensed are situated. [114318]

Mr. Hill: The practice of advertising applications for goods vehicle operator licences in local newspapers has been considered in past reviews of the operators licensing systems, but no changes were made. In 1996, a pilot project was carried out whereby staff at two Traffic Area Offices placed the advertisements in newspapers, rather than the operator. There was found to be no significant increase in the number of representations received during the trial period. We keep the process under review but have no immediate plans to change it.

Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will take steps to afford the landscape in areas of outstanding natural beauty the same degree of protection as that which applies in the national parks. [114340]

Mr. Meacher: Current planning policy provides Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) with a high degree of protection similar to that applicable in National Parks. Planning Policy Guidance (PPG 7: The Countryside—Environmental Quality and Economic and Social Development) requires policies and development control decisions affecting AONBs to favour conservation of the natural beauty of the landscape. The environmental effects of new proposals will be a major consideration, although it will also be appropriate to have regard to the economic and social well-being of the areas. It would normally be inconsistent with the aims of designation to permit the siting of major industrial or commercial development in these areas and only proven national interest and lack of alternative sites can justify an exception. Applications for mineral workings or new roads must also be subject to the most rigorous examination.

We expect to make an announcement soon about measures to conserve and enhance designated Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Council Tax

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list in rank order the 20 local authorities with the highest percentage of their area's housing falling in Band A of the council tax, indicating in each case the percentage of the total housing stock that is *(a)* unfit and *(b)* vacant. [114341]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The table lists in rank order the 20 authorities with the highest percentage of dwellings in Band A, showing in each case the percentage of the total housing stock for that area that is unfit and vacant.

The 20 local authorities with the highest percentage of dwellings in Band A

Local authority	*Percentage falling in Band A*	*Percentage of housing stock* [1] *(a) Unfit*	*(b) Vacant*
Easington	83.7	14.3	5.3
Kingston upon Hull	73.7	3.7	6.2
Wansbeck	73.3	9.2	5.3
Derwentside	73.1	4.1	4.5
Sedgefield	71.1	2.8	2.4
Manchester	70.1	7.0	5.7
Nottingham City	68.0	6.0	2.4
South Tyneside	67.9	2.8	3.5
Wear Valley	67.7	[1]5.5	[1]6.7
Sunderland	67.6	6.9	3.5
Liverpool	67.6	[1]13.7	8.1
Gateshead	66.3	5.8	3.0
Bolsover	65.8	7.7	5.4
Barnsley	65.3	6.2	4.2
Pendle	64.8	14.5	5.5
Burnley	64.5	23.0	9.9
Stoke on Trent	64.3	[1]17.7	4.1
Hartlepool	64.0	6.2	3.7
Blyth Valley	63.8	11.8	2.6
Leicester	63.6	[1]12.6	[1]5.2

[1] Figures for unfit and vacant housing of the Other Public Sector stock, which includes housing owned by Government Agencies, Regional, Health, Police and Fire authorities, were unavailable for these authorities from the 1999 HIP returns. This sector covers a very small percentage of the overall total housing stock.

Source:

DETR annual Housing Investment Programme (HIP) (Operational Information) returns) 1999

Planning

Mr. Ruffley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his oral statement of 7 March 2000, *Official Report*, columns 863–65, on planning, what assessment he has made of the predicted need for new houses in Suffolk by *(a)* 2005 and *(b)* 2020. [114343]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Secretary of State will shortly announce his response to the recommendations of the Panel, which conducted a public examination into draft regional planning guidance for East Anglia. There will be full public consultation before the final guidance is issued.

Car Mileage

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to require information about car mileage to be notified to the DVLA when the car is sold, and if he will make a statement. [114495]

Mr. Hill: DVLA already has a voluntary mileage recording scheme in place and there are plans to extend this once equipment becomes available. A mandatory mileage declaration scheme will be introduced as soon as the necessary primary legislation is in place.

Lifejackets

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the efficiency of the safety tests carried out by classification societies related to lifejackets; and on what date the approval was rescinded. [114529]

Mr. Hill: The Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) regularly monitors the performance of the Classification Societies which carry out test and approval for lifejackets and other equipment. The MSA certificate of type approval for the lifejackets carried by the Sleipner, issued by Bureau Veritas, was withdrawn on 24 January 2000.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the result of the Maritime and Coastguard Agency investigation into the safety of lifejackets following the loss of the Sleipner ferry. [114528]

Mr. Hill: Following the loss of the Sleipner, the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) worked in close liaison with the Norwegian and Italian authorities to test the lifejackets used on board the vessel at the time of the accident.

MCA contracted the Robert Gordon Institute of Technology in Aberdeen to carry out comprehensive tests of the performance of the lifejacket. These tests were witnessed by the manufacturers, the Classification Societies Bureau Veritas and RINa, as well as the MCA. The tests demonstrated that the lifejacket was unable to meet the International Maritime Organization (IMO) requirements.

As a result of the tests, Bureau Veritas withdrew the approval of the lifejacket. MCA issued a Press Release drawing attention to UK ship owners that this lifejacket should be replaced on all UK ships.

Safe Manning Certificates

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many prosecutions for breaches of safe manning certificates have taken place in the last 12 months. [114526]

Mr. Hill: There have been no prosecutions in the United Kingdom for breaches of regulations relating to Safe Manning documents in the last 12 months and there are no such prosecutions currently pending.

Voyage Data Recorders

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will introduce legislation to ensure that all UK vessels carry voyage data recorders. [114524]

Mr. Hill: The International Maritime Organisation (IMO) is actively considering international regulations for the carriage of Voyage Data Recorders (VDR), which will next be discussed at the IMO Maritime Safety Committee (MSC) in May 2000. At the European level, Council Directive 1999/35/EC, which was adopted on 29 April 1999, provides for the fitting of voyage data recorders to roll-on/roll-off ferries and high-speed passenger craft. Implementation is to be no later than 30 months after the publication of IEC standard No. 61996 or by 1 January

2001, whichever of these dates comes later. UK legislation will apply the international requirements to UK vessels.

Inspection of Vessels

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many random inspections of vessels in UK ports have taken place in the last 12 months, and how many prosecutions resulted from these inspections. [114527]

Mr. Hill: 5,303 inspections of vessels by officers of the Maritime and Coastguard Agency took place in the United Kingdom in the period 1 March 1999 to 29 February 2000.

Three prosecutions resulted from these inspections.

Road Hauliers (Incentive Payments)

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to eliminate risks posed by the practice of payment by incentive by road hauliers. [114519]

Mr. Hill: All road hauliers, freight operators and drivers must abide by the road traffic regulations on, for example, the fitting and use of speed limiters and drivers' hours. Within the context of these and other regulations governing the way in which the industry is operated, payment schemes are a matter for industry itself. The Vehicle Inspectorate collates intelligence on vehicle operators and, where there is a suggestion that the payment of incentives is encouraging malpractice, they will investigate.

Multi-agency Stops

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many multi-agency stops were carried out by his Department with other agencies in the last 12 months; where they took place; and how many multi-agency stops were carried out in 1997–98. [114534]

Mr. Hill: The police organised seven national, co-ordinated multi-agency enforcement exercises in 1999–2000, which were supported by Vehicle Inspectorate and other enforcement agencies. Each exercise consisted of checks on vehicles carried out at between 70 and 100 sites throughout Great Britain, including Motorway Service Areas, Weighbridge Sites, Goods Vehicle Test Stations and other roadside locations.

Seven similar exercises were organised by the police in 1998–99; an additional check was also arranged to inspect vehicles travelling to and from ports serving the Irish Sea. Six exercises were organised in 1997–98.

Unseaworthy Vessels

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many prosecutions of companies owning unseaworthy vessels took place in *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1998–99 and *(c)* 1999–2000. [114523]

Mr. Hill: There have been no prosecutions of companies owning unseaworthy vessel in *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1998–99 and *(c)* 1999–2000

However the owner and operator, as individuals, were convicted in 1999 of unsafe operation of a ship of the Belize registered ROYAL 1.

Shipping Safety Regulations

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will take steps to introduce higher penalties for the evasion of safety regulations on *(a)* United Kingdom ships and *(b)* foreign ships using United Kingdom ports; [114522]

(2) if he will take steps to introduce higher penalties for the evasion of safety regulations on *(a)* UK ships and *(b)* foreign ships using UK ports. [114701]

Mr. Hill: It is Government policy to follow up all significant breaches of the safety aspects of Merchant Shipping legislation to determine the appropriate action in particular cases, up to and including prosecution. There is no evidence that the available sanctions, which include detention of ships, fines and, in one recent case, imprisonment, are inappropriate.

Jubilee Line

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will direct London Underground to conduct an inquiry into continuing delays on the Jubilee Line, the operation and use of doors on the westbound platform at Westminster station, the operation of doors on the eastbound platform at Westminster station on the evening of 7 March and the delay to a southbound train at Baker Street station on the morning of 8 March. [114324]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* I note my right hon. Friend's request for an inquiry. However, problems are not unusual when bedding in a new railway, and LUL have informed me that they are doing all they can to identify and resolve recurring faults.

The incidents referred to are operational matters for London Underground Ltd. Platform edge doors are new technology for London Underground and, despite driver training, there were some initial problems, not only at Westminster, with operating procedures. This situation has improved as drivers have become more expert at handling the new equipment. There are however occasional faults. I understand that on 7 March the doors on the eastbound train failed to close at Westminster station. The train was taken out of passenger service and replaced. The initial delay was 18 minutes and the whole of the Jubilee Line was delayed as a consequence. A number of trains were cancelled as a result of the delay. New software to eliminate faults is currently under test.

I am advised that on 8 March southbound delays resulted from traction current problems between Baker Street and Finchley Road.

Tenant Participation Compact

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the number of local authorities which will not be in a position to introduce a tenant participation compact by 1 April; what action is being taken to ensure that authorities enter into a compact at the earliest opportunity; and if he will make a statement. [114699]

Mr. Mullin: Research commissioned by my Department between April and September 1999 showed that, one year ahead of implementing best value and tenant participation compacts, 10 per cent. of authorities were proactive in preparing for implementation, 70 per cent. were planning for implementation but not at an advanced stage, and the remaining 20 per cent. were reluctant to implement. We expect preparations to have progressed since then and will be looking at whether local authorities have introduced compacts through this year's annual Housing Investment Programme (HIP) process.

Local authority performance on tenant participation will continue to feed into the HIP assessment process through which Government allocate housing capital resources. Under Best Value, local authority delivery of what is agreed in compacts will also be subject to scrutiny by the new Housing Inspectorate.

Registered Social Landlords

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proposals he has to encourage the rehabilitation of run-down property by registered social landlords; and if he will make a statement. [114695]

Mr. Mullin: Each year the Housing Corporation invites registered social landlords to bid for grants to build new properties and to rehabilitate existing ones. 25.3 per cent. of the 2000–01 programme for rent, amounting to £147.48 million, has been allocated for the rehabilitation of properties.

Home Improvement Grants

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will introduce measures to allow properties that have received home improvement grants over 25 years ago to receive grants for updating those improvements; if he will make funds available to local authorities for such purposes; and if he will make a statement. [114766]

Mr. Mullin: Local authorities have broad discretion over how they give grants for home improvement, for which funding is made available each year by my Department. There are no restrictions on how often they give grants for any one property.

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what grants are available from central Government for home improvements in owner occupier and private rented accommodation. [115013]

Mr. Mullin: My Department provides a specific grant, Private Sector Renewal Grant, in support of local authorities to assist home owners with the renovation of their properties. From 1 April 2000 Exchequer support for private sector renewal will be through the single capital allocation for housing.

Seat Belts

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action he is taking to enforce the wearing of seat belts by motorists and their passengers. [114950]

Mr. Hill: Enforcement of road traffic regulations is a matter for the police. In 1997, the latest year for which figures are available, 175,334 fixed penalty notices and 14,300 written warnings were issued in seat belt cases. The magistrates courts also dealt with 8,180 cases, of which 6,411 were found guilty.

We are concerned about the number of rear seat passengers, in particular adults, who do not wear seat belts. The latest, unpublished, biannual survey, carried out by the Transport Research Laboratory (TRL) on the Department's behalf in October 1999, showed that 76 per cent. of all rear seat passengers, 54 per cent. of adults, in all cars were wearing seat belts. The "Julie" rear seat belt television campaign was repeated during February.

The Government's forward plans for seat belt fitting and wearing are set out in pages 57 and 58 of "Tomorrow's roads—safer for everyone", the Government's road safety strategy, which was launched on 1 March. Copies of the strategy are available in the Library of the House.

The Department's leaflet "Seat Belts and Child Restraints" which provides advice on the law is widely available. Copies of the leaflet are also in the Library of the House.

Housebuilding (Chelmsford)

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will assess the impact his statement of 7 March 2000 on housebuilding will have on the Chelmsford Local Authority area; and, as a result of his statement, how many houses will have to be built in Chelmsford, *(a)* over the next five years and *(b)* over the next 16 years. [114782]

Ms Beverley Hughes: I would refer the hon. Member to the reply which my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Planning gave on 13 March 2000, *Official Report,* column 35W. On 20 March we will be publishing the full details of our proposed changes to regional planning guidance in the South East. These will include an illustrative breakdown of housing within the region to county level, including an annual rate of provision for Essex. We will be seeking the views of the local authorities in the region, through SERPLAN, and those of other interested parties on that distribution.

Genetically Modified Crops

Mr. Collins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many genetically modified crop trials are currently taking place in the United Kingdom; and if he will make a statement. [114424]

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the current progress of genetically modified crop trials in the United Kingdom. [113387]

Mr. Meacher: I will release details of this year's Farm Scale Evaluations programme tomorrow morning. This will include information about all the proposed locations of sites already notified to my Department. Details will be placed in the Library of the House.

Dormer Windows

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to amend planning law in respect of the siting of dormer windows. [114919]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 1995 grants a general planning permission for a range of minor works of development to dwelling houses. This includes the insertion of dormer windows, subject to certain limits on size and except where it would alter a roof slope facing a highway. In granting permitted development rights, we have to strike a balance between giving freedoms to individual householders to improve their homes, and protecting the amenity of neighbouring properties. We are not aware of any significant problems in the exercise of permitted development rights relating to dormer windows and therefore have no plans to change these at the present time. We will, however, continue to monitor any representations received on this issue.

Bypasses

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many bypasses have been removed from the trunk road and motorway improvements programme since May 1997. [114977]

Mr. Hill: Our 1997–98 review of the programme resulted in the outright cancellation of two bypass proposals because of their impact on environmentally sensitive areas: the A36 Salisbury bypass and the A49 Hereford bypass. Three bypass schemes dropped before May 1997 were reinstated in our targeted programme of improvements, which includes a total of 19 schemes that will provide bypasses for local communities. A number of other bypass schemes were remitted to studies, regional planning bodies and, in the case of schemes on routes proposed for de-trunking, to local highway authorities for consideration as part of their local transport plans. Full details of all our review decisions are given in "A New Deal for Trunk Roads in England".

McKinsey Report

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the Commission for Integrated Transport took into account in drawing up its recent report on 44-tonne lorries for the Government, the evidence in McKinsey's report of 10 February produced for Railtrack. [114979]

Mr. Hill: McKinsey's study for Railtrack of potential demand for rail freight, using a sectoral analysis of existing business and opportunities, did not report until 12 March. I understand that in preparing its report the Commission for Integrated Transport was aware of McKinsey's work in progress but took the view that it did not add to the analysis of the impact of 44 tonne lorries already available from other sources. The shadow Strategic Rail Authority will have access to McKinsey's model in developing its forthcoming freight strategy.

Press Officers

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many of his Department's press officers have access to the PA Newsfeed via their desk-top PCs; and at what cost to public funds. [114918]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions current subscription to the PA Newsfeed allows for a maximum of two simultaneous connections to the PA service. These two connections are available to all press officers via their desk-top PCs. The cost is £7,453.44 per annum.

Opencast Mines

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many applications for opencast mines in greenbelt areas have *(a)* been approved, *(b)* been sent to public inquiry and await determination, *(c)* been sent to public inquiry and are subject to further evidence having been requested by him following the issue of the minerals planning guidance and *(d)* have been rejected; and of these, how many in each category have had costs awarded against those opposing the application since May 1997. [114775]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The information is not available in the form requested.

However, according to the latest statistics produced by the Planning Officers' Society, between 1 April 1997 and 31 March 1998, 14 applications for opencast coal mining were approved by mineral planning authorities and 13 applications were refused (including three appeal decisions refused by the Secretary of State).

Since May 1997, two appeals have been allowed and nine appeals have been dismissed by the Secretary of State.

At present six appeals await determination, of which five have been to public inquiry. Three of those appeals, which have been to public inquiry, are subject to consideration of further evidence requested by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions.

Information on how many of these applications were for sites in greenbelt areas is not readily available and cannot be obtained except at disproportionate cost.

Costs have not been awarded against those opposing the application in any case since May 1997.

Brownfield Development

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what distinction his Department makes between brownfield sites and usable brownfield sites when identifying the amount of developed land available for redevelopment. [115011]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Annexe C of Planning Policy Guidance Note 3: Housing gives a definition of previously developed land. This definition excludes previously developed land which has blended into the landscape; land where provision has been made for restoration to its natural state; and land which has been put to amenity use and cannot be regarded as requiring development. Using this definition of previously developed land, phase 1 of the National Land Use Database (NLUD) collected information from local authorities on previously developed vacant and derelict sites, whether or not they were available

for redevelopment. NLUD also included vacant buildings and sites in use which were allocated for a specific use in the local plan, had planning permission for housing, or with known development potential. In order to estimate how much of the land reported was available for redevelopment, local authorities recorded for each site whether it was allocated in the local plan, the type of any planning permission and the suitability for housing.

Liquid Petroleum Gas

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) how many *(a)* private cars, *(b)* commercial vehicles and *(c)* public transport vehicles have been converted to run on liquid petroleum gas since May 1997; [115026]

(2) how many *(a)* private cars, *(b)* commercial vehicles and *(c)* public transport vehicles can run on liquid petroleum gas in the United Kingdom. [115025]

Mr. Hill: The table shows the number of vehicles which can run on gas (either liquid petroleum gas or compressed natural gas) in the United Kingdom, according to DVLA statistics. The latest data available are for the end of June 1999, and the number of vehicles converted to gas now is expected to have continued to increase. More recent data will be available in due course. (The nearest available data for May 1997 are for the end of 1996).

Vehicle type	*Number of vehicles registered to run on gas as of 30 June 1999*	*Increase in the number of vehicles registered to run on gas since 31 December 1996*
Cars	12,357	8,272
HGVs	68	24
Buses	36	15
Other	2,922	245

Redevelopment Funding

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will publish a list of those areas to be designated as urban priority areas for redevelopment funding. [115017]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Urban Taskforce report—"Towards an Urban Renaissance"—published in June 1999 recommended the introduction of urban priority areas as one of a wide-ranging series of proposals for the renewal of towns and cities. The report was welcomed by the Government as an important contribution to the urban renaissance debate. Many of the recommendations have already been taken forward. Others, including those on urban priority areas and the measures that might be applied within them, are being considered as part of our preparations for the White Paper on urban policy, due to be published later this year.

Regional Chambers

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what has been the cost of each of the regional chambers in each of the years since their inception; and what is the projected cost for the next five years. [115015]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The costs of the voluntary regional chambers are entirely a matter for their members.

Humberside Airport

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what public funding has been made available for Hull airport in the last three years. [115023]

Mr. Mullin: In the last three years we have issued the following amounts in supplementary credit approvals for investment at Humberside Airport:

1997–98—£1.27 million

1998–99—£0.42 million

1999–2000—nil.

Following the purchase by Manchester Airport of a majority shareholding in the company owning the airport, Humberside Airport was removed from borrowing controls in August 1999.

Rent Controls

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans his Department has for legislation relating to the control of rents. [115021]

Mr. Mullin: I share the dismay and concern of many thousands of tenants that the Rent Acts (Maximum Fair Rent) Order has been quashed by the Court of Appeal. We have petitioned another place for leave to appeal the decision. If leave is not granted, we will give urgent consideration to the matter of legislation.

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent representations he has received regarding the reform of controlled rents. [115022]

Mr. Mullin: To date the Government have received some 30 representations from hon. and right hon. Members and some 260 representations from members of the public about the effects of the Court of Appeal's decision to quash the Rent Acts (Maximum Fair Rent) Order 1999.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many staff are employed in his Department; and how many were employed in each of the last four years, including the component departments which were merged into his Department after May 1997. [115020]

Ms Beverley Hughes: On 1 January 2000, there were 16,397 staff in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, including its Agencies. These figures include 824 staff for the Rent Service, which became operational on 1 October 1999, most of whom were originally employed by Local Authorities; only 15 were transferred from another part of this Department.

Information for previous years is available for 1 April. The following table shows employees of the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions in 1999 and 1998 and of the Department of Environment and the Department of Transport for 1997 and 1996.

Date	*Staff in post*
1 April 1999	15,516
1 April 1998	15,595
1 April 1997	15,844
1 April 1996	16,206

Regional Development Agencies

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list each of the regional development projects funded by the regional development agencies to date; and what funds have been committed. [115016]

Ms Beverley Hughes: At present there are approximately 5,000 projects administered by the Regional Development Agencies (RDAs). Collating and publishing this information could be completed only at disproportionate cost.

The budget for expenditure on projects by RDAs during 1999–2000—including the Partnership Investment Programme—is £837 million.

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what has been the cost of each of the regional development agencies in each of the years since their inception; and what is projected for future years as to *(a)* administration and running costs and *(b)* project funding costs. [115014]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Regional Development Agencies assumed their full responsibilities in April 1999. Information for 1999–2000 and the remainder of the current Comprehensive Spending Review period is shown in the table.

RDA expenditure: 1999–2000 to 2001–02

£000

	Administration	*Project funding*	*Total*
1999–2000			
One North East	9,771	139,039	148,810
North West Development Agency	12,131	212,595	224,726
Yorkshire Forward	8,036	152,203	160,239
East Midlands Development Agency	7,155	60,193	67,348
Advantage West Midlands	7,678	114,764	122,442
East of England Development Agency	4,803	28,957	33,760
South East of England Development Agency	5,486	82,850	88,336
South West Development Agency	7,488	46,509	53,997
All RDAs	62,548	837,110	899,658
2000–01			
One North East	9,899	138,659	148,558
North West Development Agency	12,628	221,743	234,371
Yorkshire Forward	8,525	170,700	179,225
East Midlands Development Agency	7,373	70,378	77,751
Advantage West Midlands	7,989	115,406	123,395
East of England Development Agency	5,038	35,482	40,520
South East of England Development Agency	6,027	73,672	79,699
South West Development Agency	7,819	66,400	74,219
All RDAs	65,298	892,440	957,738
2001–02			
One North East	9,899	143,179	153,078
North West Development Agency	12,628	224,678	237,306
Yorkshire Forward	8,525	190,413	198,938
East Midlands Development Agency	7,372	71,335	78,707
Advantage West Midlands	7,989	123,955	131,944
East of England Development Agency	5,038	40,282	45,320
South East of England Development Agency	6,027	85,508	91,535
South West Development Agency	7,819	65,459	73,278
All RDAs	65,298	944,809	1,010,106

Notes:
1. Includes figures for the Partnership Investment Programme
2. 1999–2000 figures are budgets at the start of the financial year
3. 2000–01 figures are allocations, except for Competitiveness Development Fund and Inward Investment which are indicative
4. 2001–02 figures are indicative

Ministerial Meetings (RMT)

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many meetings he has had with officials of the Rail, Maritime and Transport Union since May 1997. [115024]

Mr. Hill: Ministers have extensive dealings with organisations in both the Public and Private Sectors as part of their official duties.

It would be impracticable to maintain a central record of such meetings.

Rail Vehicle Accessibility Regulations

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the exemptions granted to date under the Rail Vehicle Accessibility Regulations 1998; and if he will make a statement. [114813]

Mr. Hill: The following exemptions from the Rail Vehicle Accessibility Regulations 1998 (RVAR), have been authorised by the Secretary of State in accordance with Section 47 of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995:

The Rail Vehicle Accessibility (Midland Metro T69 Vehicles) Exemption Order 1999, SI 520/1999;

The Rail Vehicle Accessibility (Midland Metro T69 Vehicles) (Exemption No.2) Exemption Order 1999, SI 1256/1999;

The Rail Vehicle Accessibility (LTS Rail Class 357 Vehicles) Exemption Order 1999, SI 1448/1999;

The Rail Vehicle Accessibility (Anglia Railways Class 170/2 Vehicles) Exemption Order 1999, SI 1931/1999;

The Rail Vehicle Accessibility (Central Trains Class 170/5 Vehicles) Exemption Order 1999, SI 1932/1999;

The Rail Vehicle Accessibility (South West Trains Class 458 Vehicles) Exemption Order 1999, SI 2404/1999;

The Rail Vehicle Accessibility (ScotRail Class 170/4 Vehicles) Exemption Order 1999, SI 2547/1999;

The Rail Vehicle Accessibility (Serco Metrolink T68A Vehicles) Exemption Order 1999, SI 2932/1999;

The Rail Vehicle Accessibility (Croydon Tramlink Class CR400 Vehicles) Exemption Order 2000, SI 6/2000;

The Rail Vehicle Accessibility (LTS Rail Class 357 Vehicles) Exemption Order 2000, SI No. 182/2000;

The Rail Vehicle Accessibility (North Western Trains Class 175/0 and Class 175/1 Vehicles) Exemption Order 2000, SI 524/2000.

Before authorising any exemptions we consult our statutory advisers, the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee (DPTAC). Many of the exemptions are for relatively minor non compliances and most have been time limited and we expect vehicles to eventually be modified to bring them to full compliance. All exemptions authorised to date have arisen due to the vehicles being designed before the RVAR where finalised.

We are working closely with operators and manufacturers to ensure that all new vehicles ordered since the RVAR came into force fully comply with the Regulations. However, there is likely to be a requirement for a small number of exemptions to continue to be authorised to cover exceptional circumstances, for example, on railways where the infrastructure limits the physical size of vehicles.

Paddington Station

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when safety modifications to the tracks outside Paddington station to eliminate cancellations of trains in the evening peak period will be completed. [114809]

Mr. Hill: This is a matter for Railtrack. Any changes or alterations to increase the service into Paddington have to be initiated by Railtrack and then be subject to approval by Her Majesty's Railways Inspectorate (HMRI). An exploratory meeting was held between Railtrack and HMRI on 8 March to discuss progress. However HMRI are still awaiting formal proposals from Railtrack.

Public Transport Gender Audit

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will place a copy in the Library of his Department's gender audit to assist transport planners and operators in meeting women's transport requirements. [114806]

Mr. Hill: The audit of women's public transport requirements was completed last year. We have continued to test the findings and will now launch "Women and Public Transport—The Checklist" on March 29, 2000 at a conference in London. A copy of this and of the research report "The Public Transport Gender Audit" will be placed in the Library.

Home Zones

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will estimate the average costs of establishing a home zone. [114812]

Mr. Hill: It is not possible to make a meaningful estimate at present. Costs may vary greatly, according to the size of the designated area and the environmental and traffic calming measures employed. We have established a programme to monitor nine pilot home zones, and will have a clearer idea of the costs associated with different approaches when these schemes have been implemented.

Rail Safety

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many trains carrying radioactive materials have passed signals at danger in each of the last five years for which figures are available. [114811]

Mr. Hill: The Department does not hold such information.

Written Answers to Questions

Friday 17 March 2000

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Land Development

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to give local authorities more control over land development. [112614]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Under our modernising planning initiative, local planning authorities, acting through regional planning bodies, are now responsible for preparing draft regional planning guidance. Local planning authorities have always been responsible for development plans and, in the first instance, for determining planning applications. We are committed to the plan-led system under which it is the local authority's development plan which provides the framework for decisions on the control of land development.

Local Authority Airports

Mr. Goggins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what legal advice he has received in the last year on proposals to change the powers of local authorities in respect of airports they own. [114573]

Mr. Mullin: Local authorities are currently required to exercise their control over public airport companies in such a way that the companies do not engage in activities in which the local authorities themselves have no power to engage. Manchester Airport asked my right hon. Friend to remove this limitation by means of a provision in the Local Government Bill under which he could make regulations extending the powers of airport companies and their subsidiaries in relation to specified types of activity. We consider that the clause which Manchester Airport wished my right hon. Friend to add to the Bill for this purpose would have been outside its scope.

Mr. Goggins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the potential benefits of extending the powers of local authorities in respect of airports they own. [114574]

Mr. Mullin: We largely agree with Manchester Airport's own assessment of the potential benefits of wider powers for local authority airport companies.

Mr. Goggins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the potential use that local authorities might make in respect of airports they own of the new obligation on local authorities to promote economic and social well-being. [114575]

Mr. Mullin: Part I of the Local Government Bill gives local authorities broad new powers to do anything that contributes to the economic and social well-being of their areas. Subject to the terms of their Memoranda and Articles of Association these powers will also apply to local authority airport companies.

Pensions (Compensation)

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action he is taking to ensure that the money paid to *(a)* Bus Employees Pension Trustees Ltd. to settle the action of the Bus Employees Superannuation Trust and *(b)* the National Bus Pension Fund Trust on 1 August 1999 is actually paid to pensioners. [114721]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 15 March 2000]:* Responsibility for distribution of the settlement sum to pensioners rests entirely with the trustees of the two funds who are independent of the Government. We have however made clear to the trustees that we are very concerned about the time it is taking to resolve this matter. I met them in February to discuss progress and emphasised the need to take matters forward as swiftly as possible.

I was pleased to be able to say on 7 February 2000, *Official Report*, columns 17–18W, in answer to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster, Central (Ms Winterton), that the trustees intend to make initial payments to some 8,000 older pensioners in March and April and are urgently investigating the feasibility of making initial payments to other pensioners.

Home Improvement Grants

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many homes received home improvement grants in each of the years 1970–76. [114770]

Mr. Mullin: This information can be found in Table X.28, page 119, Chapter 10, Part III of the 1977 Housing Policy Green Paper (Cmnd. 6851). A copy of this Green Paper should be available in the House of Commons Library.

Privacy

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what guidance he has given to planning authorities about the protection of privacy for neighbours; [114921]

(2) what plans he has to introduce measures to improve protection of privacy for neighbours. [114920]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 16 March 2000]:* Under our plan-led system of development control, decisions on planning applications have to be made in accordance with the development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise. We advise in our Planning Policy Guidance Note 1 "General Policy and Principles" that good neighbourliness and fairness are among the yardsticks against which development proposals can be measured and that, for example, it might be material to consider the question of 'overlooking' or

loss of privacy experienced by a particular resident. It is for local planning authorities to determine what considerations are material to any particular case.

Planning conditions may also be used to protect privacy. The Department's Circular 11/95 suggests, for example, that a local planning authority may wish in appropriate circumstances to attach to a planning permission a condition preventing the use of the roof area of an extension to a dwellinghouse as a balcony, roof garden or similar amenity area without further permission from the authority. We are not proposing planning to introduce any further specific planning measures to improve the protection of privacy for neighbours, although we will continue to keep the matter under review.

Water Industry

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what additional resources have been allocated within his Department to oversee the regulation of the water industry. [115012]

Mr. Mullin *[holding answer 16 March 2000]:* Departmental resources for overseeing the regulation of the water industry have been kept broadly constant in real terms since the election. The Department's Drinking Water Inspectorate (DWI) regulates drinking water quality on behalf of the Secretary of State and the National Assembly for Wales. DWI expenditure in 1998–99 was £2.1 million, and is expected to be £2.2 million in 1999–2000, compared with £1.8 million in 1997–98.

Disability Discrimination Act 1995

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what timetable he has agreed in respect of the 31 January announcement on consultation about the implementation of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and access to taxis. [115082]

Mr. Hill: We are reviewing the policy options and will consult with the taxi trade, disability organisations and local authorities on the final proposals, including the timetable for implementation in due course. An announcement with further details will be issued when the timing is clear.

Jubilee Line

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will call for a report from London Underground on the continuing failings of the signalling system on the Jubilee Line, with particular reference to delays on the southbound line on the morning of Tuesday 14 March; and by what date this line is expected to be working efficiently and punctually. [115127]

Mr. Hill: I note my right hon. Friend's request for a report. This is an operational matter for London Underground Ltd., who have informed me that they are doing all they can to identify and resolve recurring faults. This work has already started to pay off in terms of improved train reliability. Indeed, work is currently in hand, in particular on signalling, which should improve performance significantly over the next few months.

I understand that on the morning of 14 March services were suspended for 25 minutes at the request of the Metropolitan police while they investigated a suspect vehicle parked outside Westminster station. There was no signal failure.

Ministerial Conduct

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to paragraphs 113 and 126 of the Ministerial Code, what steps he took to avoid conflicts of interest in respect of the renting of a flat from the RMT and other financial arrangements with the RMT. [115211]

Mr. Raynsford: My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister has been a tenant since 1970 of a flat owned by the RMT. Like about 200,000 other pre-1989 private sector tenancies, it is a regulated tenancy under the Rent Acts and is subject to 'fair rent' control. My right hon. Friend has written to the Parliamentary Commissioner explaining to her the reasons why he sees no need to declare the tenancy in the Register of Members' Interests, but for the avoidance of doubt, he has asked for her advice on the issue.

Gatwick Express

Laura Moffatt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if there is an exemption order for the Class 460 trains to be introduced into service by Gatwick Express in respect of provisions of the Rail Vehicle Accessibility Regulations 1998; and if he will make a statement. [115700]

Mr. Hill: As my predecessor explained in her answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty) on 9 March 1999, *Official Report*, column 167W, we are expecting to receive a number of exemption applications from train operating companies whose designs for new rail vehicles were well advanced prior to the 1998 Regulations coming into force.

We have received an application from Gatwick Express relating to the new Class 460 trains they wish to introduce into service. The exemptions, have been discussed with our statutory advisers the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee. An exemption Order relating to the exemption of these trains has been laid in Parliament today. Copies are available from the Library.

The exemptions will not prevent disabled people from using the new trains. Indeed, we believe that their introduction will make a significant contribution to improving mobility opportunities for disabled people.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Photo Passes

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Chairman of the Administration Committee, pursuant to her answer of 13 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 14W, on photo passes, how many passes were held by temporary research assistants from overseas on 1 January. [115121]

Mrs. Roe: Up to 50 passes at any one time are issued each spring, summer and autumn term to temporary research assistants from overseas, who are sponsored by an institution of higher education.

DEFENCE

HQ 2 Division

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what the additional annual travelling and subsistence costs to the 2 Division will be consequent upon the relocation of the headquarters to Edinburgh; [108667]

(2) what the staffing costs will be of the 2 Division following relocation of its headquarters to Edinburgh. [108666]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 7 February 2000]:* The staffing costs of the new HQ 2 Division are expected to be of the order of £8 million per annum. The travel and subsistence costs of HQ 2 Division consequent on its relocation to Edinburgh have not been identified separately. The move will save in the region of £4 million per annum in HQ costs compared with HQs in both Edinburgh and York.

Gulf War Illnesses

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many service personnel, in each of the armed services, who served in the Gulf War have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder; how many have been treated successfully; how many have left the services on grounds of ill health; and if he will make a statement. [113959]

Mr. Spellar: The Ministry of Defence (MOD) does not keep a central record of all medical diagnoses and subsequent treatment for currently serving personnel. Responsibility for the health of ex-Service personnel, if resident in the UK, lies with the NHS, which similarly does not keep a central record of all diagnoses and treatment. Neither does the NHS routinely communicate diagnostic or treatment information to the MOD. No arrangements are in place to monitor the health of ex-Service personnel living overseas. Therefore, the total number of British Service personnel who took part in the 1990–91 Gulf conflict who have been diagnosed as having post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), their Service and their subsequent treatment is not known.

However, the MOD holds information on those Gulf Veterans who were referred by their Service Medical Officer or GP for assessment at the MOD's Gulf Veterans Medical Assessment Programme (MAP). Since its establishment in October 1993, MAP had seen a total of 2,934 patients (up to 31 January 2000). Of these, 245 personnel (nine Royal Navy/Royal Marines, 213 Army, and 23 RAF) had a recorded diagnosis of PTSD confirmed by a consultant psychiatrist.

As at 31 January 2000, of the 53,462 Service personnel who deployed to the Gulf, 846 personnel (189 Royal Navy/Royal Marines, 554 Army and 103 RAF) had been medically discharged. Of these, 37 (10 Royal Navy/Royal Marines, 24 Army and three RAF) had been medically discharged following a diagnosis of PTSD. Of the 37 cases, nine (two Royal Navy/Royal Marines and seven Army) are included in the figure of 245 who had been to MAP.

Mines

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the reason for the withdrawal from service of *(a)* the L27 off-route mine and *(b)* the Mk 7 anti-tank mine; and if he will make a statement. [114362]

Mr. Spellar: *(a)* The L27 Anti-Tank Mine was withdrawn from service in 1997 because it was obsolete and no longer required for service use.

(b) Two variants of Mk 7 Anti-Tank Mine were withdrawn from service over 10 years ago as they were obsolete and no longer required for service use. Two other variants remain in service.

Army Personnel Statistics

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the number of Army personnel (i) deployed to and (ii) stationed in *(a)* Kosovo, *(b)* Bosnia and *(c)* Northern Ireland in each of the past five years. [114256]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* The information requested is given in the table:

	1995	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*
Former Yugoslavia	3,315	10,489	—	—	—
Kosovo	—	—	0	0	4,235
Bosnia	—	—	5,468	5,129	4,136
Northern Ireland	15,608	15,308	15,022	14,483	13,517

Notes:

1. The figures given are at or around 1 April.
2. Information held prior to 1997 only records deployments to the Former Yugoslavia.
3. From 1997 onwards the figures for Kosovo and Bosnia are defined as the UK Land contributions to KFOR and SFOR respectively.
4. The figures for Former Yugoslavia and Bosnia include UK personnel serving in multinational units, such as HQ SFOR.
5. In addition to the personnel shown in the final column, there are a number of Territorial Army units based in Northern Ireland.

Military Establishments

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the military establishments within *(a)* Devon and *(b)* the Torbay constituency, indicating in each case the complement; what plans he has to change the (i) number and (ii) manning of such establishments; and if he will make a statement. [114553]

Mr. Spellar: The Ministry of Defence (MOD) manned establishments within *(a)* the county of Devon and *(b)* Torbay constituency are listed in the table. The personnel complement at each establishment is also given. The data reflect the status of the establishments in question as of 1 October 1999, which is the most recent date for which data are centrally held.

Establishment	Town	Personnel
(a)		
Royal Marine Bickleigh, 42 Commando Royal Marine	Plymouth	532
Royal Marine Commando Training Centre, Lympstone	Exmouth	748
Royal Marine Barracks Chivenor, Commando Logistics and 59 Independent Commando Squadron Royal Engineers	Chivenor	805
Royal Marine Inslow, Amphibious Trials and Training Unit	Bideford	69
Royal Marine Barracks Turnchapel, 539 Assault Squadron Royal Marines	Turnchapel	101
Royal Marine Barracks Stonehouse, Headquarters 3 Commando Brigade	Plymouth	526
Royal Marine Citadel, 29 Commando Regiment Royal Artillery	Plymouth	548
Britannia Royal Naval College	Dartmouth	233
HM Naval Base Devonport	plymouth	2,440
HM Naval Base Devonport[1]	Plymouth	3,869
HMS Cambridge	Wembury, Plymouth	193
HMS Vivid	Plymouth	8
HMS Drake, HM Naval Base	Plymouth	227
RAF Chivenor	Barnstaple	54
Dartmoor Training Areas and Oakhampton Training Camp	Oakhampton	32
Fremlington Training Camp	Barnstaple	18
Naval Bases and Supply Agency	Exeter	83
Naval Bases and Supply Agency	Ernestettle	152
Army Base Repair Organisation, Contract Repair Office	Coypool, Marshmills	2
Defence Estates, Plymouth and South West Office	Plymouth	24
Wyvern Barracks	Exeter	32
Territorial Army Centre	Millbay, Plymouth	3
Territorial Army Centre	Derriford, Plymouth	14
Territorial Army Centre	Paignton	4
Armed Forces Careers Office	Exeter	4
Armed Forces Careers Office	Plymouth	30
Army Careers Information Centre	Exeter	9
Army Careers Information Office	Barnstaple	2
Army Careers Information Office	Torquay	1
Careers Information Office	Exeter	7
Careers Information Office	Plymouth	11
(b)		
Army Careers Information Office	Torquay	1
Territorial Army Centre	Paignton	4

[1] Personnel on ships based at Devonport

(i) There are currently no plans to change the number of establishments in Torbay constituency and the county of Devon.

(ii) Current plans to change the manning of establishments in Torbay constituency and the county of Devon are set out as follows:

The transfer of 13 Service posts and 36 civilian posts at naval establishments in Plymouth and Dartmouth to Flagship Training Ltd., as part of the continuing implementation of the Partnership Arrangement between the Naval Recruiting and Training Agency and Flagship. If agreed this will come into effect on 1 April 2000. This is subject to consultation.

A study and investment appraisal are currently being carried out into the future of HMS Cambridge. As a result, changes in the status or manning of the establishment may be recommended.

RN Vessels

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the long-term service plans for use of *(a)* HMS Sheffield, *(b)* HMS Coventry and *(c)* HMS Cardiff. [114768]

Mr. Spellar: HM ships Coventry, Sheffield and Cardiff will remain Fleet assets until replaced by new ships entering service. On current plans, HMS Coventry will be replaced by HMS St. Albans at the end of 2001. In due course HMS Sheffield will be replaced by the Future Surface Combatant and HMS Cardiff by the first Type 45. Until replaced, they will be subject to a normal programme of operational tasking and upkeep.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if the refit of HMS Nottingham is proceeding on time and within budget; when she will start post-refit trials; what is the date for her to return to active service; and if he will make a statement. [114802]

Mr. Spellar: The refit of HMS Nottingham is currently proceeding to programme and is within budget. Post-refit trials are planned to commence in the autumn and HMS Nottingham is expected to return to operational service early next year.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what are the mid and long-term service plans for the three Royal Navy aircraft carriers; and if he will make a statement. [114797]

Mr. Spellar: The three aircraft carriers, HMS Invincible, Illustrious and Ark Royal undertake a rolling programme of operations and maintenance, to ensure that two ships are normally available for tasking. All three vessels are planned to remain in service for at least the next decade. Under current plans, Invincible will be the first to pay off, after which Illustrious and Ark Royal will provide the capability until the next two new aircraft carriers enter service.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the cost of the refit is for the HMS Lancaster; if it will be completed to time and cost; if she will be able to carry the Merlin helicopter; and if he will make a statement. [114763]

Mr. Spellar: Expenditure to date on HMS Lancaster's refit is about £10.5 million. There are some outstanding minor costs which are subject to negotiation with the refit contractor. It is expected that the final cost will be within the original budget. The refit contract was completed earlier than originally planned, and HMS Lancaster will shortly return to operational service. She is now capable of carrying the Merlin helicopter.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when and where HMS Norfolk will have her next refit; at what cost; and if he will make a statement. [114771]

Mr. Spellar: HMS Norfolk's next refit is planned to start in 2005 and to form part of MOD's competitive shipwork programme. Both the venue and the cost of the refit will therefore depend on the outcome of the planned competition.

Bloody Sunday

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which of the soldiers on duty in Londonderry on 30 January 1972 suffered a bullet wound to his foot. [114901]

Mr. Spellar: While on duty in Londonderry on 30 January 1972, a soldier suffered a bullet would to his foot as a result of the accidental discharge of his weapon. He has made a statement to the Bloody Sunday Inquiry, but his identity cannot be revealed under the Tribunal's ruling on anonymity.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Housing Benefit

Mr. Neil Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what was the amount of housing benefit paid by each local authority in respect of local authority rented housing in the years *(a)* 1995–96, *(b)* 1996–97, *(c)* 1997–98, *(d)* 1998–99 and *(e)* 1999–2000; and if he will indicate the average number of recipients for each authority. [113843]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the Library.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 9 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 806W, if he will list the local authorities that did not volunteer to participate in *(a)* the Area Benefit Review of Housing Benefit and *(b)* the last Housing Benefit Review. [115210]

Angela Eagle: In the summer of 1997 all local authorities in Great Britain were invited to volunteer to participate in the second National Housing Benefit Review for which a representative sample of authorities was needed.

In the spring of 1999 the Department invited all local authorities in Great Britain to participate in a project to incorporate Housing Benefit paid with Income Support or Jobseeker's Allowance (Income Based) into the Benefits Agency's Area Benefit Review programme.

In seeking volunteers for both exercises, the Department made clear to local authorities the level of commitment required. In the case of the national review, this involved diverting anti-fraud resources from mainstream anti-fraud activity for a period of approximately two months. In the case of the area benefit review, a continuing requirement to divert benefit processing resources from mainstream activity and to meet tight deadlines was involved. It was left to local authorities whether they would be able to make this commitment without jeopardising anti-fraud work or service delivery.

The list of local authorities who did not volunteer to participate in the second National Housing Benefit Review or the Area Benefit Review project has been placed in the Library.

Fraud Officer (North Essex)

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when the Benefits Agency Fraud officer for North Essex will be contactable by e-mail; and if he will make a statement. [114978]

Mr. Rooker: This is a matter for Peter Mathison, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Bernard Jenkin, dated 16 March 2000:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking when the Benefits Agency Fraud officer for North Sussex will be contactable by e-mail; and if he will make a statement. We understand that there was an error in the question and that it should have read North Essex not Sussex.

Until recently we did not have in place a secure gateway from our internal e-mail system to the Internet to allow safe communication with those outside our system. This is now in place and instructions have just been issued to staff for its use. Over the coming months the e-mail addresses of BA District and other offices will be published on the DSS Web site. A timetable has not yet been finalised. A number of constraints remain to be resolved in terms of confirming identify and ensuring security before restricted or personal information can be sent by e-mail but these are being addressed.

We have not yet, however, put in place the structures within offices to deal with a high volumes of enquiries but an arrangement can be made for specific cases and I understand that this option has been made available to you by the Fraud Sector manager.

I hope this is helpful.

IR35

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of the impact on the social security budget of the introduction of IR35. [114498]

Mr. Rooker: The introduction of IR35 is estimated to yield an additional £220 million per year in National Insurance contributions in a full year. Although the increased contributions are likely to lead to higher future National Insurance benefit expenditure, it is not possible to quantify this increase.

National Insurance

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 13 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 53W, *(a)* what types of fraud the new scans of national insurance numbers will identify that previous scans have not been able to, *(b)* what estimate he has made of how many fraudulent numbers there will be for each type of anticipated fraud and *(c)* how many numbers on the Departmental Central Index will be scanned using the new technique. [115204]

Mr. Rooker: The scans of National Insurance numbers are designed primarily to identify anomalies and duplicate records, rather than specific areas of fraud.

It is not possible to estimate how many cases of fraud will be identified by scans, or the type of fraud involved.

Each scan involves checking the whole of the Departmental Central Index database, some 81 million accounts.

Water Charges

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will bring forward proposals to provide compensation to those in receipt of a state pension in Scotland for the recent increases in water charges; and if he will make a statement. [114679]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 16 March 2000]:* No. Social Security benefits are paid at a set UK rate. Account is taken of a wide range of goods and services, including water charges across the UK.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Sure Start

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what recent progress has been made on the Sure Start projects introduced to date. [113174]

Yvette Cooper: I have been asked to reply.

Of the 60 Sure Start trailblazer programmes that were announced in January 1999, 53 have now received approval and are now starting to help young children and their families. The remaining seven will follow shortly. In November 1999, we launched the second wave of Sure Start by inviting a further 69 areas to start work to develop local programmes. All of these are now working on drawing up outline plans. This brings the number of Sure Start programmes so far announced to 129.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proportion of poor children will be covered by the Sure Start programme when the roll-out is complete. [113783]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 9 March 2000]:* I have been asked to reply.

Sure Start are committed to establishing 250 local Sure Start programmes in areas of disadvantage by March 2002. On the basis of the 60 Sure Start trailblazers now in place, it is estimated that when fully rolled-out the programme will cover 18 per cent. of children under four in England living in households in receipt of income-based benefits.

"Computers Within Reach"

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the qualifying conditions will be for retired people to acquire computers under the computers within reach scheme for the purposes of lifelong learning. [114115]

Mr. Wills: The Government are making £15 million available for a scheme, "Computers Within Reach", to evaluate arrangements for those who cannot afford new computers to acquire reconditioned computers for use in the home for the purpose of improving their employment prospects, for lifelong learning or for their children's homework. Eligible recipients for computer packages under this scheme are expected to be those in receipt of a range of benefits including Jobseekers Allowance, Income Support, Incapacity Benefit and Disability Living Allowance, and may include those for whom state pensions are the main source of income.

Press Releases

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment for the period 2 May 1997 to 29 February 2000 what was *(a)* the number of occasions on which couriers were used to distribute news releases from his Department and *(b)* the total cost of using couriers to distribute news releases. [113969]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 10 March 2000]:* Prior to April 1998, the DfEE distributed hard copies of press notices via the Central Office of Information delivery service. After April 1998, all press releases have been distributed electronically via the News Distribution Service managed by the Central Office of Information. Couriers are not used purely to distribute press releases. It is however impossible to separate the times when couriers were used as the only practical means of sending out sensitive material which may have had press releases attached.

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the *(a)* national, *(b)* regional and *(c)* local newspapers and media bodies to which his Department sent news releases during the period 2 May 1997 to 29 February 2000. [113995]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 10 March 2000]:* Due to the sheer numbers of media who will have received DfEE press releases, it is not possible to provide a list. Press releases are available to all the media via the News Distribution Service, managed by the Central Office of Information, and the internet. Targeted distribution will rely on the subject and content of the specific press release.

New Deal (Disabled People)

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what progress is being made towards a national roll out of the New Deal for Disabled People. [114688]

Ms Hodge *[holding answer 16 March 2000]:* We expect to make an announcement very shortly.

TREASURY

Farmers (Compensation)

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what discussions he has had with the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on *(a)* state aid for pig farmers and *(b)* monetary compensation to farmers for currency fluctuations; [114683]

(2) what discussions he has had with the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on compensation for farmers for currency adjustments; and if he will make a statement. [114947]

Mr. Andrew Smith: My right hon. Friends the Chancellor and the Agriculture Minister discuss many issues. All relevant issues receive continuous close attention.

London (Migration)

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what are his estimates for migration from London to the south-east of England over the next five years. [114428]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Tim Loughton, dated 17 March 2000:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your recent parliamentary question on estimates for migration from London to the South East of England over the next five years.

Projections for migration from London to the South East of England are shown in the following table for 2001 and 2006. Projection of migration are not available for the intervening years, but are consistent with those shown.

Projected migration from London to the Government Office for the South East Region 2001, 2006

Thousand

	2001	*2006*
Inflow	82.3	82.8
Outflow	54.1	54.8
Net	28.2	28.0

Athletic Events (Funding)

Mr. Faber: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what recent discussions his Department has had with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport about capital funding for facilities for major athletics events; and if he will make a statement. [113946]

Mr. Andrew Smith *[holding answer 14 March 2000]:* No recent discussions have taken place between the Treasury and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport about capital funding for facilities for major athletics events. Any additional needs will be considered as part of the current spending review.

Investing in Britain Fund

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what proportion of gross domestic product was spent on the Investing in Britain Fund in the financial years *(a)* 1998–99 and *(b)* 1999–2000; what estimate he has made for (i) 2000–01 and (ii) 2001–02; and if he will make a statement. [114705]

Mr. Andrew Smith *[holding answer 15 March 2000]:* The Investing in Britain Fund provides for the renewal and modernisation of the UK's public sector capital stock. Figures for capital investment as a percentage of gross domestic product are shown in Table B6, Annexe 2 of the pre-Budget Report (Cm 4479). These figures will be updated in the forthcoming Financial Statement and Budget Report.

Dot.com Companies

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the economic implications of the entry of dot.com companies into the FTSE 100. [114997]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Changes in the composition of the FTSE 100 reflect market valuations of UK companies.

As the Prime Minister explained in a recent speech, the challenges and opportunities presented by the growth of e-commerce apply to all businesses, in all sectors of the economy. The Government recognise the importance of these developments and have set a target of making the UK the best place for e-commerce in the world by 2002.

Financial Markets (Local Authority Access)

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to allow local authorities greater access to the financial markets. [114911]

Miss Melanie Johnson: There are currently no plans to allow local authorities greater access to the financial markets.

ECOFIN

Mr. Russell Brown: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the outcome of ECOFIN on 13 March. [115740]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Paymaster General attended the Economic and Finance Council of Ministers.

The Commission presented its action plan for improving financial management and procedures. The Council recommended granting discharge in respect of the 1998 financial year.

The Stability programmes of Luxembourg, France and Portugal were agreed.

The Presidency announced that the ECOFIN Ministers would be invited to attend the Lisbon European Council on employment, economic reform and social cohesion. ECOFIN agreed a report to the Lisbon Council which emphasised the importance of sustainable growth, macroeconomic stability and economic reform in promoting a dynamic, innovative and socially inclusive European economy.

The Commission presented their report on the taxation of aviation fuel.

HEALTH

Neurosurgical Consultants

Dr. Brand: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the number of neurosurgical consultants in each NHS region in each of the last 10 years. [110932]

Mr. Denham: The latest available information is shown in the tables.

Neurosurgical consultants by regional office 1995–1998
England at 30 September each year

Headcount

	1995	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*
Northern and Yorkshire	20	20	20	20
Trent	10	10	10	10
Anglia and Oxford	10	10	10	10
North Thames	20	20	20	20
South Thames	10	10	10	20
North West	20	20	20	20
South and West	10	20	20	20
West Midlands	10	10	10	10
England	110	120	130	130

Neurosurgical consultants by regional health authority 1988–1995
England at 30 September each year

Headcount

	1988	*1989*	*1990*	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*
Northern	10	10	10	0	10	0	10	10
Yorkshire	10	10	0	10	10	10	10	10
Trent	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10
East Anglia	0	0	0	10	0	0	10	10
Oxford	0	0	0	0	0	10	0	0
NW Thames	0	0	0	10	0	0	0	10
NE Thames	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10
SE Thames	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	0
SW Thames	0	10	10	10	0	10	10	10
Mersey	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10
North Western	10	10	10	10	20	20	10	10
South Western	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10
Wessex	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
West Midlands	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10
England	100	90	100	100	100	100	110	110

Notes:
1. Figures rounded to nearest 10
2. 'O' denotes five or less
3. Regional totals may not equal England total due to rounding and staff working in more than one region
4. The regional structure changed on 1 April 1996, when the regional health authorities were replaced by regional offices. For September 1995, data are available in either format.

Source:
Department of Health Medical and Dental Workforce Census

Administration Expenditure

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was the change in central administration spending by his Department in each of the last two years; what is the budgeted change for this year and 2001. [106771]

Ms Stuart: The change in central administration spending by my Department was a reduction of 7.9 per cent. in real terms in 1997–98, from the previous year, and a further 9.9 per cent. reduction in 1998–99. The budgeted changes are a 8.7 per cent. real terms increase for 1999–2000, and a real terms reduction of 6.1 per cent. in 2001–01.

The budgeted administration expenditure in 1999–2000 includes an amount towards the set up costs of the new Food Standards Agency. Excluding this amount, the changes in real terms are:

Year	*Percentage change*
1997–98	–7.9
1998–99	–9.9
1999–2000	+3.9
2000–01	–1.7

Capitation Targets

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the amount by which each health authority in England is expected to be above or below its capitation target in *(a)* 1999–2000 and *(b)* 2000–01, expressed (i) in cash terms and (ii) as a percentage of each authority's expenditure. [112037]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 9 March 2000]:* The information requested is shown in the table.

Health authority	1999–2000 distance from target £000	1999–2000 distance from target Percentage	2000–01 distance from target £000	2000–01 distance from target Percentage
Avon	–6,924	–1.17	–7,351	–1.15
Barking and Havering	–1,934	–0.75	2,573	0.94
Barnet	4,594	2.25	447	0.20
Barnsley	–4,786	–2.98	–5,379	–3.11
Bedfordshire	–12,427	–3.82	–13,980	–3.98
Berkshire	–15,619	–3.50	–15,847	–3.23
Bexley and Greenwich	14,573	5.31	18,097	6.15
Birmingham	2,656	0.39	4,390	0.60
Bradford	–5,542	–1.77	–3,853	–1.13
Brent and Harrow	9,296	3.09	7,051	2.15
Bromley	–498	–0.27	214	0.11
Buckinghamshire	–9,343	–2.48	–11,999	–2.92
Bury and Rochdale	–3,241	–1.29	–1,049	–0.39
Calderdale and Kirklees	1,619	0.44	–671	–0.17
Cambridge and Huntingdon[1]	–2,663	–1.13	—	—
Cambridgeshire[1]	—	—	–10,687	–2.41
Camden and Islington	6,949	2.22	6,701	1.95
Cornwall and Isles of Scilly	6,454	2.08	5,506	1.65
County Durham	–9,737	–2.31	–8,724	–1.93
Coventry	–7,182	–3.45	–6,172	–2.76
Croydon	–2,556	–1.25	–2,517	–1.14
Doncaster	–276	–0.14	–427	–0.20
Dorset	9,771	2.24	9,035	1.93
Dudley	–1,840	–1.00	–3,044	–1.52
Ealing, Hammersmith and Hounslow	–2,835	–0.59	–133	–0.03
East and North Hertfordshire	–2,118	–0.73	–4,059	–1.28
East Kent	7,108	1.83	11,031	2.67
East Lancashire	–2,389	–0.68	–2,822	–0.74
East London and The City	–24,117	–4.69	–20,945	–3.77
East Norfolk[1]	3,198	0.85	—	—
East Riding	–2,397	–0.66	–159	–0.04
East Surrey	5,013	2.10	5,777	2.25
East Sussex, Brighton and Hove	10,634	2.15	13,072	2.48
Enfield and Haringey	1,731	0.54	1,464	0.42
Gateshead and South Tyneside	–1,954	–0.76	–2,889	–1.05
Gloucestershire	12,408	3.85	10,564	3.05
Herefordshire	61	0.06	–319	–0.30
Hillingdon	658	0.43	–963	–0.58
Isle of Wight	6,326	7.35	6,603	7.16
Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster	–27,917	–8.88	–27,876	–8.14
Kingston and Richmond	4,593	2.25	5,795	2.55
Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham	–3,567	–0.62	12,253	2.00
Leeds	1,203	0.26	3,114	0.62
Leicestershire	–13,466	–2.54	–16,280	–2.83
Lincolnshire	2,528	0.64	–3,733	–0.88
Liverpool	7,149	2.09	6,603	1.81
Manchester	7,758	2.28	7,498	2.06
Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth	9,553	2.31	8,245	1.88
Morecambe Bay	8,671	4.40	7,291	3.43
Newcastle and North Tyneside	1,752	0.53	3,206	0.91
Norfolk[1]	—	—	186	0.04
North and East Devon	5,434	1.84	4,395	1.38
North and Mid Hampshire	3,913	1.36	1,612	0.52
North Cheshire	3,561	1.80	2,200	1.04
North Cumbria	111	0.06	434	0.20
North Derbyshire	–575	–0.25	–1,090	–0.44
North Essex	–3,480	–0.69	–436	–0.08
North Nottinghamshire	–2,849	–1.19	–5,763	–2.21
North Staffordshire	–8,156	–2.62	–5,796	–1.74
North West Anglia[1]	–4,748	–1.86	—	—
North West Lancashire	–1,356	–0.42	54	0.02
North Yorkshire	–1,736	–0.40	–2,462	–0.53
Northamptonshire	4,847	1.51	3,079	0.89
Northumberland	–325	–0.17	–661	–0.31
Nottingham	–10,151	–2.53	–10,245	–2.39
Oxfordshire	–9,569	–2.84	–8,166	–2.24
Portsmouth and South East Hampshire	–917	–0.28	60	0.02
Redbridge and Waltham Forest	13,384	4.72	11,902	3.89
Rotherham	–1,079	–0.67	–1,970	–1.14
Salford and Trafford	6,440	2.13	5,725	1.75
Sandwell	–2,795	–1.34	–2,060	–0.93
Sefton	1,987	1.05	5,688	2.82
Sheffield	5,419	1.50	4,686	1.21

Health authority	1999–2000 distance from target £000	1999–2000 distance from target Percentage	2000–01 distance from target £000	2000–01 distance from target Percentage
Shropshire	–905	–0.36	–3,616	–1.34
Solihull	1,598	1.32	496	0.38
Somerset	2,866	1.00	1,843	0.59
South and West Devon	6,989	1.86	5,998	1.48
South Cheshire	2,168	0.54	4,007	0.93
South Derbyshire	–7,068	–2.03	–5,958	–1.59
South Essex	–14,809	–3.42	–7,240	–1.57
South Humber	6,625	3.44	4,180	2.01
South Lancashire	4,328	2.38	4,249	2.14
South Staffordshire	2,721	0.85	–508	–0.15
Southampton and South West Hamptonshire	312	0.10	178	0.05
St. Helens and Knowsley	–1,013	–0.43	–2,173	–0.85
Stockport	802	0.46	926	0.49
Suffolk	6,452	1.65	3,950	0.94
Sunderland	–1,530	–0.76	–2,255	–1.04
Tees	–3,681	–0.99	–4,624	–1.15
Wakefield	771	0.37	1,031	0.46
Walsall	–2,093	–1.27	–2,826	–1.58
Warwickshire	7,616	2.66	5,177	1.67
West Hertfordshire	4,980	1.59	1,788	0.53
West Kent	3,636	0.65	5,974	0.99
West Pennine	–4,898	–1.62	–5,594	–1.72
West Surrey	8,531	2.35	10,150	2.65
West Sussex	–3,555	–0.76	–2,609	–0.52
Wigan and Bolton	–12,069	–3.13	–12,351	–2.98
Wiltshire	5,699	1.68	7,725	2.12
Wirral	4,365	2	7,386	3.14
Wolverhampton	–2,351	–1.45	–3,311	–1.89
Worcestershire	5,228	1.75	1,981	0.62

[1] On 1 April 1999 Cambridge and Huntingdon Health Authority, East Norfolk Health Authority and North West Anglia Health Authority merged to form Cambridgeshire Health Authority and Norfolk Health Authority

Telecommunication Masts

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to publish the Stewart report on mobile phone masts; and if he will make a statement. [114710]

Yvette Cooper: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for South-East Cornwall (Mr. Breed) on 16 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 300W.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Bloody Sunday Inquiry

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Solicitor-General if he will offer immunity from prosecution under the Official Secrets Act 1989 to enable former employees of military intelligence to testify anonymously before the Bloody Sunday Inquiry. [114645]

The Solicitor-General: On 22 February 1999, the then Attorney-General wrote to Lord Saville of Newdigate setting out the terms of an undertaking he gave in relation to witnesses appearing before the Bloody Sunday Inquiry. The terms of the undertaking were as follows:

> "An undertaking in respect of any person who provides evidence to the Inquiry, that no evidence he or she may give before the Inquiry relating to the events of Sunday 30 January 1972, whether orally or by written statement, nor any written statement made preparatory to giving evidence, nor any document produced by that person to the Inquiry, will be used to the prejudice of that person in any criminal proceedings (or for the purpose of investigating or deciding whether to bring such proceedings) except proceedings where he or she is charged with having given false evidence in the course of this Inquiry or with having conspired with, aided, abetted, counsel procured, suborned or incited any other person to do so."

The Attorney General concluded his letter by stating that

> "although the undertaking is cast in terms which preclude the use of evidence given by a witness as the basis for a criminal investigation into the conduct of that witness, this does not amount to any form of immunity. If the question of granting immunity to any individual were to arise, I would need to consider that on an individual case basis."

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

GM Seeds

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to add genetically modified seed to the National Seed Register; and if he will make a statement. [111779]

Ms Quin: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given to the hon. Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) on 13 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 47W.

GMO Field Trials

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to prevent the destruction of GMO field trials. [112255]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 8 March 2000]:* The Government deplore vandalism of GM crop trials. My Department has liaised with other Departments, the police and the industry to alert them to the risk of vandalism, so that measures can be taken to prevent it.

Hedgerows

Ms Walley: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what recent representations he has received in respect of the two metre rule in relation to hedgerows and grassy banks bordering arable land eligible for crop payments. [114112]

Ms Quin: Representations concerning the two metre maximum width of field margins for inclusion in claims for arable area aid under the Integrated Administration and Control System have been received from the Allerton Research and Educational Trust, the British Institute of Agricultural Consultants, the Central Association of Agricultural Valuers, the Country Landowners Association, the Countryside Agency, English Nature, Essex Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group, the National Farmers Union, the National Trust, the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, the Somerset Wildlife Trust, the Suffolk Wildlife Trust, the Tenant Farmers Association, Wildlife and Countryside Link and from a number of other organisations, private individuals and companies.

Ms Walley: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what estimate he has made of the length of hedgerows in the UK which are more than two metres wide and which border land affected by CAP arable crop payments. [114137]

Ms Quin: No such estimates have been made. However, information is available on the percentage of all fields inspected by MAFF in 1999 on which arable area payments were made on the basis of full Ordnance Survey areas where the field margins were found to be wider than two metres. I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given to the hon. Member for South-East Cornwall (Mr. Breed) on 9 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 798W.

Ms Walley: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) if he will refer the issue of arable crop payments affecting hedgerows and grassy banks to the Green Ministers' Committee; [114114]

(2) what recent discussions he has had with MAFF in respect of the impact of the two metre rule in relation to the eligibility of hedges and grassy banks for arable crop payments; and if he will make a statement. [114139]

Ms Quin: It is not proposed to refer the issue referred to by my hon. Friend to the Green Ministers' Committee, concerning as it does the implementation of EU legislation and advise from the European Commission and the European Court of Auditors. MAFF and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions are, however, in close touch on this issue.

European Commission Payments

Ms Walley: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what meetings he *(a)* has recently held and *(b)* plans to hold with the European Commission in respect of environmental integration and arable land crop payments. [114113]

Ms Quin: My right hon. Friend the Minister raised the environmental consequences of field margin rules for arable area payment claims at meetings with the European Commission on 1 February and 9 March. The need for any future meetings on this subject will depend upon the outcome of current discussions between my officials and the Commission.

Sterling

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what measures he is proposing to reduce the impact of the strong pound on British farmers. [114337]

Ms Quin: Over the last three years we have paid nearly £400 million in agrimonetary compensation. We plan to pay a further £88 million this year and £44 million next year in agrimonetary compensation to beef, sheep and arable farmers.

Any additional optional agrimonetary compensation will have to be considered against other calls on public expenditure.

Beef Subsidies

Mr. Cox: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how much was paid in subsidies to beef farmers in the United Kingdom in 1999. [114249]

Ms Quin: Payments by the Exchequer in support of the beef industry for the financial years 1998–99 and 1999–2000 are outlined in the table. It should be noted that not all subsidies are paid directly to farmers. Figures for 1999–2000 are estimates.

April/March (financial years)

£ million

	1998–99	*1999–2000*
Suckler Cow Premium Scheme	339.5	219.9
Beef Special Premium Scheme	294.0	220.1
Beef Deseasonalisation Scheme	5.6	3.0
Hill Livestock Compensatory Allowances: cattle	70.3	56.5
Internal market measures	2.0	2.4
Intervention purchases/sales	−29.3	−85.8
Intervention storage costs	24.2	9.9
Export refunds	−1.9	0.6
Over Thirty Month scheme purchases	263.8	248.4
Over Thirty Month Scheme slaughter, disposal costs etc.	116.2	127.7
Calf Processing Aid Scheme	51.0	10.0
Selective cull	18.9	2.2
Other measures	5.2	0.5
Total	1,159.5	815.4

Red Tape

Mr. Paice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to the Government's response to Recommendation 4 of his Red Tape Working Group on the Meat Industry, whether he intends unannounced visits to replace existing procedures or be additional to them. [113884]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 10 March 2000]:* A system of unannounced inspections is seen as integral to the introduction of a full Hazard Analysis Critical Control and Point approach as recommended by the Meat Industry Red Tape Working Group. They would therefore replace the current inspection system, but amendments to existing EU legislation are required before HACCP could be introduced. However, the Working Group recommended the earliest possible introduction of a regime of

unannounced, thorough, targeted inspections of plants. We are currently considering the costs and benefits of adding such a system to the existing controls.

GM Produce

Mr. David Heath: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what progress has been made with negotiating the voluntary agreement with industry on labelling of genetically modified produce. [113765]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* All genetically modified food sold in the UK is required by law to be labelled. In the UK these requirements apply to foods sold in restaurants as well as in retail premises. We are working within Europe to agree a definition of "GM free" in a labelling claim and to achieve a labelling regime for animal feed in relation to GM ingredients.

Mr. David Heath: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what research he has commissioned on the safety for human consumption of meat from animals fed on GM crops. [113767]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* None, as there is no evidence that meat from animals fed on GM crops is in any way distinguishable from animals fed on conventional feedingstuffs.

Ms Drown: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to introduce legislation to give effect to EC Regulations 49/2000 and 50/2000 concerning the labelling of genetically modified foods. [115741]

Ms Quin: The Genetically Modified and Novel Foods (Labelling) (England) Regulations 2000, which will come into force on 10 April, have today been laid before Parliament. These Regulations make provision in England for the enforcement of two new European labelling Regulations for GM foods, which will take effect automatically in all member states on 10 April, as well as consolidating all earlier GM labelling provisions.

The first of these, EC Regulation 49/2000, amends Regulation 1139/98 on the labelling of foods containing GM soya and maize, to extend the scope of the requirements to include foods for catering establishments, and to establish a 1 per cent. de minimis threshold for the adventitious contamination of non-GM material, below which GM labelling will not be required. The second, EC Regulation 50/2000, will require for the first time, the labelling of foods and food ingredients which contain GM additives and flavourings.

The Government are determined that consumers should be able to make informed choices about whether or not to eat genetically modified foods, and these new Regulations will strengthen further the arrangements already in place for this purpose.

A letter is being sent today to interested parties advising them of the content of the Regulations and enclosing a copy of the text. A Regulatory Impact Assessment for the Regulations has been prepared and placed in the Libraries of the House.

Agriculture (Greater London)

Ms Ryan: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is the total hectarage of *(a)* registered and *(b)* non-registered land under agricultural management within Greater London. [114556]

Ms Quin: The total area on agricultural holdings in Greater London was 13,322 hectares at June 1999. This includes estimates for minor holdings. Information is not available on unregistered holdings.

Ms Ryan: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many *(a)* agricultural land holdings and *(b)* other agricultural practices there are within Greater London. [114557]

Ms Quin: The number of agricultural holdings in Greater London was 479 at June 1999. This includes estimates for minor holdings. Information on other agricultural practices is not available.

Primates

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many primates have arrived in the UK via Dover port in *(a)* October 1999, *(b)* November 1999, *(c)* December 1999 and *(d)* January 2000; and of those how many were found to be (i) ill and (ii) dead. [114419]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 14 March 2000]:* According to our records, 124 primates arrived in the UK via Dover port in October 1999, 60 arrived in November 1999, 44 in December 1999 and 124 in January 2000. These were inspected by a veterinary surgeon at the quarantine premises which was their destination and were found to have travelled well with no signs of ill health or disease.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

International Price Comparisons

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what response the Government have made to the recent OECD report on international price comparisons. [114079]

Dr. Howells: OECD statistics on purchasing power parity are a regular statistical publication. No official response is made regarding such routine statistical publications by the OECD.

Gas-powered Vehicles

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on his Department's policy on the development and promotion of liquefied petroleum gas-powered vehicles in rural areas. [113933]

Mr. Alan Johnson *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* The Department's Foresight Vehicle programme provides funding of up to 50 per cent. for the development of innovative technologies for future vehicles. This includes developments of systems for hybrid electric and alternatively fuelled vehicles including LPG. Bi-fuelled LPG vehicles are, however, already available for purchase.

The Department is also jointly responsible with DETR for the Cleaner Vehicles Task Force, which aims to promote the production, marketing, purchasing and use of cleaner vehicles and fuels in all areas, both rural and urban.

A sub group of the Task Force is specifically looking at the role and cost effectiveness of alternatively fuelled vehicles and their fuels. It is drawing up recommendations to help develop the necessary infrastructure needed for these fuels, and will be reporting its conclusions to the Task Force next month.

National Minimum Wage

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what factors the Low Pay Commission takes into account when setting the accommodation offset for the national minimum wage; and if he will make a statement. [114789]

Mr. Alan Johnson: Before making their recommendation on the level of the accommodation offset for the introduction of the national minimum wage, the Low Pay Commission undertook an extensive and wide ranging consultation exercise, which included written and oral evidence from organisations and individuals in various sectors that provide accommodation for workers. They also examined current charges in the agricultural and hotel industries and took account of the rates set in the former Wages Councils. In view of the representations received during the consultation exercise on the draft National Minimum Wage Regulations, the Government asked the Commission to look again at this issue in February 1999. The Commission also considered the offset for their second report, which monitored the impact of the minimum wage since its introduction in April.

The Government believe that workers should be paid a reasonable wage and not have to rely on benefits in kind. The accommodation offset figure is not intended to be a commercial valuation but is designed to protect workers from unreasonable accommodation charges, while recognising that these arrangements are of benefit to worker and employer.

The Commission has recommended that the offset should be retained at its present level and considered again when the national minimum wage is next reviewed. The Government accepted this recommendation.

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how the accommodation offset for the national minimum wage has been calculated; and if he will make a statement. [114790]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The maximum amount which can be offset against national minimum wage pay by employers who provide accommodation is £19.95 a week. This is to be calculated at either £2.85 per day or 50p an hour, up to the maximum. The two different methods of calculation ensure that part-time workers do not lose out.

The maximum amount reflects the recommendation of the Low Pay Commission in their first report in June 1998. The amount is not meant to reflect the commercial value of the accommodation provided. The accommodation offset was considered further in the Commission's special report on the offset produced in March 1999, which concluded that it was set at the right level. The most recent Commission report, published in February 2000, recommended that

> "the accommodation deductor should be retained at its present rate and its level considered again when the national minimum wage is reviewed."

The Government accepted this recommendation.

Refurbished Computers

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if it is his policy to make available secondhand refurbished computers to socially excluded groups; and if he will make a statement. [114999]

Dr. Howells: The majority of the Department's IT equipment is owned by UNITAS (a consortium of ICL and CMG) who provide the equipment under a private finance arrangement. UNITAS are responsible for the disposal of this equipment.

In respect of other equipment that remains the Department's property, contracts are in place for recycling that which is surplus to requirements. Under these contracts, London Computer Auctions and Recycle IT refurbish such equipment, where suitable, and sell it to schools at a low cost.

Ice Cream Industry

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he will be in a position to make a statement about the outcome of the Office of Fair Trading consultation with the impulse ice cream industry regarding Walls distribution. [114794]

Mr. Byers: As announced in my press notice of 28 January, I have invited views from the industry to be put to the Director General by the end of the month. He will advise me by Easter on the remedy and I will make an announcement once I have considered his advice.

Company Law Review

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps he is taking to ensure that personal shareholders are represented on the consultative committee when carrying out its review into company law; and if he will make a statement. [115029]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 16 March 2000]:* The company law review is designed to take into account as many views and interests as possible. It is an open and consultative exercise, and the consultative committee is an important aspect of that process. While the consultative committee already represents a very wide range of interests, I am considering whether it adequately reflects the views of personal shareholders, and will write to the hon. Member shortly.

Export Credit Guarantees

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what involvement David McLachlan had in the decision of the ECGD to support the *(a)* nuclear power project in Ain Shan China Phase III, *(b)* coal handling export terminal in Tianjin, China, *(c)* coal-fired power station in Manjing, Malaysia and *(d)* line of credit for the Korean Development Bank. [114786]

Mr. Caborn: In his capacity as a banking member of the Export Guarantees Advisory Council, Mr. David McLachlan may be asked for his advice from time to time on cases which are being put forward for underwriting decisions. Such advice is sought only from a Council Member who has no direct business interest in the relevant transaction.

Of the four cases mentioned, Mr. McLachlan's advice was sought only in respect of ECGD's risk analysis and recommendation regarding the Korean Development Bank. The line of credit was subsequently underwritten by ECGD.

A3XX Super-Jumbo Project

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if, following his decision to aid the A3XX Super-Jumbo project, he will publish *(a)* an independent investment appraisal of the project and *(b)* a report on his efforts to finance the project on a fully commercial basis. [115137]

Mr. Byers: My Department has received independent advice on the financial implications of the application from BAE SYSTEMS for launch investment for the A3XX from PricewaterhouseCoopers. The specific terms of the investment are commercially confidential. I am satisfied that the basis of the Government's participation in this risk sharing partnership is fully justified by the benefits it will secure for the UK economy, by ensuring substantial UK involvement in the design and production of this advanced aircraft. Supporting innovation and enterprise, improving productivity and developing skills is the only way forward in the knowledge-based economy of the 21st Century.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Visa Applications

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many applications for visas for settlement from family members of persons who had held exceptional leave to remain in the UK for less than four years were *(a)* received and *(b)* granted in each of the last three years for which figures are available. [114567]

Mr. Vaz: Entry clearance staff overseas do not routinely record for statistical purposes information on the immigration status of those sponsoring applications for settlement in the United Kingdom. The information is therefore not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

South-east Asia Department

Ms Drown: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the responsibilities of the Defence Sales Desk Officer in the South East Asia Department. [114729]

Mr. Battle: FCO desk officers, including those in the South-East Asia Department, among other duties scrutinise and advise licence applications for the countries they cover against the UK national criteria and the EU Code of Conduct on Arms Exports.

Mr. Vassily Kononov

Mrs. Mahon: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Government of Latvia regarding the imprisonment of Mr. Vassily Kononov; and if he will make a statement. [114793]

Mr. Vaz: None. I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) on 16 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 289W.

Correspondence

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he will reply to the letter from the hon. Member for West Chelmsford to the Minister for Trade of 13 October 1999 that was transferred to the Foreign Office on 21 October 1999 concerning the issues raised by Ms P. Jones of Chelmsford. [115209]

Mr. Hain: We will reply to the hon. Member's letter of 13 October 1999 to the Minister for Trade, enclosing a postcard from his constituent Ms P. Jones about the information contained in the Annual Report on Strategic Export Controls, as soon as possible. We regret the delay in issuing a response, which was the result of an administrative oversight. Since publication of the Annual Report on Strategic Export Controls on 3 November 1999, we have received over 1,500 letters from MPs and members of the public on the same subject.

Paid Secondees

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list those United Kingdom embassies overseas where embassy staff include paid secondees from commercial companies; and for each secondee, if he will list the *(a)* seconding company and *(b)* whether the secondee is paid by (i) the seconding company, (ii) the embassy or (iii) another source. [114815]

Mr. Hain: In line with HMG's policy of increased interchange with the private sector, as part of the modernising government agenda, there are eight private sector secondees at posts overseas, in Japan, Hong Kong, Angola, Thailand and the USA. In addition, there is one secondee with a roving remit for South-East Asia.

The secondees are bound by Diplomatic Service regulations relating to conduct and discipline, and answerable to the head of the diplomatic post at which they are serving.

I will ask the companies concerned for their agreement to their details being provided to the hon. Member and will write to him. I will place a copy of my letter in the Libraries of the House. As regards payment, the most common arrangement is for the secondee to continue to be paid by his or her employer, which in turn seeks reimbursement from the FCO. However, I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave on 13 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 44W, to the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Smith), in which I stated that BNFL meet the full costs associated with the appointment of the Atomic Energy Counsellor in Tokyo.

British Embassies

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many British embassies the Minister for Europe has visited during his period of office. [115341]

Mr. Vaz: Twelve.

Land Purchases

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what restrictions affect the purchase of *(a)* agricultural and *(b)* industrial land by (i) citizens and (ii) companies in (A) EU member states and (B) candidates for membership. [113146]

Mr. Caborn: I have been asked to reply.

Under the terms of the EC Treaty, there are no restrictions affecting the purchase of agricultural and industrial land by citizens and companies in EU member states. As regards the candidate countries, there is currently a range of restrictions on the purchase by EU citizens and companies of agricultural and industrial land in the different states. Compliance with the Single Market acquis means that these restrictions should be removed on accession. The EU will respond later in the negotiation process to applicants' requests for transition periods, to allow the retention of some restrictions for a limited period after accession.

CABINET OFFICE

Ministerial Visits

Mr. Maude: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office (1) what rules govern civil servants accompanying Ministers to overseas fund-raising functions; [115206]

(2) what rules govern civil servants accompanying Ministers to party political functions. [115208]

Mr. Stringer: Paragraph 60 of the Ministerial Code makes it clear that Ministers should not ask civil servants to attend, still less take part in, Party Conferences or meetings of policy or subject groups of any of the parliamentary parties. It is an established principle in the public service that civil servants in their official capacity should not accept invitations to conferences convened by, or under the aegis of, party political organisations. The situation is, of course, different when Ministers require officials to be in attendance at party political events in order to enable the Minister to carry out urgent departmental business. This guidance applies to events within the United Kingdom and overseas.

PRIME MINISTER

Task Forces

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Prime Minister which of the task forces created since he came into office have had their lifetime extended beyond the original envisaged wind-up date, indicating the reason for such extensions. [113303]

The Prime Minister: Information in the form requested is not held centrally. A full list of Task Forces established since the General Election was placed in the Library on 9 December 1999. The list includes details of wind-up dates, where appropriate. Task Forces which are classified as non-departmental public bodies are excluded from the list as information on them is published in the annual "Public Bodies" publication.

Individual Ministers are responsible for agreeing the programme of work of the Task Forces for which they are responsible.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Millennium Dome

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many tickets for the Millennium Experience had been sold in each region of the UK on the latest date for which figures are available. [107184]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 31 January 2000]:* Dome tickets can be purchased through National Lottery outlets, travel operators, the New Millennium Experience Company's website and a call centre as well as at the dome. It should be borne in mind, however, that when people purchase dome tickets, particularly those bought at the dome itself but also those purchased through the other outlets, their location at the time is not always an indication of their place of residence. For example, 7.9 per cent. of tickets were bought on the door and are counted in the proportions as having been bought in England. Of the total sales as at 7 March, 97.2 per cent. were purchased in or from addresses in England, 1.3 per cent. in Wales, 1.1 per cent in Scotland and 0.4 per cent. in Northern Ireland.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on *(a)* the pay rates offered to and *(b)* the payment schedule for production crews of the Millennium Dome. [110073]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 14 March 2000]:* The New Millennium Experience Company considers the information requested to be confidential and that its release would both harm the company's relationship and negotiating position with the individuals in question and impair the company's ability to operate in a commercial and professional manner.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will publish the terms and conditions of standard contracts with the operators of the catering outlets that operate in and around the Millennium Dome at Greenwich. [110505]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 17 February 2000]:* The New Millennium Experience Company considers the information requested to be confidential and that its release would both harm the company's relationship and negotiating position with the individuals in question and impair the company's ability to operate in a commercial and professional manner.

New Millennium Experience Company

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many contracts were awarded by the New Millennium Experience Company to *(a)* advertisers and *(b)* designers; and what is the total cost to the NMEC of those contracts to date. [110913]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 21 February 2000]:* M & C Saatchi were appointed by the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) in August 1997 to develop an integrated communications campaign, including creative development, media planning and sales promotion in support of the Millennium Experience and its associated National Programme. Their appointment followed a competitive process, through OJEC. As stated in the OJEC advertisement, the estimated total value of the contract is up to £16 million. NMEC has contracted no other advertisers.

Design contracts for exhibit zones, entered into by NMEC, were also subject to OJEC procedures in August 1997. The total value of these contracts is about £17.1 million (excluding VAT), subject to normal resolution procedures.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many of the contracts awarded by the New Millennium Experience Company to *(a)* advertisers and *(b)* designers were granted after a process of competitive tendering; and how many of those contracts were still in place on 31 January 2000. [110914]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 21 February 2000]:* All contracts awarded by the New Millennium Experience Company to advertisers and designers were granted after a process of competitive tendering. The advertising contract with M & C Saatchi is still in place. The designers have completed their services under the agreements. The contracts are still in place in the sense that NMEC either owns the products of their services or is licensed to use them.

Sport and Tourism

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what action he is taking to promote the importance of sport in association with tourism; and if he will make a statement. [112640]

Janet Anderson: On 11 January this year, my hon. Friend the Minister for Sport and I launched the British Tourist Authority's Action Plan for Sports Tourism. The strategy aims to position sports as an integral part of the British tourism product and to maximise the potential of sport for inbound tourism to Britain. It includes proposals to establish a Sports Tourism Forum with partners (eg UK Sport) to identify opportunities, formulate strategy and implement a joint sports tourism action plan and to mount an international promotional campaign.

Television Licences

Mr. Martlew: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will assess the benefits of granting partially sighted people a reduced television licence fee. [113268]

Janet Anderson: The independent review panel on the future funding of the BBC considered the question but recommended only that registered blind people should be entitled to a 50 per cent. reduction in the licence fee. We have no plans to make any further assessment.

Wembley Stadium

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many formal bids were received in relation to the construction contract for Wembley National Stadium. [114116]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 10 March 2000]:* Wembley National Stadium Ltd. (WNSL) has responsibility for the development and operation of the new National Stadium at Wembley and have advised that following a formal pre-qualification process between July and October 1999, five contractors were invited to submit a detailed first stage bid. WNSL held four interviews following, which one party withdrew. An updated pack of project information was issued to each of the three remaining contractors which invited revised proposals by January 2000. Following further assessment and negotiation, WNSL agreed on 6 March 2000 that Bovis/Multiplex JV should act as the Preferred Contractor for a 20-week period.

The construction contract will be awarded to Bovis/Multiplex JV only if at the end of the 20-week period terms have been agreed which are satisfactory to WNSL and its funders. In addition, Citex, the Project Monitor appointed by Sport England, have had full sight of all supporting paperwork and bid documents throughout this process.

Sport in Schools

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the organisations with which he has discussed the provision of sport in schools during the past year. [114442]

Kate Hoey: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I have held meetings with a number of organisations to discuss sport in schools. Since my appointment to this Department, I have met the National Council of Sport; the Youth Sport Trust; The Youth Charter for Sport; the British Association of Advisers and Lecturers in Physical Education; the Physical Education Association UK: the Independent Schools Council; the HM Chief Inspector of Schools; the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority; and a large number of sports governing bodies including the CCPR. I have also had discussions with Ministers at the Department for Education and Employment.

National Lottery

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many applications for National Lottery grants have been submitted to date by organisations in the Greenock and Inverclyde constituency; of these, how many were successful; and what was the total amount of such grants. [112933]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* There have been 81 successful applications from organisations in the Greenock and Inverclyde constituency and the total value of the successful grant applications is £3,034,889. 169 applications for National Lottery grants have been received to date. These figures are based on information provided to use by the Lottery Distributing Bodies. The total number of applications excludes figures from the Millennium Commission which does not hold the information in the form requested.

Athletics Stadium

Mr. Faber: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will place in the Library a copy of transcripts of *(a)* media statements and *(b)* interviews which he gave on or subsequent to 2 March concerning Wembley National Stadium and venues for major athletics events. [113938]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 14 March 2000]:* Copies of the only relevant transcript in the possession of the Department, dealing with an interview given to BBC Radio 5 Live on 2 March, have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses of Parliament. Copies of departmental press notices are placed in both Libraries as a matter of course. They are also available to hon. Members online either on POLIS or at the Department's website (www.culture.gov.uk).

HOME DEPARTMENT

Fine Defaulters

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the number of *(a)* men and *(b)* women serving a prison sentence in England and Wales on 1 March for the non-payment of fines; and if he will make a statement. [114493]

Mr. Boateng: The latest available information is for 31 January 2000 when there were 86 male and three female fine defaulters in prison in England and Wales.

Prisons (Drugs Tests)

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the accuracy of the current urine test in Her Majesty's prisons for determining a prisoner's drug use. [114448]

Mr. Boateng: Mandatory drug testing (MDT) is contracted to an independent laboratory, Medscreen. The analytical process if highly accurate, fully meets industry standards and is subject to a rigorous quality assurance programme. Voluntary drug testing is conducted by prisons staff using less sophisticated methods, to provide an indication of drug misuse. Unlike MDT, disciplinary measures do not routinely result from positive voluntary tests.

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the arrangements for voluntary urine testing in Her Majesty's prisons. [114449]

Mr. Boateng: Voluntary drug testing will be made available to all prisoners who request it and who are assessed as suitable, by April 2001.

Licensing Act 1964

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent representations he has received concerning section 182 of the Licensing Act 1964. [114727]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: In the last year, we have received a number of representations about the operation of section 182 from individuals and organisations representing musicians and the entertainment industry. Proposals for reform and modernisation of alcohol and public entertainment licensing will be set out in the White Paper which we expect to publish soon.

Child Protection

Mr. Burnett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department for the last three years for which figures are available, what was the average time taken to process a criminal record check under child protection arrangements *(a)* per police force area and *(b)* in total; and if he will make a statement. [114734]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The table shows information in relation to checks conducted by police forces in England and Wales under the terms of Home Office Circular 47/1993. Arrangements in Scotland and Northern Ireland are a matter for the respective Secretaries of State.

Average time taken for police forces to complete an inquiry made under child protection guidance (Home Office Circular 47/1993) (A) where internal (i.e. force) inquiries are made, and (B) where inquiries outside the force are made, by Police Force Area 1996–99

Number of days

	1996–97		*1997–98*		*1998–99*	
	A	*B*	*A*	*B*	*A*	*B*
Avon and Somerset	4–10	10–15	5–10	[1]0	8	1–14
Bedfordshire	13	18	6	21	13	32
Cambridgeshire	1–2	5+	2–3	14	14	28
Cheshire	3.67	8.87	4	9	2–3	6–7
City of London	1	7–21	1	21–28	1	90
Cleveland	10–21	10–21	[2]10	[2]10	[6]1–7	[6]1–14
Cumbria	5	14	7	16	5	25
Derbyshire	2	14	7	21	2	20
Devon and Cornwall	5	10	35	56	20	82
Dorset	1–2	3–28	1–2	3–28	5–7	7–28
Durham	1–2	7–40	4	7–28	7	14
Dyfed-Powys	5	21	6	13	8	13–14
Essex	6	25	11	21–27	10	28
Gloucestershire	8	27.5	5	21	5	23
Greater Manchester	21	28	47–63	47–63	28	28–42
Gwent	2	2	5	[1]0	2–13	[1]0
Hampshire	3	5	2	11	2	13
Hertfordshire	3.4	22	[4]4	[4]19	[4]3	[4]16
Humberside	3	3	3	10	3	3
Kent	2	5	3	7	5	7
Lancashire	2	16	2	16	8	18
Leicestershire	2	4	4–5	0	2	[1]0

Average time taken for police forces to complete an inquiry made under child protection guidance (Home Office Circular 47/1993) (A) where internal (i.e. force) inquiries are made, and (B) where inquiries outside the force are made, by Police Force Area 1996–99

Number of days

	1996–97		1997–98		1998–99	
	A	*B*	*A*	*B*	*A*	*B*
Lincolnshire	1	8	1	8	2	9
Merseyside	[1]84	[1]94	3	1–21	4	14–21
Metropolitan	28	33	12.6	17.9	15	20
Norfolk	4	n/a	28–42	42–56	2–3	14–21
Northamptonshire	12	25	14	26	17	33
Northumbria	4	7	4	11	5–6	14–35
North Wales	28	42–56	7–28	14–28+	1–60	1–60
North Yorkshire	2	7	2	7	2	10
Nottinghamshire	10	15	10	30	10	25
South Wales	20	30	9	16	48	60
South Yorkshire	7–10	14–28	7–10	14–28	7–10	14–28
Staffordshire	1–5	n/a	1–5	[3]0	1–3	[3]0
Suffolk	5	15	4	12	14	26
Surrey	1	2–30	1	2–21	1	2–42
Sussex	4	21	4	21	5	21
Thames Valley	14	14	[1]47	[1]47	35	37
Warwickshire	8	3–21	9	3–21	9–12	1–21
West Mercia	7	28	5	14+	5	5–35
West Midlands	3	28	2	28	4	35
West Yorkshire	14–30	14–30	23.25	25.4	20	23
Wiltshire	3–4	7–10	5–7	10–4	5–7	10.14

[1] Problem with computer system.
[2] Figures relate to 91 per cent. of checks processed for this period (Cleveland does not record the time taken to process each request).
[3] Force does not request checks from other forces.
[4] Force only records time taken from date form is input onto record log system to date reply sent. It does not refer to time taken from date the form was received.
[5] Figures only relate to 1 June 1997—31 March 1998. Thames Valley installed a new computer system which went live on 1 June 1997 and records details more efficiently.
[6] Figures relate to (a) 75 per cent. and (b) 30 per cent. of checks processed for this period (Cleveland does not record the time taken to process each request).

Mr. Burnett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many criminal record checks were carried out under child protection arrangements in each month in each of the last three years for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [114735]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The available information is set out in the following table, which shows numbers of checks carried out by police forces in England and Wales under the terms of Home Office Circular 47/93. Arrangements in Scotland and Northern Ireland are matters for the respective Secretaries of State.

Criminal record checks carried out on behalf of local authorities, statutory health bodies, schools and further education establishments (Home Office Circular 47/93), by Police Force Area 1996–99

	1996–97	1997–98	1998–99
Avon and Somerset	24,487	28,698	27,580
Bedfordshire	7,745	8,536	9,128
Cambridgeshire	7,283	9,765	15,498
Cheshire	16,697	13,374	15,411
City of London	692	802	574
Cleveland	6,710	7,709	10,452
Cumbria	4,736	6,781	6,813
Derbyshire	9,331	9,831	10,268
Devon and Cornwall	21,188	24,638	22,736
Dorset	22,479	24,792	30,231
Durham	12,999	15,339	17,456
Dyfed-Powys	11,135	12,675	10,275
Essex	15,946	15,748	16,764
Gloucestershire	6,229	6,373	11,591
Greater Manchester	37,244	36,061	32,766
Gwent	4,707	7,501	7,025
Hampshire	29,935	34,564	36,612
Hertfordshire	10,433	7,982	8,543
Humberside	13,454	14,915	16,917

Criminal record checks carried out on behalf of local authorities, statutory health bodies, schools and further education establishments (Home Office Circular 47/93), by Police Force Area 1996–99

	1996–97	1997–98	1998–99
Kent	17,603	18,953	22,705
Lancashire	20,041	21,801	21,751
Leicestershire	7,543	7,893	20,210
Lincolnshire	7,180	8,064	12,205
Merseyside	15,482	18,203	16,170
Metropolitan	75,804	91,146	92,608
Norfolk	9,444	9,058	n/a
Northamptonshire	7,864	8,504	8,802
Northumbria	18,601	22,029	23,614
North Wales	11,955	12,259	12,893
North Yorkshire	7,628	9,024	10,053
Nottinghamshire	9,939	10,132	13,123
South Wales	11,411	15,082	15,247
South Yorkshire	10,460	12,169	12,631
Staffordshire	8,311	9,297	12,407
Suffolk	5,249	5,279	6,115
Surrey	11,302	12,361	12,711
Sussex	15,483	18,204	19,974
Thames Valley	[1]37,487	21,422	31,079
Warwickshire	5,599	6,747	6,943
West Mercia	18,239	22,066	25,631
West Midlands	37,152	40,320	38,023
West Yorkshire	16,163	18,229	18,591
Wiltshire	7,666	8,439	9,389
Total	657,036	712,765	769,515

[1] Figures only relate to 1 June 1997 to 31 March 1998. Thames Valley installed a new computer system which went live on 1 June 1997 and records details more efficiently—previous records only kept on paper and not as reliable.

Note:

n/a = Figures are not available. Norfolk have ceased collecting these statistics.

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Mr. Burnett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent representations he has received concerning delays in the issuing of criminal records checks on individuals under child protection arrangements; and if he will make a statement. [114733]

Mr. Charles Clarke: We have received several letters and telephone calls over the past year concerning delays in obtaining criminal record checks. Under arrangements agreed with the Home Office, police forces in England and Wales aim to reply to employers and other agencies within 10 days, unless inquiries need to be made of other forces in which case the aim is to reply within three weeks. However, these targets are subject to the allocation of resources within each police force which is the responsibility of the Chief Constable.

Arrangements in Scotland and Northern Ireland are a matter for the respective Secretaries of State.

City Status

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what provisions exist for a city to have its title and status removed. [114882]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Apart from those cities that enjoy city status by ancient prescriptive usage, city status is an honour conferred by the Sovereign by Letters Patent. As it is a matter for the Royal Prerogative, the Sovereign can strip a city of its status, but this has never been done. Any city acknowledged by ancient prescriptive usage would be expected to have had that status confirmed by local government legislation during the last 100–150 years. It is possible, however, under local government re-organisation legislation, for a new local authority to lose the city status previously enjoyed by part of that authority.

Chinese President (State Visit)

Mr. Hope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the report of the review of policing arrangements for the state visit of the President of China will be published. [115544]

Mr. Straw: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis will publish the report later today and I will place a copy in the Library.

Global Cultural Diversity Congress

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 9 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 818W, on the Global Cultural Diversity Congress, what were the issues that led to his decision that substantial public funds could not be justified to support the Global Cultural Diversity Congress which he became aware of after 7 February. [115054]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The issues that related to my and my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary's decisions were value for money and whether it was appropriate to inject public funds into a private company in serious difficulties.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 9 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 817W, on the Global Cultural Diversity Congress, what undertaking that additional funding would be provided to Global Cultural Diversity Congress 2000 Ltd. by his Department was given by his Department before the Commission for Racial Equality's meeting on 7 February; and if he will make a statement. [115056]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I do not accept that an undertaking was made that additional funding would be provided.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 1 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 288W, on the Global Cultural Diversity Congress, *(a)* for what reasons he will not place the accountants' report into Global Cultural Diversity Congress 2000 Ltd. in the Library and *(b)* what was the cost to public funds of the accountants' report into Global Cultural Diversity Congress 2000 Ltd.; and if he will make a statement. [115058]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The accountant's report was requested to inform consideration by Ministers of the policy issues and never intended for publication.

The final invoice was £31,824.72.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 9 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 818W, on the Global Cultural Diversity Congress, from what source he understood the additional funding for the Global Cultural Diversity Congress which was to be discussed at the Commission for Racial Equality's meeting on 7 February would be provided; and if he will make a statement. [115065]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I understand the potential sources discussed were from the Commission for Racial Equality and Government funds.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 9 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 818W, on the Global Cultural Diversity Congress *(a)* when Mr. Gurbux Singh will take up his duties as Chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality; *(b)* if the discussions with Mr. Gurbux Singh on the timetable for the review which was announced on 22 February have been completed; and *(c)* if the review will commence before Mr. Gurbux Singh formally takes up his duties as the Chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality; and if he will make a statement. [115055]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Mr. Singh officially takes up his position as Chairman in mid May 2000.

The discussions with Mr. Gurbux Singh on the timetable for the review which was announced on 22 February have not been completed.

The review will commence before Mr. Gurbux Singh formally takes up his duties as the Chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) of 6 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 548W, on the Global Cultural Diversity Congress, if the full text of the review conducted by Mr. Gurbux Singh will be placed in the Library; and if he will make a statement. [115057]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We are assured that the review by Mr. Gurbux Singh will be thorough. He shall review the events that led to the cancellation of the Global Cultural

Diversity Congress, including possible implications for the corporate governance of the Commission for Racial Equality and to make recommendations.

The text of the review will be placed in the Library.

Jury Trial

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if he will estimate *(a)* the cost to public funds and *(b)* the amount of Crown court time taken up if (i) 25 per cent., (ii) 50 per cent., (iii) 75 per cent. and (iv) 100 per cent. of defendants electing Crown court trial but refused it by the magistrates under the provisions of the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No. 2) Bill appealed to the Crown court against the magistrates' decision, assuming that an oral hearing was granted in (1) 25 per cent., (2) 50 per cent., (3) 75 per cent. and (4) 100 per cent. of appeals for each proportion of appeals in (i) to (iv); [115212]

(2) pursuant to his answer of 9 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 820W, on jury trial, what research he has undertaken into the likelihood of a defendant appealing against magistrates' decision as to mode of trial under the provisions of the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No. 2) Bill; if he will place a copy of the research in the Library; and if he will make a statement. [115061]

Mr. Charles Clarke: No research has been conducted on this issue. It is assumed that the magistrates will decide to try about 13,940 cases. There is no cost to public funds but the implications of appeals on the estimated savings from the Bill are contained in the table.

	Appeal rate			
Oral hearing rate	*25 per cent.*	*50 per cent.*	*75 per cent.*	*100 per cent.*
25 per cent.				
£ million savings	128	122	116	110
Number of hours	799	1,597	2,396	3,196
50 per cent.				
£ million savings	126	119	112	104
Number of hours	1,017	2,035	3,051	4,066
75 per cent.				
£ million savings	125	116	107	99
Number of hours	1,235	2,470	3,703	4,398
100 per cent.				
£ million savings	124	113	103	93
Number of hours	1,454	2,904	4,358	5,808

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, (1) pursuant to his answer of 9 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 820W, on jury trial, what discussions he has had with *(a)* resident judges, *(b)* other circuit judges and *(c)* the Crown Prosecution Service regarding the requirement for resident judges and their nominated deputies to hear appeals from magistrates' decisions as to mode of trial within 48 hours, under the provisions of the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No. 2) Bill; what was the nature of those discussions; what representations he has received; and if he will make a statement; [115062]

(2) what research he has undertaken into the feasibility of resident judges hearing appeals against magistrates' decisions as to mode of trial within 48 hours under the provisions of the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) (No. 2) Bill; if he will place a copy of the research in the Library; and if he will make a statement. [115064]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The proposal that appeals on mode of trial should be subject to a speedy procedure with determination within 48 hours was discussed with the Senior Judiciary and the Crown Prosecution Service. No research has been undertaken on this matter and no representations have been received.

Political Parties (Donations)

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the annual cost of a scheme to promote tax relief for donations of £500 or less to political parties; and if he will place in the Library the results of research which he has undertaken into the cost of such a scheme. [115122]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The cost of a scheme would depend on the number and size of donations (up to a £500 limit) in respect of which qualifying political parties claimed relief. The Government's White Paper on the Funding of Political Parties in the United Kingdom, published in July 1999, estimated the loss of revenue at upwards of £4 million or £5 million a year. This estimate was based on an assumption that the three main parties would claim relief on an average donation of £20 from each of their members.

Safe Cells

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many safe cells will be installed in prisons in the next financial year. [112590]

Mr. Boateng *[pursuant to his reply, 13 March 2000, c. 76W]:* Rye Hill prison is scheduled to open in January 2001 and will provide 576 cells all of which incorporate the key elements of the Prison Service's new improved standard cell or "safe" cell.

Two new prisons, Ashfield and Forest Bank, opened in this financial year providing 1,088 improved standard cells.

All new prisons are required to provide cells which reflect the design requirements of the Prison Service's new improved standard cell or "safe cell".

Home Detention Curfew

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many of the prisoners released to date under the Home Detention Curfew scheme have *(a)* breached the conditions of the curfew, *(b)* disappeared, *(c)* had their curfew revoked and *(d)* re-offended whilst on the scheme; what offences were committed by those who re-offended whilst on the scheme; what was the (i) average and (ii) maximum sentence received by a prisoner for an offence committed whilst on the scheme; and if he will make a statement. [112728]

Mr. Boateng *[pursuant to his reply, 3 March 2000, c. 448–49W]:* I am now in a position to provide further information regarding the breach and revocation of Home Detention Curfew licences. In addition, my

previous reply included a number of inaccurate figures, arising from administrative errors. These figures have now been corrected.

As at 29 February 2000, 17,792 prisoners had been placed on the Home Detention Curfew scheme. At this date, there had been 625 breaches of curfew. Unauthorised absences from the place of curfew during the curfew period, tampering with the equipment and violence directed at the monitoring contractors' staff count as violations. There are different levels of violations. The most serious violations, or an accumulation of less serious violations, constitute a breach of the curfew.

Those subject to Home Detention Curfew may be recalled to prison if:

there is a breach of the curfew;

their whereabouts can no longer be electronically monitored;

it is necessary to protect the public from serious harm; and

they commit an offence or breach any requirement of probation supervision.

As at 29 February 2000, 832 of those placed on Home Detention Curfew have had their licences revoked by the Secretary of State, as opposed to the figure of 862 published in my earlier reply. As previously indicated, breaches of non-curfew related conditions by curfewees whose original offences were committed prior to 1 January 1999 are dealt with by the courts. Information on these cases is not held centrally.

As my previous reply made clear, the vast majority of those curfewees whose licences are revoked by the Secretary of State are quickly arrested and returned to custody. Fifty were unlawfully at large on 29 February 2000. While the priority to be given to pursuing individual cases will be an operational matter for local police forces, Home Office Circular 1/1999 made clear that Home Detention Curfew recalls should be regarded as "urgent action" cases. In addition, the National Identification Service at New Scotland Yard issues "The Police Gazette" weekly to all police forces, including details of curfewees who are unlawfully at large. The Prison Service regularly monitors police progress in apprehending those curfewees who are unlawfully at large. When curfewees are apprehended following a period unlawfully at large, they are required to serve the full period of time outstanding at the point their licence was revoked.

As of 29 February, the Prison Service had received notification of 182 curfewees who had been charged with an offence committed while subject to the Home Detention Curfew scheme, rather than the figure of 194 given in my previous reply.

A revised breakdown of the offences with which the curfewees were charged is shown in the table. This breakdown has been prepared from information supplied by police forces and drawn from the police national computer. As previously indicated, further analysis of re-offending by those subject to Home Detention Curfew, including the procedures for notification of further charges to the Prison Service by the police, is currently under way as part of a long-term evaluation of the scheme.

The purpose of Home Detention Curfew is to help prisoners bridge the transition from custody to the community through the structure and discipline imposed by the curfew. The scheme only applies to short-term prisoners and no prisoner can be granted Home Detention Curfew without first passing a risk assessment. Overall, the Home Detention Curfew scheme has an impressive success rate of 95 per cent. of curfewees completing their period of curfew licence. However, as I made clear in my previous reply, we are not complacent about any re-offending on curfew and the scheme is strictly enforced.

Offence type	*Number*
Burglary, theft and stealing from shops (including taking without consent/taking and driving away)	65
Assault	31
Driving and traffic offences	16
Drug offences	15
Breach of the peace (including drunk and disorderly)	14
Handling stolen goods/deception	10
Criminal damage	10
Threatening behaviour	8
Possession of an offensive weapon	3
Breach of court injunction or restraining order	3
Rape	2
Harassment	1
Going equipped	1
False imprisonment	1
Arson	1
Indecent exposure	1
Total	182

Note:
Where a curfewee was charged with more than one offence, they appear in the table next to the most serious offence. The table excludes those where, following initial notification, the Prison Service was informed that the charges had been withdrawn.

Roger Crooks

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department on what dates in 1993 and 1994 Roger Crooks was interviewed by the Anti-Terrorist Squad. [114953]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[pursuant to the reply, 16 March 2000, c. 268W]:* The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis tells me that officers of S013, known as the Anti-Terrorist Branch, interviewed Roger Crooks on 21 June 1994.

Press Office

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 9 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 821W and the answer to my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) of 2 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 385W, if he will publish the total number of persons employed in the Home Office Press Office broken down by grade, for *(a)* (i) 1 May 1997, (ii) 1 January 1998, (iii) 1 January 1999 and (iv) 1 January 2000; and *(b)* as an average for the year ending 1 March over (i) 1996–97; (ii) 1997–98; (iii) 1998–99 and (iv) 1999–2000. [115059]

Mr. Straw: As I said in my reply to the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) on 2 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 385W, records of staff numbers are, of necessity,

a snapshot of a particular month and cannot take fully into account staff arrivals and departures which are happening on a working basis.

The total number of persons employed in the Home Office Press Office, broken down by grade for the dates in question, were:

1 May 1997: three Senior Information Officers, 10 Information Officers (two part-time), one Assistant Information Officer, a Higher Executive Officer on secondment, one Executive Officer, one Administrative Officer and two Administrative Assistants;

January 1998: three Senior Information Officers, 11 Information Officers (two part-time), one Executive Officer, one Administrative Officer and two Administrative Assistants;

January 1999: two Senior Information Officers, eight Information Officers (two part-time), three Assistant Information Officers, one Higher Executive Officer on secondment, one Executive Officer, one Administrative Officer and two Administrative Assistants; and

January 2000: three Senior Information Officers, six Information Officers, three Assistant Information Officers, one Higher Executive Officer, one Executive Officer, one Administrative Officer and two Administrative Assistants.

For all these periods, the Home Office Press Office was managed by an Assistant Director at either Grade 7 or temporary Grade 6 level.

At virtually no time since May 1997 has the full staff complement been reached. There have been a considerable number of vacancies at various grades at any one time. Attachments and secondees, some at no cost to the Department and some for less than six weeks' duration, make the calculation of average staff levels almost meaningless.

In addition at various times through this period, Chief Immigration Officers were on six month attachment to the Home Office Press Office. It should also be noted that the grades referred to are substantive grades and that at various times press officers may have been on temporary promotion to a higher grade.

The staff details supplied to the Select Committee on Public Administration and published in its report in July 1998 are averages for the years in question and an average for the year to 1 March for the years 1996–97 and 1997–98 would vary very little.

It would not be possible to obtain the averages for 1998–99 and for 1999–2000 without disproportionate costs.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to employ members of the Home Office Press Office on special adviser terms; which of his special advisers are authorised to speak to the press on his behalf; if they are required to consult the Home Office Press Office before doing so; if a record is kept; and if he will make a statement. [115036]

Mr. Straw: There are no plans to employ members of the Home Office Press Office on special adviser terms. Of two special advisers at the Home Office, appointed by the Home Secretary under terms and conditions set out in the model contract for special advisers, one (Ed Owen) supports Ministers in the presentational aspects of policy and in doing so has regular direct contact with the media and liaises with the Home Office Press Office.

Special Advisers

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the persons employed as special advisers in his Department since 2 May 1997, indicating their salary bands, in each financial year. [115063]

Mr. Straw: The information requested is as follows:

Name	*Period of employment*	*Pay band 1998–99*	*Pay band 1999–2000*
Lord Warner	May 1997 to October 1998	—	—
Ed Owen	May 1997 to date	A	B
Justin Russell	October 1998 to date	B	B

Lord Warner stepped down as my Senior Special Adviser prior to the introduction of pay bands. Prior to that salaries paid to special advisers fell within pay ranges which were, in 1997–98, £24,349-£73,484. From 1 April 1998 to 1 December 1998, the pay range was £24,836-£74,957, and after 1 December 1998, £26,000-£76,050.

In addition, a special adviser, Ruth Allan, was employed between 1 September 1997 and 30 September 1998 to work with the Youth Justice Task Force. Her salary was also within the pay ranges mentioned above.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Courts (Closures)

Mr. Burnett: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many courts have *(a)* been due for closure and *(b)* closed in each of the last four years; and what estimate he has made of the costs saved by each closure. [114732]

Jane Kennedy: The number of magistrates courts assessed by local Magistrates Courts Committees (MCCs) as due for closure is: 1996—20, 1997—24, 1998—25, 1999—8. The number of courts closed is: 1996—20, 1997—22, 1998—24, 1999—8. The Government's policy is that magistrates courts are best managed locally by MCCs, and that decisions and costings concerning the number of magistrates courts in its area are for the MCC to determine. The cost saving achieved by the closures is not collected centrally.

The Chief Executive of the Court Service has supplied the following information.

Since 1 March 1996 to date, public consultation on the question of closure has been authorised in respect of 37 county courts, of which 25 have been closed or amalgamated.

The number of county courts closed in each of the last four years since 1 March 1996 is: 1996—7, 1997—8, 1998—6, 1999—2. Two county courts have been closed to date since 1 January 2000.

The financial savings to the Court Service are chiefly in terms of rent and accommodation charges, running costs such as telephone, postage, and maintenance of buildings. Figures on all the savings accruing from county court closures since 1996 are not kept centrally by the Court Service. However, a broad conservative estimate of accommodation charges saved and general running costs would indicate a minimum saving of around £3,000,000 over the four year period since March 1996. During the period there were no Crown court closures, actual or contemplated.

Legal Aid

Mr. Burnett: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what estimate his Department has made of the cost to the civil legal aid fund of increases in court fees in each of the last four years. [114731]

Mr. Lock: Court fee increases in November 1996 were estimated to cost the legal aid fund some £14 million. No estimate was made of the small increase in fees in 1997 and there were no increases in 1998.

We estimated that the overall effect of increases in some and decreases in other court fees, in April 1999, would provide savings to legal aid of around £6 million per annum.

Damages Act 1996

Mr. Burnett: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans the Lord Chancellor has to use his powers under Section 1 of the Damages Act 1996. [115239]

Mr. Lock: The Act allows the Lord Chancellor to set a rate by which lump sum awards for damages are discounted to offset the advantage to the claimant of receiving his money all at once. In Wells *v.* Wells [1999] 1 A.C. 345 the House of Lords ruled that the rate should be based on the return available from Index Linked Government Securities (ILGS) because the claimant must be assumed to pursue risk-averse investments. The Lord Chancellor has today issued a consultation paper seeking comments on how the discount rate should be set and reviewed. In the light of responses he will decide whether, and if so how, to exercise the power under section 1 of the Act.

Written Answers to Questions

Monday 20 March 2000

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Press Releases

Mr. Brady: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food for the period 2 May 1997 to 29 February 2000, what was *(a)* the number of occasions on which couriers were used to distribute news releases from his Department and *(b)* the total cost of using couriers to distribute news releases. [113977]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 10 March 2000]:* As far as I am aware couriers have not been used, by MAFF, to distribute news releases.

Mr. Brady: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the *(a)* national, *(b)* regional and *(c)* local newspapers and media bodies to which his Department sent news releases during the period 2 May 1997 to 29 February 2000. [113989]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 10 March 2000]:* News releases are made available to all press and media bodies through the Central Office of Information (COI) managed News Distribution Service and the internet, and until recently via the Royal Mail postal service.

I will write to the hon. Member with a list of all those we believe have received news releases.

Farmers' Ages

Mr. Paice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what the most recent figures are regarding the average age of farmers and the trend in average age. [113878]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 10 March 2000]:* The estimated average age of holders on main holdings in the UK for the years 1990 to 1997 are contained in the table.

Year	*Estimated average age*	*Percentage of holders aged 65 and over*
1990	53	23
1993	53	23
1995	54	25
1997	53	22

Notes:

1. The EC Farm Structure Survey is held across all member states of the European Union four times every decade, to assess the agricultural situation across the Community and to monitor trends in the structure of holdings.

2. The holder of the holding is that (natural or legal) person in whose name the holding is operated. The holder can own the holding outright or rent it, or be a hereditary long-term leaseholder, or a usufructuary or a trustee. A natural person may be either a single individual or a group of individuals, for example married couples, siblings, joint beneficiaries under a will or intestacy.

3. The data is collected by age bands and, to calculate the average age, the mid-point of each age band is used. The mid-point of 67 is assumed for the age band Aged 65 and over.

Source:
EC Farm Structure Survey

Fisheries

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the environmental impact of the proposed reduction in grant-in-aid to the Environment Agency in support of its fisheries work. [114436]

Mr. Morley: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given to the hon. Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) on 27 October 1999, *Official Report*, column 922W.

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he has received in relation to the proposed cut in grant-in-aid to the Environment Agency in support of its fisheries work. [114435]

Mr. Morley: I have received representations from a number of individuals and organisations, including some 120 letters from Members of Parliament and over 60 letters from the general public.

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what estimate he has made of the number of job losses resulting from the proposed cut in grant-in-aid to the Environment Agency in support of its fisheries work. [114434]

Mr. Morley: The planned reduction in grant-in-aid to the Environment Agency to fund its work on salmon and freshwater fisheries in England will come into effect in 2001–02. It will be for the Environment Agency to determine its spending priorities for that year in the light of the fall in grant-in-aid. Until it has done this it is not possible to assess the impact of the reduction.

GM Crops

Mr. David Heath: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what maximum percentage of the diet of *(a)* animals reared for meats, *(b)* animals kept for dairy produce and *(c)* poultry may originate from a GM crop or a mixture of GM crops. [113769]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* There are no specific rules on the proportion of animal diets which are permitted to originate from GM crops.

Irish Sea

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) what progress has been made on the development of a regional fisheries forum for the Irish Sea area; [114706]

(2) what estimate he has made of the cost of establishing a regional fisheries forum for the Irish Sea area. [114707]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 15 March 2000]:* Although ideas for the establishment of a Forum for Fisheries in the Irish Sea are not currently being pursued, substantial progress has been made in the context of the Irish Sea Cod Recovery Programme in the involvement of

fishermen in fisheries management decisions which affect them. At UK prompting, the European Commission and Council agreed on 17 December last that each stage of the Programme should be developed through a regional consultation group bringing together fishermen, scientists and administrators from the Member States concerned in the Irish Sea cod fishery. This group will also review progress towards meeting the stock recovery objectives of the Programme.

This marks an important step forward in strengthening the regional dimension of the Common Fisheries Policy.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Bus and Priority Lanes

Mr. Bill O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he plans to extend bus lanes on congested motorways and trunk roads; what plans he has to introduce priority lanes on motorways and trunk roads for lorries; and if he will make a statement. [112706]

Mr. Hill: The Government are committed to making the best possible use of existing trunk road systems in tackling problems of traffic congestion. This may, at certain specific locations, involve the provision of designated lanes but I do not envisage their widespread use in the immediate future on the motorway and trunk road network outside urban areas. Where such lanes are appropriate, consideration needs to be given on a case by case basis as to what vehicles, including buses and heavy goods vehicles, may use them and at what times.

A3 (Hindhead)

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) when the public were last consulted about proposals to remedy blockages on the A3 near Hindhead; when he plans next to consult the public on this issue; if he will estimate the cost of the current study of the A3 near Hindhead; and if he has consulted the National Trust about the A3 near Hindhead; [114368]

(2) when the public will next be involved in the problem of the proposals to remedy blockages on A3 near Hindhead problem. [114425]

Mr. Hill: The public were consulted on options for a road solution at Hindhead, including the proposed tunnel scheme, in 1992. As part of the study now under way the public are being involved on an on-going basis through a comprehensive programme of consultation and communication. This includes setting up local focus groups, a wider reference group, telephone interviews with longer distance travellers and a formal public consultation exercise. The commission for the study was awarded on the basis of a tender price of £188,066. Mr. Peter Griffiths, Director of the National Trust for the South Region, is a member of the study's steering group.

London Underground

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will place in the Library a copy of the invitation documents sent to consortiums selected to bid for the two deep-level tube PPP contracts, together with the draft contract for the proposed PPP; and if he will list the members of each consortium which was selected. [114195]

Mr. Hill: The invitation to tender and PPP draft contract contain commercially confidential material whose release could undermine the public sector's negotiating position and prevent best value from being achieved. London Transport has made an overview of the invitation to tender publicly available and I have placed a copy in the Library of the House.

London Underground announced the consortia selected to bid for the two deep-level tube contracts on 7 October 1999. The bidding consortia and their members are as follows:

LINC:

Bombardier Prorail, John Mowlem and Company, Fluor Daniel, Alcatel Telecom and Anglian Water

Metronet:

Adtranz (Daimler-Chrysler Rail Systems), W. S. Atkins, Balfour Beatty (BICC), Seeboard plc and Thames Water

Tube Lines Group:

Bechtel/Halcrow, Amey, Hyder Investments and Jarvis

TubeRail:

Brown and Root, Alstom Transportation Projects, Amec and Carillion

The Tube Lines Group has been invited to bid for only one of the two contracts.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he is expecting PPP bids for the sub-surface London tube lines by 31 March. [114985]

Mr. Hill: No. London Transport will be inviting bids shortly.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what London tube lines and stations will be closed during the proposed PPP; and if he will make a statement. [114984]

Mr. Hill: Under the PPP, the private sector will take over responsibility for delivering a massive programme of work on the Tube network, totalling around £8 billion of investment and around £5 billion of maintenance over the next 15 years. This will reduce passenger journey times and make services more reliable, as well as improving the quality of the travelling environment.

As now, it will be necessary from time to time to close some parts of the network for limited periods to undertake essential work. Bidders' proposals in this area will be closely examined when London Underground evaluates the PPP bids.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what is his policy on continuing with proposals for the London Underground PPP if none of the bids undertakes best value against the appropriate public sector comparator; [114986]

(2) what public sector comparators he will employ to assess whether potential bidders for the London Underground PPP are offering best value for money; and if he will make a statement. [114931]

Mr. Hill: To test that the London Underground PPP represents value for money, London Underground, with their professional advisers, are developing a rigorous public sector comparator. A paper explaining the principles underlying the comparator will be published shortly. The cash values produced by the comparator will also be released, but only once negotiations with bidders are complete. To publish them any earlier would risk jeopardising the taxpayer's negotiating position.

To ensure that the public sector comparator proves a rigorous and fair test, it is to be audited by London Underground's independent, external auditors. In addition, the comparator will be open to detailed scrutiny by the National Audit Office in the usual way.

We will not contemplate deals being done if they do not offer best value to the taxpayer.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what representations about the political risks associated with the proposed contracts for the London Underground PPP he has received from potential bidders; and if he will make a statement; [114932]

(2) what commitment the Government have entered into to underwrite the bidders' costs of bidding for the contracts for the London Underground PPP; how much he estimates this will cost public funds; and if he will make a statement. [114934]

Mr. Hill: My right hon. Friend has received no representations about political risk associated with the PPP contract. My officials have, however, received a small number of representations about political and other risk associated with the bidding competition.

Under the terms of the Invitation To Tender for the deep Tube infrastructure service contracts, London Underground may make payments to bidders for bid costs:

(i) should the PPP competition be terminated on grounds other than the fact that the bids do not present value for money; or

(ii) where costs are incurred by an unsuccessful shortlisted bidder after London Underground has required offers with committed finances to be submitted.

We are confident that PPP will represent best value and go ahead, and therefore expect there to be no cost to public funds in the first case. If costs are incurred in the second case, arising from the successful completion of the PPP programme, it may be necessary to reimburse the eligible costs from public funds up to a limit of £1 million per shortlisted bidder.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much has been spent on professional and consultancy fees in respect of the London Underground PPP; and if he will estimate how much will be spent in total by the time of completion of the PPP. [114933]

Mr. Hill: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas) on 21 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 525W. London Transport will not know the overall requirements or costs for external advice until the Public-Private Partnership (PPP) transaction has been completed, but the Government are working with LT to ensure that we receive the best advice while minimising the overall costs of implementing the PPP.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what estimate he has made of how much public funding will be required to support the London Underground PPP; and if he will make a statement; [114980]

(2) what is his latest estimate for the total funding requirement for the London Underground for the period of the proposed PPP; and how this will be met. [114981]

Mr. Hill: Under the PPP, we expect to see around £8 billion invested in the Underground over the first 15 years with around a further £5 billion spent on maintenance. It would not be sensible at this stage, before London Underground have received bids, to estimate how this will be funded. However, we have made clear that if it should prove value for money, then Transport for London will receive the appropriate level of central government grant to allow for London Underground's need to make any payments to the PPP contractors.

The PPP is about obtaining best value in the way that farebox revenue and any public subsidy is spent. The evidence indicates that the PPP will be better value than the wholly public sector alternatives, even if central government grant continues to be paid.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received from potential bidders for the PPP contracts on the London Underground concerning shortfalls against costs of the PPP. [114982]

Mr. Hill: None.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what cap he will set on increases in fares on the London Underground under the proposed PPP. [114983]

Mr. Hill: Fares on the London Underground will be a matter for the Mayor. The economic analysis London Underground and their advisers have undertaken for the PPP assumes that fares will do no more than keep pace with inflation once the PPP is in place.

Welded Vehicles

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is his estimate of the number of motor vehicles that were welded together and offered for resale during 1999; and if he will make a statement. [114494]

Mr. Hill: The information requested is not held centrally by the Department. Our aim is to ensure that all vehicles comply with prescribed roadworthiness standards and that the tools are there to see they are enforced. Through its oversight of the MOT testing regime the Vehicle Inspectorate enforces the relevant roadworthiness requirements. Local authority trading standards officials have powers to deal with unscrupulous traders who offer unroadworthy vehicles for sale. As must be the case, the

best advice we can give is for buyers to arrange for an independent technical inspection of a vehicle and to obtain information on its background prior to purchase.

Rema (Sinking)

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recommendations were made to him by the Marine Accident Investigation Board following the sinking of the Rema. [114525]

Mr. Hill: The Marine Accident Investigation Branch Report into the sinking of the Belize-registered MV Rema made one recommendation to this Department, addressed to the Maritime and Coastguard Agency. The Agency is recommended to advocate through the International Maritime Organisation (IMO), the fitting of hold bilge alarms in all single hold vessels.

An identical recommendation was addressed to the International Merchant Marine Registry of Belize (IMMARBE), therefore the Maritime and Coastguard Agency will be consulting IMMARBE and the United Kingdom marine industry for their views on how this recommendation should be supported and taken forward to the IMO.

The other four inspector's recommendations contained in the report are addressed to IMMARBE and propose measures to improve its safety record.

O Licences

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will increase the minimum deposit for the grant of an O licence from £5,000 to £20,000. [114518]

Mr. Hill: New European Union rules on the level of finances required by holders of international operator licences came into effect in this country for new applications in October 1999. Existing operators have until October 2001 to meet the new requirements. They require an amount equal to or exceeding 9,000 euro for the first or only vehicle authorised under the operator's licence and 5,000 euro for each additional vehicle. This represents a significant increase over the previous financial requirements. Traffic Commissioners assess the level of financial resources required by domestic operators as a proportion of these figures. For standard national licences this is normally some 80 per cent. of the figure set for an international operator's licence and about 50 per cent. for Restricted licences. We are planning to carry out a consultation exercise seeking views on whether these remain appropriate levels of funding for domestic operators.

Rail Yards (Telephony Equipment)

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will issue guidelines identifying *(a)* the correct telephony equipment for use in railway freight yards and *(b)* suitable training courses for operatives. [114515]

Mr. Hill: There are no plans to issue guidelines identifying what communication equipment, including telephone equipment, should be used in railway freight yards.

The provision of communication equipment, including telephones, and the suitable training of staff in its use, is a matter for the train operating companies.

Greater London (Select Committee Report)

Ms Ryan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what steps are being taken to prepare a response to the recommendation in the Twentieth Report of the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee, Session 1998–99 (HC 477), about Greater London; [114561]

(2) what plans he has to include in the preparation of the White Paper on rural issues investment in and support for the management of green and open spaces within conurbations, with special reference to London. [114554]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Government's Response was published in January 2000 (Cmnd 4550). It identified a number of recommendations to be considered further in the White Paper on urban policy. The White Paper will set out policies and proposals for improving the quality of life in our towns and cities. An important part of this will be our proposals for improving the management of the public realm, including our parks and open spaces.

Parks and open spaces are important to the quality of life in all our towns, cities and conurbations. The proposals set out in our Response and being developed in the White Paper are for national application.

Green and Open Spaces

Ms Ryan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what mechanisms exist to ensure that initiatives across London which affect green and open spaces and the public funds invested in them can be co-ordinated. [114560]

Ms Beverley Hughes: A large proportion of the open space surrounding the built up area of London is designated as Green Belt or Metropolitan Open Land. As such it enjoys a high degree of protection from development, through existing national planning guidance and local planning policies. In addition, Strategic Guidance for London Planning Authorities (RPG3) issued in 1996 urges local planning authorities to encourage the maintenance and support of agriculture as a major economic activity in the Green Belt.

The new Mayor of London will be required to produce a number of important strategies including a spatial development strategy, a number of environmental strategies and biodiversity action plan. Each of the strategies should be consistent with the others. Together, these strategies will enable the Mayor to devise an holistic approach to the protection and enhancement of green and open spaces of strategic importance in London.

Ms Ryan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what hectarage of green and open space land open to the public is (i) owned and (ii) managed by the *(a)* Corporation of London, *(b)* Royal Parks Agency, *(c)* Lee Valley Regional Park, *(d)* London boroughs, *(e)* English Heritage and *(f)* other agencies. [114558]

Ms Beverley Hughes: This information is not held centrally.

Ms Ryan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much public funding was spent within the boundary of the M25 on (1) management and maintenance and (2) the development, conservation and restoration of public and open spaces, parks, gardens and estates by *(a)* the Corporation of London, *(b)* the Royal Parks Agency, *(c)* the Lee Valley Regional Park, *(d)* the Heritage Lottery Fund, *(e)* the London boroughs, *(f)* English Heritage and *(g)* other agencies and by way of (i) grants made available via the Government Office for London for Single Regeneration Budget or related green space projects, (ii) ESF Objective 2 grants related to green space enhancement and (iii) grants made by London TECs for country green space development projects in the last 12 months. [114559]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The information requested in respect of the Corporation of London, the Lee Valley Regional Park, the London boroughs and other agencies is currently not available centrally in the form, and for the geographical area requested. I am however able to say that the estimated net current expenditure of the London boroughs and the City of London on managing and maintaining parks and open spaces totals £100,896,000 for 1999–2000.

Responsibility for the Royal Parks Agency, Heritage Lottery Fund and English Heritage falls to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport. My right hon. Friend informs me that the information requested in respect of the Heritage Lottery Fund is not currently available for the geographical area requested. The total grant paid to the Royal Parks Agency for 1999–2000 is £26.389 million, which is currently not broken down in the form requested. The English Heritage budget for 1999–2000 for the management and maintenance of properties and land within their care is a total of £3,597,618. The budget for development and conservation projects on English Heritage owned properties for 1999–2000 is £539,500.

No grants have been offered to third parties for management of open space, parks, or gardens in the last 12 months by English Heritage. However, London Region has commissioned a management plan to advise on proposals for College Farm at a cost of £15,000, and English Heritage contributed £37,000 to the Thames Landscape Strategy in 1999–2000.

Road Traffic Regulations Act 1984

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will conduct a review of sections 92 and 122 of the Road Traffic Regulations Act 1984, with particular reference to compatibility between those two sections and the personal injuries and damage to vehicles caused by rising bollards. [114795]

Mr. Hill: We have no plans to conduct such a review. Section 122 of the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984 places a duty on local traffic authorities to exercise their functions under the Act so as to secure the expeditious, convenient and safe movement of traffic, so far as practicable having regard to certain matters such as amenity and need for access to premises. This includes the exercise of their power under section 92 to place bollards to prevent vehicles from using roads from which they are prohibited. It is the responsibility of individual traffic authorities to ensure that they exercise their road traffic regulation functions in a manner that is compatible with their statutory duty under section 122.

Highways (Works)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will take powers to require utility telecoms companies and local authorities to co-ordinate their work programmes so that disruptive excavations of the highway are minimised; and if he will make a statement. [114996]

Mr. Hill: Street works undertakers are required under the New Roads and Street Works Act 1991 to co-operate with highway authorities and one another, and the authorities for their part are required to co-ordinate works in their streets. Section 66 of the 1991 Act provides that undertakers must carry on and complete works with all reasonable dispatch, and a street authority can require an undertaker obstructing the street more extensively or for longer than is reasonable necessary to comply with a restraining notice. Where there is a risk of serious traffic disruption from street works, section 56 enables the street authority to direct the undertaker to carry out work only at certain times, if the disruption can be avoided or reduced by this means.

In a further development, the 1998 Integrated Transport White Paper made a commitment to consult on options for an incentive system, with penalties, to minimise disruption to road users, and to encourage improved co-ordination of street works. A consultation was launched last October and my Department is considering the responses to the consultation in order to decide on the best way forward.

Finally, Regulations have been made under powers in the New Roads and Street Works Act 1991, and came into effect last year, to facilitate and encourage the electronic transfer of information about street works and other works in the highway between utilities such as telecoms companies and highway authorities. This will ensure greater consistency and speed in transferring and registering the information, which in turn will help authorities in their co-ordination role.

Accident Reduction Targets

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action he is taking to ensure that local authorities meet the Government's accident reduction targets; and if he will make a statement. [114890]

Mr. Hill: The Government's Road Safety Strategy, "Tomorrow's Roads—Safer for Everyone", included new national casualty reduction targets to be met by 2010. To achieve these targets we must work in partnership with

others, including local authorities. The strategy outlines what we expect of local authorities. Within their local transport plan (LTP) authorities must devise a local road safety strategy including local casualty reduction targets in support of the national targets. We are providing authorities with additional resources for implementation.

The integrated transport element of capital allocations, which includes road safety schemes, will be £250 million in 2000–01, 20 per cent. higher than in the current year. Authorities will be required to produce annual progress reports setting out performance against the indicators and targets contained within the LTP. Authorities will be asked to look again at LTPs which fail to deliver against their targets and we reserve the right to reduce allocations to poorly performing authorities or introduce the selective ring-fencing of resources.

Office of the Rail Regulator

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many full-time staff worked in the Office of the Rail Regulator at the time that the present Regulator was appointed; how many new appointments have been made since then; how many staff have left since then; how many vacancies exist; how many staff are due to leave within the next six months; and how many staff the Regulator employs. [114917]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 16 March 2000]:* At the time the present Regulator was appointed—on 5 July 1999—there were 140 full-time staff in the Office of the Rail Regulator, including the staff of the Central and regional Rail Users' Consultative Committees. Since his appointment, there have been 53 appointments—16 of which were new posts. Thirty-three staff have left since the current Regulator was appointed. There are 27 existing vacancies and there are five staff due to leave within the next six months. The Regulator currently employs 160 staff.

Cycle Lanes

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many kilometres of cycle lanes have been built in each of the last 10 years for which figures are available; and how many are projected to be built in the next five years. [114814]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* Information about the lengths of cycle lanes provided and projected by local highway authorities is not held centrally. The responsibility for the provision of all cycle facilities, including cycle lanes, rests with individual highway authorities.

We are encouraging local highway authorities to respond to the National Cycling Strategy by including local strategies to increase cycling in their local transport plans.

Telecommunications Masts

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what investigations the Health and Safety Executive is making into the potential health hazards of telecommunications masts. [115066]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 17 March 2000]:* The Health and Safety Executive, in common with other Government Departments, is advised on health hazards from radiation emitted from telecommunication masts by the National Radiological Protection Board. The Government's view, based on advice from the NRPB, is that the validated scientific evidence does not suggest that radiofrequency emissions from telecommunication masts present a health hazard if they comply with NRPB guidelines, but that there is a need for more research.

HSE is supporting national and international research programmes into the suggested harmful effects of radiofrequency emissions, and will contribute to the review of the UK research programme in the light of the recommendations of the Independent Expert Group on Mobile Phones due in May.

Multiple Property Owning

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has had with the Treasury regarding taxation to discourage multiple property owning. [115125]

Mr. Mullin *[holding answer 16 March 2000]:* My Department has regular discussions with the Treasury on a range of issues of mutual interest. Final decisions on taxation are a matter for the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Seat Belts

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action he is taking to ensure that seat belts are worn by rear-seat passengers. [115537]

Mr. Hill: I refer the hon. Member to my reply of 16 March 2000, *Official Report,* columns 329–30W.

Home Energy Efficiency Programme

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much money was allocated to the Home Energy Efficiency Programme for each financial year since 1990–91 to the present for *(a)* the United Kingdom as a whole, *(b)* England, *(c)* Scotland and *(d)* Wales; and if he will make a statement. [115139]

Mr. Meacher: The Home Energy Efficiency Scheme (HEES) covers Great Britain only. Northern Ireland has always had its own separate scheme. Until 1999, the scheme had shared administration and delivery costs and no separate allocation for England, Scotland and Wales. During 1999–2000, the scheme was devolved to Scotland with a set budget. The total allocation for each year from 1990–91 is as follows, together with the approximate proportion spent in Scotland and Wales:

Financialyear	Total allocation (£ million)	Of which approximately allocated to Scotland (percentage)	Of which approximately allocated to Wales (percentage)
1990–91[1]	1.5	[3]—	[3]—
1991–92	26.1	9	4
1992–93	33.6	8	3
1993–94	41.5	8	4
1994–95	83	8	5
1995–96	107.2	8	5
1996–97	76.1	8	5
1997–98	76.1	8	4
1998–99	76.2	7	6
1999–2000	74.9	[2]—	5

[1] Expenditure in 1990–91 was for three months only.
[2] From 1 July 1999, Scotland set up its own separate scheme "Warm Deal". The total amount transferred to Scotland for the whole year (including expenditure during 1 April to 30 June) was £5.9 million. This figure does not include any additional monies allocated by the Scottish Executive to the programme.
[3] Not available.

Housing (Newcastle Great Park)

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will estimate the housing densities of the housing areas of the proposed Newcastle Great Park planning application now referred to him, using the net site density method set out in Annexe C of the revised Planning Policy Guidance 3. [115285]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The application for Newcastle Great Park, which is currently before the Secretary of State, is for outline planning permission, so the information provided does not enable the net housing density to be calculated in accordance with Annexe C of the revised PPG3 on Housing. To do so, we should require many more details, such as the housing layout and area of open space, that the applicants are legitimately seeking to reserve for later approval if outline permission is granted.

If the application is approved, the planning authority concerned (either the local authority or the Secretary of State) could impose conditions on the outline permission relating to housing density. The Secretary of State would expect any decision on this application to take into account the policies in the revised PPG3, as well as any other relevant policy guidance.

Vacant Properties (Tyne and Wear)

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many vacant residential properties there were in each local authority area in Tyne and Wear on the most recent date for which figures are available; and how many residential properties have been leased in each such local authority area in the last five years. [115283]

Mr. Mullin: The latest information reported by local authorities on Housing Investment Programme returns is as follows:

	All vacant residential properties at 1 April 1999	Dwellings leased to, or by, the authority at 1 April:									
		1999		1998		1997		1996		1995	
		To LA	By LA	To LA	By LA	To LA	By LA	To LA	By LA	To LA	By LA
Gateshead	2,608	0	416	0	399	0	372	0	356	0	335
Newcastle upon Tyne	7,905	0	792	0	732	0	701	0	658	0	648
North Tyneside	5,008	0	326	0	314	0	312	0	283	0	273
South Tyneside	2,341	0	386	0	364	0	353	0	339	0	558
Sunderland	4,298	8	426	8	357	8	345	8	301	8	431

Source:
Annual HIP (Operational Information) returns

Rural Public Transport

Dr. Jack Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to improve the provision of public transport in *(a)* rural areas and *(b)* West Cumbria; and if he will make a statement. [115144]

Mr. Hill: Many of the measures within the Integrated Transport White Paper and the Transport Bill currently before Parliament benefit rural areas. We are also developing a Ten Year Plan for transport to set out a long-term investment programme and a Rural White Paper to set out our objectives for rural areas.

The system of Local Transport Plans, which are five year integrated transport strategies prepared by local authorities, are the cornerstone of delivering better transport in local ares. Authorities are specifically required to address the accessibility needs of people in rural areas in their Plans and to recognise the interrelationship between rural and other areas.

We appreciate that rural areas have particular transport problems, which is why we have made £170 million available for rural transport over the three years to March 2001. The bulk of this money is delivered through the Rural Bus Subsidy Grant. In England this provides £32.5 million a year to fund new or improved bus services for rural areas. In February we announced the extension of the Rural Bus Subsidy Grant until at least 2004.

We are also conscious of the importance of rural railways. Our guidance to the Franchising Director seeks improvements through the re-negotiation of franchise agreements. We have also made available additional funding for a new Rail Passenger Partnership scheme aimed specifically at providing support for locally sponsored services that are not commercially viable.

We look forward to receiving the full Local Transport Plan for Cumbria to be submitted in July. This will set out the authority's plans for transport in the area for the next five years. We have also been working with the many local bodies on the development of a Lake District Transport Strategy to improve and co-ordinate public transport provision across Cumbria. The strategy recognises the importance of links with both West Cumbria and the Furness area. A range of measures to improve public transport are under way, including upgrading information displays and new bus shelters. Further work is planned, including through ticketing, marketing and promotion, travel point information, improving existing interchange between bus and rail and new multi-modal interchanges.

Cumbria has received £957,300 a year in Rural Bus Subsidy Grant and has established 27 new and 64 improved services. The county has also recently been awarded £722,000 under the Rural Bus Challenge for a project to enhance bus links between Cockermouth, Keswick and Penrith. Feeder bus services to the core route (including one from Workington), interchange and waiting facilities and travel information are all to be improved. This work will complement the improvements achieved through the Local Transport Plan, particularly those planned for Penrith rail station to enhance linkages with bus services. A feasibility study is also being undertaken with interested companies and Railtrack to establish detailed proposals to improve the Furness and Cumbrian coast rail services.

The Countryside Agency has provided grant to support three Rural Transport Partnerships, including one in West Cumbria, to secure additional resources for rural transport supporting local communities and in particular to reduce rural isolation and social exclusion through enhanced access to jobs and services.

Jubilee Line

Mr. Bruce George: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action is being taken permanently to correct the signal failures affecting the Jubilee line. [114820]

Mr. Hill: This is an operational matter for London Underground. I understand that software improvements are currently being carried out which will improve the reliability of the signalling system on the Jubilee line. The implementation programme for this work is expected to be completed by the end of June. Other improvements in the Stratford area have already been carried out or are in hand and will help to provide a more consistent and regular service. Further, line-wide, signalling-related work is also scheduled to take place throughout the year.

Publicity Costs (Greater London Authority)

Mr. Syms: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much money the Government have spent on publicity costs in relation to the Greater London Authority and associated bodies. [115513]

Mr. Hill: In the run-up to the London Referendum between May 1997 and 7 May 1998 the total publicity budget was £1.6 million. There was no publicity budget for publicising the Greater London Authority between the Referendum and Royal Assent for the Greater London Authority Act 1999 in November 1999.

The Government are currently running a multi-media information campaign to ensure that Londoners know about the new voting process on 4 May and understand how the Mayor and Assembly will affect their daily lives. The total budget for this campaign is £4.1 million—about 81p per London elector. Approximately £2.9 million will be spent in the current financial year and £1.2 million in 2000–01.

In addition, following the recent amendment to the Greater London Authority Act 1999, the Government have agreed to spend £1.7 million on a booklet prepared by the Greater London Returning Officer containing election addresses by Mayoral candidates.

National Air Traffic Services

Dr. Strang: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the estimated level of capital investment by National Air Traffic Services for *(a)* 1999–2000, *(b)* 2000–01 and *(c)* 2001–02; and how much of that investment will go to the New Scottish Centre in each of these years. [115509]

Mr. Mullin: The 1999 NATS Business Plan estimated capital investments are at the following levels.

	£ million
1999–2000	55.6
2000–01	47.5
2001–02	53.7

NATS are currently developing a long-term investment plan, which will be completed in the next few months.

It is not possible to give a precise estimate of the likely expenditure on the New Scottish Centre over the next few years as the contract for construction of the centre building has yet to be let. However the cost of the centre is expected to be of the order of £400 million, and is expected to come into operation in the winter of 2006–07.

Dr. Strang: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the civil airports in the UK, specifying which use National Air Traffic Services to provide air traffic control services. [115508]

Mr. Mullin: The following is a list of the civil airports in the UK. Those which use National Air Traffic Services to provide air traffic control services are marked with an asterisk (*).

Aberdeen*
Alderney (States of Guernsey)
Belfast City
Belfast International*
Birmingham International Airport*
Blackpool
Bournemouth International Airport
Bristol Filton
Bristol International Airport (Lulsgate)
Cambridge
Cardiff International Airport*
Carlisle Airport
Coventry
Cranfield Airport
Dundee
Dunsford Aerodrome
East Midlands International Airport
Edinburgh*
Exeter
Glasgow—Prestwick
Glasgow*
Gloucestershire Airport
Guernsey States Airport
Hawarden
Highlands and Islands Airports (includes 10 airports—not all have ATC)
Humberside International Airport
Isle of Man (Ronaldsway) Airport
Jersey
Leeds Bradford International Airport
Liverpool
London—Biggin Hill
London—Gatwick*
London—Heathrow*
London—Luton
London—Southend
London—Stansted*
London City*
Lydd
Manchester*
Manston—Kent International
Newcastle International Airport
North Denes Heliport
Norwich
Oxford
Plymouth City
Sheffield City
Shoreham
Southampton
St. Marys
Swansea
Teeside
Warton
Woodford Aerodrome

Green Transport Plans

Mr. Syms: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the budget was for promoting green transport plans in 1999–2000; and what is the predicted outturn of expenditure for 1999–2000. [115514]

Mr. Hill: The original budget was for £2 million. The predicted outturn is around £0.5 million.

Mr. Syms: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions for what reasons the Government transferred £500,000 for the promotion of green transport plans budget in 1999–2000 to other uses. [115515]

Mr. Hill: £500,000 was transferred to make the best use of predicted underspend. This is a new programme to promote the take-up of travel plans through guidance and advice to employers and schools. We have decided to wait for the results of a pilot programme of site specific advice before rolling out a more substantial programme.

Housebuilding (Chelmsford)

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will assess the impact his statement of 7 March on housebuilding will have on the Chelmsford Local Authority area; and, as a result of his statement, how many houses will have to be built in Chelmsford, *(a)* over the next five years and *(b)* over the next 16 years. [114782]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[pursuant to her answer, 16 March 2000, c. 330W]:* The Secretary of State's proposed changes to the Regional Planning Guidance for the South East and for the East of England will now be published on 27 March.

Housebuilding Statistics

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) when he will publish the housebuilding figures announced on 7 March broken down by county; [114413]

(2) what balance of brownfield and greenfield development he expects to take place in each of the English regions in the next 15 years as a result of his statement on 7 March; [114412]

(3) how many new homes will need to be built in West Sussex in *(a)* the next 15 years and *(b)* over each of the next five years as a result of his housebuilding policy announcement on 7 March. [114402]

Mr. Raynsford *[pursuant to his answers, 13 March 2000, c. 31–32W, 34–35W]:* The Secretary of State's proposed changes to the Regional Planning Guidance for the South East and for the East of England will now be published on 27 March.

SCOTLAND

Poindings and Warrant Sales

Mr. Grieve: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what recent *(a)* advice he has received and *(b)* representations he has made in respect of the impact of abolishing poindings and warrant sales on the Government's ability to recover unpaid tax or VAT. [112043]

Dr. Reid *[holding answer 28 February 2000]:* I have not received advice or made representations in respect of the impact of abolishing poindings and warrant sales on the Government's ability to recover unpaid tax or VAT.

Press Releases

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the *(a)* national, *(b)* regional and *(c)* local newspapers and media bodies to which his Department sent news releases during the period 2 May 1997 to 29 February 2000. [113983]

Dr. Reid *[holding answer 10 March 2000]:* All media outlets can request press releases. Targeted distribution will rely on the subject and content of the specific press release. The numbers involved in listing these outlets would incur disproportionate costs. Press releases are available electronically to all media outlets via Cable and Wireless. The are also available on the Internet.

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland for the period 2 May 1997 to 29 February 2000 what was *(a)* the number of occasions on which couriers were used to distribute news releases from his Department and *(b)* the total cost of using couriers to distribute news releases. [113973]

Dr. Reid *[holding answer 10 March 2000]:* All press releases are distributed electronically via Cable and Wireless. Couriers have not been used to distribute press releases.

PRIME MINISTER

Staff (10 Downing Street)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister (1) if he will list those staff paid for by the Labour Party who are working in No. 10 Downing Street, indicating their function in each case; [112055]

(2) if the marginal costs which result from the employment of Labour party staff in No. 10 Downing Street are met from public funds. [112056]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 28 February 2000]:* The information requested is as follows:

Sally Morgan—Political Secretary
John Cruddas—Deputy Political Secretary
Faz Hakim—Assistant Political Secretary
Michael Stephenson—Assistant Political Secretary
Plus six secretarial and administrative support staff, four of whom work on a job-share or part-time basis.

As has been the case under successive Administrations, marginal costs associated with the Political Office are met from within the overall budget for No. 10 Downing Street.

Roger Liddle

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Prime Minister on what occasions, and at what venues, during November and December 1999 his Defence and Foreign Affairs Adviser, Mr. Liddle, made speeches at seminars in *(a)* the UK and *(b)* other European countries. [112001]

The Prime Minister: Seminars attended by Mr. Liddle during this period were informal. On all occasions he made introductory remarks that formed the basis for discussion. He did not speak from a written text.

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Prime Minister when he will answer the question from the hon. Member for Croydon, South tabled on 22 February 2000, concerning Mr. Roger Liddle (ref. 112076). [115370]

The Prime Minister: I have done so today. The question referred to by the hon. Member bears the reference number 112001 and not 112076.

Joint Ministerial Committee

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Prime Minister how many plenary meetings of the Joint Ministerial Committee on the relationship between Westminster and the devolved Administrations have been held. [114585]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 14 March 2000]:* The Joint Ministerial Committee (JMC) has not met to consider the relationship between Westminster and the devolved administrations. However, the guidance note on "Common Working Arrangements," agreed by the official committee of the JMC, includes guidance on handling relations between the Administrations and Westminster. This note is available in the Library of the House and on the Cabinet Office website (at www.cabinet-office.gov.uk /constitution/2000/devolution/).

Official Visits Abroad

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to paragraph 72 of the Ministerial Code and the answer by the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, of 13 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 33W, if it is his policy that Ministers should be willing to provide information on their overseas travel more frequently than once a year. [115207]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 17 March 2000]:* A detailed list of Cabinet Ministers' visits overseas, and information on spend by all Ministers on travel overseas for the period 1 April 1999 to 31 March 2000 will be published as soon as possible after the end of the current financial year. It is reasonable that, in response to a Parliamentary Question seeking information similar to that which is currently being assembled, the hon. Member was informed that he would have to wait for the published list.

Union with Ireland Act 1800

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Prime Minister what plans he has to commemorate the date of the 200 Anniversary of the Union with Ireland Act 1800; and if he will make a statement. [114546]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 17 March 2000]:* None.

House of Lords

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Prime Minister (1) if he will publish the correspondence between the Government and Lord Rodgers of Quarry Bank concerning the appointment of peers to the House of Lords; [115423]

(2) what discussions he has had with opposition parties over the appointment of peers to the House of Lords; [115421]

(3) what discussions have been conducted between the Government and Lord Rodgers of Quarry Bank over the appointment of peers to the House of Lords. [115422]

The Prime Minister: It is established practice under section 8(c) of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information not to disclose information relating to information, opinions and assessments given in relation to recommendations for honours.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Public Bodies

Dr. Tony Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs as of 1 April 1999, which of the executive and advisory non-departmental public bodies sponsored by his Department *(a)* were required to publish annual reports, *(b)* were required to publish annual accounts, *(c)* were subject to a full audit by the National Audit Office, *(d)* were under the jurisdiction of the Parliamentary Ombudsman or other ombudsmen, *(e)* had their own complaints procedure, *(f)* were required to observe the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information, *(g)* possessed a register of Members' interests, *(h)* allowed the public to inspect a register of Members' interests, *(i)* were subject to a public right to attend board meetings or committee meetings, *(j)* were obliged to release reports of meetings, *(k)* were subject to a public right to inspect agendas of meetings, *(l)* were subject to a public right to see minutes of meetings, *(m)* were required to hold public meetings, *(n)* (i) maintained an internet site and (ii) were developing an internet site and *(o)* had been subject to a quinquennial review within the last year, including a continuing review. [114166]

Mr. Hain: All executive and advisory NDPBs sponsored by our Department on 1 April 1999 were required to publish annual reports; to publish annual accounts (where they had significant expenditure of their own); to operate in accordance with the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information; and to draw up, and make publicly available on request, a Register of Members' Interests. All NDPBs were also encouraged to hold meetings in public and to release or otherwise make available records of meetings. There was, however, no statutory requirement or obligation for them to do so.

Information on audit arrangements for executive NDPBs is set out in Public Bodies 1999. Information on which NDPBs maintain their own website can be accessed from the Cabinet Office quango website (www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/quango).

The Marshall Aid Commemoration Commission was subject to a quinquennial review during 1998.

Uganda

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what measures he has taken to encourage the peaceful resolution of the conflict in Northern Uganda; and if he will encourage the Ugandan and Sudanese Governments to enter into negotiations with all the warring parties. [115219]

Mr. Hain: We welcomed the bilateral agreement signed by Uganda and Sudan last December in Nairobi. Successful implementation will increase stability in the region and help secure the release and return of abducted children. We are encouraging the Governments in both Kampala and Khartoum to honour these commitments.

We have consistently urged the Government of Uganda to seek a negotiated settlement to the conflict in Northern Uganda. I welcomed the Government's decision to pass amnesty legislation when I saw President Museveni last October. But this is just one element towards a negotiated settlement which must also involve commitment on all sides to reconciliation and rehabilitation. We continue to encourage the Government of Uganda to open direct dialogue with the Lords Resistance Army (LRA). The Department for International Development is also supporting a number of projects in the North aimed at promoting peace, rehabilitation and development, as well as responding to some humanitarian needs.

Peat Compost

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 22 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 941W, on peat compost, what percentage of the compost used in his Department's estate gardens is peat; when use of peat compost will be phased out on his Department's estates; and if he will make a statement. [115236]

Mr. Hain: No peat is used on the FCO's estate. There is no information available on what our overseas Posts use, but FCO purchasing guidance states that peat should be avoided.

Fundamental Rights Charter

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs in respect of the Convention on a draft Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU, if he will list *(a)* the participant from each member state or other appointing body, *(b)* the composition and tasks of its, (i) working groups, (ii) drafting Committee and (iii) Editorial Committee, *(c)* the dates when these groups and the Plenary of the Convention (1) have met and (2) plan to meet and *(d)* what (x) oral and (y) written evidence from his Department has been reported by select committees of the House concerning the Convention. [115249]

Mr. Vaz: *(a)* The current membership of the EU Charter Convention is:

Member States Representatives

Lord Goldsmith, QC—United Kingdom
to be announced—Austria
Jean-Luc Dehaene—Belgium
Dr. Erling Olsen—Denmark
Paavo Nikula—Finland
Guy Braibant—France
Roman Herzog (Chair)—Germany
George Papadimitriou—Greece
Michael O'Kennedy—Ireland
Stefano Rodota—Italy
Paul-Henri Meyers—Luxembourg
Frits Korthals Altes—Netherlands
Professor Bacelar de Vasconcelos—Portugal
Professor Alvaro Rodriguez Bereijo—Spain
Daniel Tarschys—Sweden

National Parliamentary Representatives
Win Griffiths, MP—United Kingdom
Lord Bowness—United Kingdom
Dr. Heinrich Neisser—Austria
Dr. Harald Ofner—Austria
Roger Lallemand—Belgium
Karel de Gucht—Belgium
Claus Larsen Jensen—Denmark
Ulla Tornaes—Denmark
Gunnar Jansson—Finland
Tuija Brax—Finland
Hubert Haenel—France
Francois Loncle—France
Professor Doctor Jurgen Meyer—Germany
Jurgen Gnauck—Germany
Georgios Romeos—Greece
Michael Liapis—Greece
Desmond O'Malley—Ireland
Bernard Durkan—Ireland
Piero Melograni—Italy
Andrea Manzella—Italy
Ben Fayot—Luxembourg
Simone Beissel—Luxembourg
Michiel Patijn—Netherlands
Ernst Hirsch Ballin—Netherlands
Jose Barros Moura—Portugal
Maria Eduarda Azevedo—Portugal
Gabriel Cisneros—Spain
Jordi Sole Tura—Spain
Goran Magnusson—Sweden
Lars F. Tobisson—Sweden

Members of the European Parliament
Inigo Mendez de Vigo
Charlotte Cederschiold
Thierry Cornillet
Ingo Friedrich
Timothy Kirkhope
Johanna Maij-Weggen
David Martin
Pervenche Beres
Hans-Peter Martin
Martin Schulz
Elena Paciotti
Andrew Duff
Johannes Voggenhuber
Sylvia-Yvonne Kaufmann
Georges Berthu
Jens-Peter Bonde

Commission
Antonio Vitorino
Most of the delegates also have Alternates. Lord Goldsmith's Alternate/Deputy is Martin Eaton, Foreign and Commonwealth Office Deputy Legal Adviser.

(b) The Convention agreed that instead of meeting in smaller working groups they would hold formal plenary sessions and more frequent informal sessions. First readings of draft articles should take place in the latter, with more formal decisions and additional readings left to the former.

A Drafting Committee ("Praesidium") composed of the chairperson, the vice-chairpersons (one from the EP representative, one from the national parliament representative, and the representative of the member state currently president of the Council), and the representative of the Commission, and assisted by the General Secretariat of the Council, prepares and circulates working drafts taking account of drafting proposals submitted by any member of the Body.

(c) The Convention has met five times so far, most recently on 20–21 March (plenary). Previous meetings were on 17 December 1999 (plenary), 1–2 February (plenary), 24–25 February and 2–3 March.

A further 12–13 meetings are planned on 27–28 March, 3–4 April, 27–28 April, 11–12 May, 22–23 May, 5–6 June (plenary), 19–20 June, 29–30 June, 17–18 July, 11–12 September (plenary), 25–26 September, 9–10 October (to be confirmed), and 18–19 October (plenary).

(d) My letter of 8 December 1999 to the chairs of the two European Scrutiny Committees has been placed in the Libraries as have papers by Lord Goldsmith to the Charter Convention. Both Lord Goldsmith and I are scheduled to give oral evidence on 5 April to the House of Lords Inquiry on the Charter. There have also been other opportunities—such as the adjournment debate on 16 February—to discuss the Charter. Parliament's two delegates to the Charter Convention provide a further channel for information on the negotiations.

Honduras

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations his Department have made to the Government of Honduras about the murder of Edy Ortega and Francisco Espinoza. [114842]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 16 March 2000]:* Sadly these two cases are just an example of the abuses suffered by street children in Honduras. The majority of cases happen when a child is detained for a petty crime and tries to flee detention. Our Embassy in Tegucigalpa makes regular representations to the Honduran authorities on these and other issues on human rights abuses.

We are also in touch with several Human Rights NGOs working in Honduras and through these we lobby for progress on several cases including Edy Ortega's and Francisco Espinoza's tragic deaths. We continually reiterate our position on the treatment of minors by the authorities.

We remain committed to the continued improvement in the overall lot of children throughout Central America, and in particular in their treatment. We are supporting projects throughout the region bilaterally and through the EU and other multilaterals in areas such as constructing community centres and hostels, health, rural development, and training and education which involve the police.

Trade Attachés

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is the *(a)* job description and *(b)* person specification for trade attachés appointed to British embassies. [115363]

Mr. Battle: Each commercial job overseas requires a combination of skills and attributes relevant to the specific post. Since these jobs can differ in certain respects, reflecting the particular requirements of a market, there is no standard job description covering all such posts. As a general guide, duties for a substantive First Secretary

Commercial post involve management of our commercial operation and staff; provision and analysis of local market research; local contact building; advising British business visitors; coordinating arrangements for trade missions and other visitors (including ministerial and VIP visits); responsibility for specific market sectors; research and provision of commercial input into economic reporting; and implementation of initiatives agreed with British Trade International headquarters.

A typical job specification would highlight the need for the person taking up the post to have effective interpersonal, management and communication skills with knowledge of the business world. A comprehensive training and briefing programme is provided prior to any posting.

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the trade attachés recruited from the private sector and currently serving in British embassies, with their date of appointment and special areas of expertise in each case. [115364]

Mr. Battle: I refer the hon. Member to my answer to the question raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, South (Mr. Simpson), on 15 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 223W.

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what criteria are used for the appointment of specialist trade attachés to British embassies; and if he will make a statement. [115365]

Mr. Battle: Decisions on all commercial appointments are made by FCO Selection Boards. Candidates are considered on the basis of their suitability in terms of the competences, skills and experience required for each post.

Bosnia

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many suspected war criminals have been apprehended by British forces in Bosnia. [113722]

Mr. Vaz: British SFOR troops have successfully detained nine war crimes suspects indicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. They have also been involved in the arrest of a further two suspects with other SFOR forces. A further indictee was shot dead by British SFOR personnel acting in self-defence during a detention operation.

Millennium Civil Society Forum

Dr. Strang: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which countries have pledged money towards the Millennium Civil Society Forum to be held in May; and if he will make a statement. [114243]

Mr. Hain: The Millennium Forum has yet to announce details of any financial pledges they have received. In response to a request from the Forum's organisers, the Government have in principle offered funding to help the Forum secure participation by civil society representatives from less developed countries.

Iran

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports he has received on the continued use of Sharia law punishments in Iran; and if he will make a statement. [115498]

Mr. Hain: Hudud punishments in Iran, though in recent years used less frequently, are allowed under Sharia law. Sharia law forms the basis of the Iranian legal system, as well as the legal systems of some other countries in the region.

With our EU partners the UK tabled the United Nations General Assembly resolution on human rights in Iran adopted on 17 December 1999. This resolution calls on Iran to take the necessary steps to end the use of torture, the practice of amputation, stoning and other cruel, inhuman and degrading punishments.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

BNFL

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the reportable accidents and incidents that occurred at *(a)* BNFL Chapelcross, *(b)* BNFL Calderhall, *(c)* BNFL Springfields and *(d)* BNFL Capenhurst since 1992–93; and if he will breakdown the figures by (i) fatalities, (ii) major injuries, (iii) other injuries, (iv) dangerous occurrences and (v) disease. [113309]

Mrs. Liddell: The tables contain information on accidents and incidents reported to HSE since 1992–93 at specified BNFL premises. Brief details of events occurring at licensed nuclear sites relating to nuclear safety are published in the site Quarterly Reports, which are placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

1. Notifications are made under the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 1995 and their predecessors.

Table 1A: Chapelcross

	Fatal	*Major injuries*	*Other injuries*	*Dangerous occurrence*	*Diseases*
1992–93	0	0	5	1	0
1993–94	0	1	0	0	0
1994–95	0	0	3	0	0
1995–96	0	0	3	3	0
1996	0	0	1	3	1
1997	0	0	2	2	0
1998	0	1	1	1	0
1999	0	1	2	2	0
2000	0	0	0	1	0

Table 1B: Calderhall

	Fatal	*Major injuries*	*Other injuries*	*Dangerous occurrence*	*Diseases*
1992–93	0	0	7	3	0
1993–94	0	0	4	0	0
1994–95	0	1	9	0	0
1995–96	0	1	6	3	0
1996–97	0	0	2	0	0

Table 1B: Calderhall

	Fatal	Major injuries	Other injuries	Dangerous occurrence	Diseases
1996	0	1	2	0	0
1997	0	0	0	0	1
1998	0	0	0	0	0
1999	0	0	0	1	0
2000	0	0	0	0	0

Table 1C: Capenhurst

	Fatal	Major injuries	Other injuries	Dangerous occurrence	Diseases
1992–93	0	0	4	1	1
1993–94	0	0	12	0	0
1994–95	0	1	5	0	1
1995–96	0	0	4	1	0
1996–97	0	0	0	0	0
1996	0	0	0	0	0
1997	0	0	1	1	0
1998	0	1	2	0	0
1999	0	2	1	0	0
2000	0	0	0	0	0

Table 1D: Springfields

	Fatal	Major injuries	Other injuries	Dangerous occurrence	Diseases
1992–93	0	8	39	3	0
1993–94	0	1	40	1	0
1994–95	0	5	25	2	2
1995–96	0	2	10	0	0
1996–97	0	0	7	1	0
1996	0	1	14	1	1
1997	0	7	5	2	0
1998	0	3	7	8	0
1999	0	2	6	3	0
2000	0	0	2	0	1

Note:

The Health and Safety Executive transferred responsibility for enforcement of the general provisions of the Health and Safety at Work, etc. Act 1974 at licensed nuclear installations from its Field Operations Directorate to the Nuclear Installations Inspectorate in August 1996. The figures up to August 1996 are recorded by financial year and those after are recorded by calendar year.

2. Notification of nuclear events to HM Nuclear Installations Inspectorate in accordance with the Nuclear Installations Act 1965 (as amended) and published in the sites' Quarterly Report.

Table 2

Site	Event	Date
Chapelcross	Employee momentarily exposed to radiation from irradiated fuel element	25 May 1993
Chapelcross	Defect in heat exchanger	1 June 1997

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent representations he has received from the EU Environment Commissioner in respect of the application of the provisions of Article 34 of the Euratom Treaty to Sellafield. [114088]

Mrs. Liddell: None.

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will place in the Library copies of communications between his Department's Director General for Energy and the atomic energy counsellor in the British Embassy in Tokyo made since 1 August 1999. [114082]

Mrs. Liddell: Communications between the British Embassy in Tokyo and energy policy officials in my Department constitute information whose disclosure would harm the frankness of internal discussion, and as such are exempt under the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what was the cost of his Department's Director General for Energy's visit to Japan on 7–10 February; and under which budget sub-head costs were met. [114085]

Mrs. Liddell: The cost of the Director General for Energy and other Department of Trade and Industry officials' visit to Japan on 7–10 February was in the region of £23,000.

I understand that these costs are to be met by my Department's Running Cost budget sub-head.

Dr. Jack Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if the Nolan Rules on public appointments apply to non-executive directors of British Nuclear Fuels; and if he will make a statement. [115067]

Mrs. Liddell: I can confirm that all appointments, and re-appointments, of non-executive directors to the Board of BNFL are subject to the Code and Guidance of the Commissioner for Public Appointments.

Nuclear Energy (Emissions Reduction Targets)

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry by how much generation of electricity from nuclear sources would have to be increased over current levels to *(a)* save two million tonnes of carbon dioxide a year and *(b)* meet all the Government's current carbon dioxide reduction targets. [114819]

Ms Hewitt: The table sets out the required increase in nuclear generation to achieve savings of 2 MtC and 22 MtC. The latter figure represents the additional reduction required, based on existing policies, to achieve the domestic goal of a 20 per cent. reduction in CO_2 by 2010. The provisionally estimated generation from nuclear plants in 1999 was around 88 TWh. This amount of generation is estimated to be saving between about 10 and 21 MtC, depending on the mix of fuels assumed to be displaced.

CO_2 savings required	Extra nuclear generation required (TWh) if displacing: Coal	Gas
2 MtC	9	21
22 MtC	94	234

National Grid Company (Compulsory Purchase Order)

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he has received

concerning the Inspector's report closing the inquiry following the withdrawal of all compulsory purchase orders on the line of pylons from Picton to Shipton by Bellingborough; and if he will make a statement. [114338]

Mrs. Liddell: Two written representations have been received following the withdrawal by the National Grid Company plc at the public inquiry on Thursday 2 March 2000 of the National Grid Company plc (Nunthorpe to Newby) Compulsory Purchase Order 1999. That inquiry related to the compulsory purchase of certain rights to underground part of the proposed 400 kV electrical connection between Lackenby, Picton and Shipton at privately owned land between Nunthorpe and Newby. The Secretary of State is now awaiting the Inspector's report on the proceedings, but understands that the company considered it had obtained all the necessary voluntary agreements from the landowners along the route of the proposed compulsory purchase order.

Gas-fired Power Stations

Shona McIsaac: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what estimate he has made of the average number of construction jobs which will be created by each of the gas-fired power stations for which approval has been sought but not yet granted. [114156]

Mrs. Liddell: The actual number of construction jobs will vary according to the size of the power station and the stage reached in its construction. From information available to the Department, we estimate that construction of 1 Gigawatt could generate peak employment of around 800 jobs, including an allowance for employment in production of the gas turbines themselves.

Shona McIsaac: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he will lift the moratorium on the construction of new gas-fired power stations. [114158]

Mrs. Liddell: The Government expect to be able to relax the stricter consents policy for new gas-fired power stations as soon as it concludes, on the basis of advice from the Director General of Electricity Supply, that the reform programme has been undertaken and the distortions in the electricity market have been removed. The Government expect the reforms to be substantially complete across the picture before the consents policy is relaxed.

Lord Levy

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on which dates Lord Levy has had meetings with *(a)* ministers and *(b)* senior officials in his Department since 1 May 1997, giving in each case the purpose of the meetings; and if he will make a statement. [113502]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 7 March 2000]:* Records of meetings with officials are not held centrally, but to the best of my knowledge, no Minister or senior official in the Department of Trade and Industry has met Lord Levy since 1 May 1997 in his capacity as the Prime Minister's personal envoy delivering messages in the Middle East.

Electricity Requirement (South-East)

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what is his estimate of the extra electricity requirement to supply the proposed new housing build in the South-East; [114184]

(2) what is his estimate of the extra electricity transmission lines and their cost, that will be needed by new-build homes in the South-East. [114186]

Mrs. Liddell: No such estimate has been made.

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make it his policy to encourage the building of new power stations in the South East. [114185]

Mrs. Liddell: As was made clear in the October 1998 White Paper the Government intend to leave the initiative for proposals for new generation capacity entirely to developers. Power stations are run by private companies which must make market investment decisions, subject to the usual environmental and planning/consent constraints. It is therefore a matter for power station developers to consider where they wish to locate their stations.

Counterfeit Goods

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what was the value of counterfeit goods seized by trading standards officers in the United Kingdom during 1999. [114991]

Dr. Howells: Information about the value of counterfeit goods seized by trading standards officers is available in a National Counterfeiting Survey compiled by Warwick University, but the latest figures available only cover the period 1 April 1998 to 31 March 1999. The replies from 75 per cent. of Trading Standards Departments in England, Wales and Scotland show that during this period goods with an estimated street value of £22,445,580 were seized, this being equivalent to a value of £65,053,217 if they had been genuine goods. These figures are not, though, comprehensive, but it is hoped that better estimates covering the whole of the UK will be available in the future. One initiative that should, among other things, help to deliver an improved understanding of the extent of all intellectual property crime is the new Counterfeiting and Piracy Forum. The Forum will meet for the first time later this month bringing together industry, public sector enforcers, consumers, retailers and Internet service providers with Government. This Forum will be able to explore issues such as better record keeping of criminal activity, greater co-operation and co-ordination of enforcement effort and how to make consumers more knowledgeable about short and long term damage to both themselves and others caused by the purchase of fake goods.

Industrial Diseases

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list by region of residence the numbers of *(a)* claims received in respect of respiratory disease, *(b)* interim and expedited awards in respect of respiratory disease by (i) number and (ii) value, *(c)* claims in respect of vibration white finger and *(d)* interim and general damage awards in respect of vibration white finger by (i) number and (ii) value. [115043]

Mrs. Liddell: The information is as follows:

Respiratory Disease

Postal region	*Total claims*	*Interim payments*		*Expedited payments*	
		Number of claims	*£*	*Number of claims*	*£*
Anglia	327	46	208,250.00	0	0.00
Midlands	19,545	3,505	6,772,233.51	327	857,385.75
North East	37,895	5,675	10,867,100.00	695	1,753,281.10
North West	6,407	789	1,554,850.00	46	137,667.84
Northern Ireland	11	1	2,000.00	0	0.00
Scotland	8,477	1,377	2,699,550.00	325	799,584.11
South Central	150	13	26,000.00	0	0.00
South East	1,507	265	488,350.00	18	38,037.87
South West	633	41	79,850.00	10	22,243.83
Wales	24,295	3,874	7,384,800.00	330	878,674.05
London	203	20	40,000.00	0	0.00
No postcode	100	8	16,000.00	0	0.00
Total	99,550	15,614	30,102,983.51	1,751	4,486,874.55

Vibration White Finger

Postal region	*Total claims*	*Interim payments*		*General damages*	
		Number of claims	*£*	*Number of claims*	*£*
Anglia	168	5	15,572.21	27	150,083.04
Midlands	14,666	1,602	1,672,738.05	1,602	9,074,958.80
North East	30,545	6,065	10,681,785.76	6,065	32,699,739.99
North West	2,529	514	264,456.71	514	1,512,530.00
Northern Ireland	4	0	0.00	0	0.00
Scotland	3,967	1,328	1,610,503.83	1,328	3,392,825.84
South Central	42	8	14,629.37	8	26,094.68
South East	524	73	57,888.35	73	165,014.48
South West	61	9	5,869.37	9	16,503.02
Wales	8,756	2,380	754,584.83	2,380	8,194,798.15
London	39	0	0.00	0	0.00
No postcode	207	173	0.00	173	127,310.00
Total	61,508	12,179	30,102,983.51	1,751	71,037,886.72

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many claims his Department has received in respect of respiratory disease; and in respect of how many claims spirometry has been completed. [115045]

Mrs. Liddell: As at 5 March the Department's claim handlers had received 98,803 claims. 66,077 of these are from live claimants, of which 44,797 have received spirometry tests, with a further 12,619 invited to make appointments.

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many claims have been made in respect of respiratory disease by *(a)* the sufferer and *(b)* widows and dependants where the claimant has died after the date of claim. [115044]

Mrs. Liddell: As at 16 March IRISC, the Department's claims handler, had been informed of 4,249 claims where the sufferer has died since their date of claim. Details are not available of the number of widows or dependants who have died after submitting claims.

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the locations, dates of opening or proposed dates of opening are of centres for medical assessment of claims for vibration white finger. [115049]

Mrs. Liddell: There are currently 13 centres open for medical assessment of claims for vibration white finger. The location and dates of opening for the centres are as follows:

Location	*Dates*
Newcastle	9 August 1999
Sheffield	23 August 1999
Mansfield	1 September 1999
Cardiff	8 September 1999
Glasgow	13 September 1999
Edinburgh	6 October1999
Barnsley	10 November 1999
Wakefield	12 December 1999
Nottingham	7 January 2000
Manchester	10 January 2000
Birmingham	21 February 2000
Stoke	1 March 2000
Swansea	6 March 2000

An additional centre will be opened in London (Victoria) by the end of March.

Wind Power

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what was the total subsidy for the generation of power from wind turbines in *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1998–99 and *(c)* 1999–2000. [114913]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 16 March 2000]:* The support to wind energy from the Fossil Fuel Levy in England and Wales was:

Year	£ million
1997–98	36.8
1998–99	35.1
1999–2000	[1]6.5

[1] estimated

The support to wind energy from the Fossil Fuel Levy in Scotland was:

Year	£ million
1997–98	3.9
1998–99	5.4
1999–2000	[1]5.7

[1] estimated

Correspondence

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when Bruce Crawford MSP will receive a reply to his letter, dated 31 January, to the Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe regarding compensation payments to ex-miners. [115534]

Mrs. Liddell: A reply was sent on Friday 3 March 2000.

Mrs. Roe: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when the hon. Member for Broxbourne will receive a reply to her letters of 21 September, 20 October, 17 November, 14 December, 11 January and 8 February relating to Mr. James Gardiner, a constituent. [113929]

Mr. Byers *[pursuant to the reply, 14 March 2000, c. 341–42]:* The hon. Lady's letters of 21 September and 20 October have been traced. The letter of 7 March arrived on 14 March. The other correspondence does not appear to have been received. I replied to the hon. Lady on 16 March.

Post Office

Mrs. Fyfe: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many sub-postmasters there are in the UK; and how many of them are *(a)* from ethnic minorities and *(b)* women. [115205]

Mr. Alan Johnson *[holding answer 17 March 2000]:* There are at present some 16,000 sub-postmasters. A number of these cover more than one post office.

Approximately 40 per cent. of this total are women. The Post Office's estimate is that 12.4 per cent. of sub-postmasters are from ethnic minorities. This estimate derives from data provided on a voluntary basis by sub-postmasters.

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will introduce measures to allow post offices to sell alcoholic drinks. [115484]

Mr. Alan Johnson: Items such as stationery and greetings cards, which complement postal services, may be sold in post offices by Post Office Counters Ltd. However, where a post office is located alongside a retail outlet, the decision to sell alcoholic drinks rests with the shop owner.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what contracts the Post Office has with haulage contractors for the delivery of UK mail in foreign-registered trucks; and if he will make a statement. [115268]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The names of the Post Office's contractors are a commercially confidential matter for the Post Office, who tell me that they use a range of hauliers, some UK based, some based in other countries. They have no records of where their suppliers register their vehicles.

Export Guarantees

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what involvement Mr. David Harrison, of the Export Guarantees Advisory Council, had in the decision of the ECGD to support the ACESITA stainless steel strip mill in Timoteo. [114785]

Mr. Caborn *[holding answer 17 March 2000]:* In his capacity as a banking member of the Export Guarantees Advisory Council, Mr. David Harrison may be asked for his advice from time to time on cases which are being put forward for underwriting decisions. Such advice is sought only from a Council Member who has no direct business interest in the relevant transaction.

This case did not involve submission to Mr. Harrison or to any other member of the Export Guarantees Advisory Council.

Science and Engineering

Dr. Michael Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what action is he taking to draw public attention to the importance of science and engineering. [114787]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 17 March 2000]:* National Science Week launched on Friday, now annually attracts well over a million visitors to more than 7,000 events, and is the flagship project of our Public Understanding of Science, Engineering and Technology programme. This programme currently supports 15 pilot projects with a total value this financial year of £1.46 million.

More generally, the Department grant-aids relevant activities throughout the year organised by the Royal Society, the British Association for the Advancement of Science and the Research Councils.

We have also consistently supported the engineering community in its efforts to raise the profile of engineering in the mind of the public and past initiatives such as "Action for Engineering" have received substantial financial assistance. One of the key aims of the latest such initiative to receive DTI support, the "Campaign to Promote Engineering" is to present engineers and engineering as key contributors to the nation's wealth and quality of life. The campaign's patrons include Professional Engineering Institutions, Trade Associations and companies both large and small within all sectors of UK industry. DTI also continues its financial support for SETNET (Science Engineering Technology Mathematics Network) whose key objective is to bring coherence and co-ordination to the myriad schemes and resources aimed at fostering the teaching and learning of engineering related subjects in schools.

Dr. Michael Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on his Department's involvement in activities relating to Science Week commencing on 17 March organised by the British Association. [114788]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 17 March 2000]:* My Department is a strong supporter of National Science Week and continues to be the main core sponsor of the week. The British Association for the Advancement of Science receives grant aid worth £160,000 each year from the Office of Science and Technology's Public Understanding of Science, Engineering and Technology budget to cover core costs. In addition we have also provided almost £90,000 to support 56 National Science Week projects around the United Kingdom through the COPUS grants scheme.

My Department also runs a small number of events to mark National Science Week, targeted at a Whitehall audience. This year these include an event co-hosted by the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee at the Palace of Westminster on 23 March entitled "Putting Science To Work".

Cable & Wireless Communications

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will accept the recommendations of the Competition Commission's report into the acquisition of Cable & Wireless Communications cable business by NTL; to what extent he will be guided in his decision by representations made outside the Competition Commission process; and if he will make a statement. [115244]

Dr. Howells: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will publish the Competition Commission's report into the acquisition by NTL Incorporated of the cable business of Cable & Wireless Communications as soon as is reasonably practical. In publishing the report he may comment on it.

If the report finds that the merger may be expected not to operate against the public interest, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will have no power to take any action in respect of the merger.

If the report finds that the merger may be expected to operate against the public interest, then the Director General of Fair Trading (DGFT) will advise the Secretary of State on the report. The DGFT's advice will also consider any representations that may have been made subsequent to the CC's report. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will decide on his response to the merger in the light of the CC's report and the DGFT's advice, taking into account any matters which he considers relevant.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he received from *(a)* BSkyB and *(b)* News International with regard to the acquisition of Cable & Wireless Communications cable business by NTL (i) before and (ii) subsequent to his receipt of the Competition Commission's report on this subject. [115213]

Dr. Howells: I do not think it appropriate in general to disclose either the identity of those who make representations on cases or the substance of their views. This allows interested parties to comment freely without concern that their comments might then be disclosed, which could prejudice the future supply of information.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Art and Business

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) if he will list those organisations which have received funding under the Pairing Scheme administered by Art and Business (formerly ABSA), together with the relevant amount in each case in *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1998–99 and *(c)* 1999–2000; [114743]

(2) if he will list those organisations which agreed funding arrangements under the Arts Council Pairing Scheme administered by Art & Business (formerly ABSA) for schemes lasting more than *(a)* one year, *(b)* two years and *(c)* three years in (i) 1997–98, (ii) 1998–99, and (iii) 1999–2000, together with the planned funding agreed for each year. [114742]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 15 March 2000]:* During the three years in question, Arts and Business agreed 1,890 Pairing Scheme awards totalling £12,080,157. These are summarised in the following table. A full list of awards has been included in a report prepared by Arts and Business, and I have arranged for a copy to be placed in the Libraries of the House.

£

Year	*Value of 'one-off' awards (i.e. awards not covered by a three-year contract*	*Value of awards made as part of a three-year contract*	*Total*
1997–98	1,979,129	2,087,962	4,067,091
1998–99	1,294,082	2,677,812	3,971,894
1999–2000	2,047,554	1,993,618	4,041,172
Total	5,320,765	6,759,392	12,080,157

Note:
The Pairing Scheme did not make two-year awards

National Athletics Stadium

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what progress has been made in locating a site for a new national athletics stadium. [114908]

Kate Hoey: Sport England has submitted an analysis of the cost and design issues related to the brief for an athletics venue proposed by UK Athletics, along with an evaluation of a number of potential sites in London against criteria discussed and agreed between my Department, the Government Office for London, UK Sport, UK Athletics, the 2005 World Athletics Championships Bid Team and the British Olympic Association. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and I chaired a meeting of all interested parties on Wednesday 15 March to consider

these papers at which it was agreed that my Department will co-ordinate further detailed work on a short-list of sites and a further announcement will be made shortly.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when he will reply to the question tabled on 15 February, ref 110728, from the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham concerning peat compost. [115191]

Mr. Alan Howarth: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply that I gave on 15 March 2000, *Official Report*, columns 253–54W.

Olympic Bid

Mr. Faber: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if it is the policy of his Department that any stadium selected as a London bid venue for the 2005 World Athletics Championships should be capable of being upgraded to 80,000 seats in the event of a successful London Olympic bid. [115227]

Kate Hoey: We are looking at a number of options to ensure that we develop a venue capable of staging major domestic and international athletics events, which creates a permanent legacy for future generations of UK athletes and will not rule out a future Olympic bid.

Wembley Stadium

Mr. Faber: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when he plans to reply to the Fourth report of Session 1999–2000 of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee on Wembley National Stadium (HC 164). [115232]

Kate Hoey: We are considering the conclusions and recommendations in the Committee's Fourth report of Session 1999–2000 carefully and will respond shortly.

BBC Funding

Mr. Faber: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when he plans to reply to the Third report of Session 1999–2000 of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee on Funding of the BBC (HC 25). [115231]

Janet Anderson: The Government welcome the Culture, Media and Sport Committee's report "The Funding of the BBC" and is grateful to the Committee for its inquiry into this area. Command Paper 4674, which constitutes the Government's response to the report, is due to be published on 22 March. Copies will be placed in the Library.

Baltic Exchange

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions he has had with English Heritage concerning the heritage and architectural merits of the Baltic Exchange; and if he will make a statement. [115262]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 17 March 2000]:* No such discussions have taken place.

Nevertheless, I am aware that an application for demolition of the building and redevelopment of the former Baltic Exchange site has been made to the City of London Corporation. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Transport and the Regions has issued an Article 14 Direction the effect of which is to prohibit the City Corporation from making a decision, pending consideration by my right hon. Friend as to whether the case should be called in for his own decision and whether an environmental impact assessment should be carried out. English Heritage are my right hon. Friend's advisers on listed building matters and their views will be taken into account at the appropriate stage.

It would not be right for me to comment on merits of the case, since to do so could prejudice my right hon. Friend's decision.

Millennium Dome

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will place in the Library copies of the results of market research commissioned by NMEC in 1999 into the Millennium Dome. [110243]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 15 March 2000]:* Much of the market research commissioned by the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) in 1999 was specifically oriented to particular business development aspects of the project. It was commissioned on the basis that it would not be published, but would be used internally by NMEC to inform its marketing and business strategies. Copies of the more general market research undertaken as part of the overall development of the project in 1997 and 1998 have been placed in the Library.

DEFENCE

Defence Medical Services

19. **Helen Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much in addition to existing spending plans the Government plan to spend in real terms on the Defence Medical Services over the next four years. [113707]

Dr. Moonie: Following the Strategic Defence Review we allocated an additional £140 million to the Defence Medical Services over the four years 1998–99 to 2001–02. Funding for subsequent years is currently under consideration as part of my Department's annual planning process.

Iraq

22. **Mr. Cohen:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what has been the total cost to the UK *(a)* of operation Desert Fox and *(b)* of subsequent operations in Iraq; and what is the current monthly cost. [113710]

Mr. Hoon: Information on the total cost of Operation Desert Fox cannot be reliably differentiated from the overall costs of military operations in the Gulf, which in 1998–99 cost £35 million. The figure for 1999–2000 is forecast to be £30 million, a reduction of £3 million on the previous estimate I gave to the House on 22 February.

Our costs are not collected on a monthly basis, nor do they relate, always, to regular monthly activities.

Army Numbers

24. **Mr. Flight:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the current strength of the Army; and what was its strength in March 1999. [113712]

Mr. Spellar: The current strength of UK Trained Army Personnel as at 1 February 2000, the latest figures available is 96,607. This represents an increase of some 147 personnel over the comparable figure for March 1999 of 96,460.

Weapons of Mass Destruction

26. **Mr. Brazier:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment has been made by his Department of the threat to the UK from weapons of mass destruction. [113714]

Mr. Hoon: Our assessment is that there is no significant threat to the UK from weapons of mass destruction at present, but developments continue to be monitored closely.

Chinook Crash, Mull of Kintyre

27. **Mr. Martin Bell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if the cause of the crash of RAF Chinook ZD 576 on the Mull of Kintyre in 1994 has been established absolutely beyond doubt. [113715]

Mr. Spellar: Yes. The finding of gross negligence required there to be absolutely no doubt whatsoever over the cause of the crash. The aircraft was being flown towards the high ground of the Mull of Kintyre at high speed, at low level and into fog.

Eurofighter

29. **Mr. Flynn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is his latest estimate of the sales of Eurofighter in the first five years of operation. [113717]

Mr. Hoon: I am pleased to say that the export prospects for Eurofighter are excellent. As my hon. Friend will be aware from the announcement made of 8 March, Greece has made a commitment to purchase 60 aircraft, with an option for a further 30. A number of other countries are showing interest in Eurofighter and I am sure that the Greek commitment represents the first of a number of opportunities for future sales of this excellent combat aircraft, bringing benefit to the UK defence industry, as well as those of our Eurofighter partners.

Invincible Replacements

30. **Mr. Savidge:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what progress has been made in the Government's plans to procure replacements for the current Invincible class of aircraft carriers. [113718]

38. **Mr. Hoyle:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the Government's plans to procure replacements for the Invincible class of aircraft carriers. [113727]

Mr. Hoon: Competitive contracts, each potentially worth about £30 million, for the future aircraft carrier assessment phase were awarded on 23 November to BAe Land and Sea Systems, now BAE SYSTEMS, and Thomson-CSF Naval Combat Systems. The assessment phase will investigate options for carrier design and, by 2003, will deliver proposals for the demonstration and manufacture of the vessels. The carriers, which will be built in the United Kingdom at an estimated cost of £2 billion, are scheduled to enter service in 2012 and 2015.

Training and Education (Forces Personnel)

31. **Mr. Geraint Davies:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans his Department has to increase the proportion of accredited training and education in the armed forces. [113719]

Mr. Spellar: Civilian accreditation of military education and training is an important recruiting and retention issue for the armed forces. As such all three Services are working closely with a number of key accreditation and awarding bodies to increase the amount of civilian recognition given to military courses, leading to the award of academic, vocational and professional qualifications.

Kosovo

32. **Mr. Dalyell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the actions of British forces defending *(a)* Serbs and *(b)* Albanian civilians in Kosovo. [113720]

Mr. Hoon: The role of British forces in Kosovo is to provide a secure environment for all Kosovans, whatever their ethnic origin.

British forces, based in Multi-National Brigade (Centre), provide round-the-clock patrols, static guards, protection of churches, patriarchal sites and businesses, as well as checkpoints at permanent and varying locations.

British forces remain available to COMKFOR, to assist where the need is greatest.

Boeing C17 and Antonov 100–124

33. **Mr. Wilkinson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what estimate he has made of the *(a)* payload, *(b)* range, *(c)* fuselage volume, *(d)* cost and *(e)* availability of the (i) Boeing C17 and (ii) Antonov 100–124 aircraft for the Royal Air Force's short-term strategic aircraft requirements. [113721]

Dr. Moonie: On the basis of information publicly available, the C-17 has a maximum payload capability of 77 tonnes at the military limit of 2.25g, which it can carry an approximate range of 2,400 nautical miles, whereas the An124–100 has a maximum payload capability of 120 tonnes at the civil limit of 2.5g, which it can carry up to a range of 1,790 nautical miles.

The C-17 has a fuselage volume of 592m^3, whereas the An124–100 has a fuselage volume of 1,270m^3. I am withholding commercially sensitive details of costs and availability under Exemption 13 (third party's commercial confidences) of the Code of Practice on access to Government Information.

Prisoners of War

34. **Mr. David Heath:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what recent representations he has received seeking the payment of ex-gratia compensation to prisoners of war held in the far east during world war two. [113723]

Dr. Moonie: Since the beginning of 1999, we have received three Parliamentary Questions relating to this subject and over 450 letters. These have come particularly from Members of Parliament, Ex-Service Organisations and former Far Eastern Prisoners of War and their families, the majority of which have been in response to the Royal British Legion campaign. My hon. Friend the Minister of State for the Armed Forces also met officers of the Royal British Legion last year.

Combat Vehicle Reconnaissance (Tracked) Life Extension Programme

35. **Mr. St. Aubyn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the number of private sector firms invited to tender for the Combat Vehicle Reconnaissance (Tracked) Life Extension Programme. [113724]

Dr. Moonie: The CVR(T) Life Extension Programme was a single source procurement for which only Alvis Vehicles Ltd. were invited to tender. Since Alvis are the Design Authority for CVR(T) and hold the Intellectual Property Rights for much of the vehicle, the MOD could not issue information to a third party to have the vehicle redesigned. There was therefore no practicable alternative but to contract with Alvis. However, this covered only the design of the modifications and the conversion of the first 200 vehicles and a limited competition is being run between Alvis and the MOD's Army Base Repair Organisation to convert the remaining vehicles.

Mozambique

36. **Mr. Corbyn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list all support from the services sent to Mozambique to assist flood victims; and what was the income to his Department from leasing equipment and aircraft. [113725]

Mr. Hoon: The Ministry of Defence has, at the request of the Department for International Development (DfID), provided four Puma helicopters with around 100 support personnel, and the Royal Fleet Auxiliary Fort George with an additional five helicopters to Mozambique to assist in the international flood relief efforts.

The current estimate of the MOD's additional costs, which the DfID agreed to reimburse, is around £1.15 million for the four Puma aircraft and support personnel, which includes the cost of both deployment and recovery by civilian charter and RAF transport aircraft. The deployment of the Royal Fleet Auxiliary Fort George is estimated at £1.4 million. It would be highly misleading to refer to this as income; the DfID will merely make good the additional costs the Ministry of Defence incurs in giving assistance.

Overseas Emergencies

37. **Mrs. Fyfe:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will discuss with the Secretary of State for International Development a plan for future provision of helicopters and other aircraft, as well as personnel, in cases of emergencies in countries overseas. [113726]

Mr. Hoon: There are well-established procedures between the Department for International Development and the Ministry of Defence for calling on military support in response to emergencies in countries overseas. These procedures are reviewed as a matter of routine following every operation, and will involve discussions between both Departments at every level.

Leave Entitlement

Mr. Pond: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to improve leave entitlements for Service personnel. [113704]

Mr. Spellar: As part of our "Policy for People" in the Strategic Defence Review we undertook to introduce a Common Annual Leave Allowance of 30 working days for all Service personnel. This was implemented in April 1999.

Additionally, we announced the introduction in July 1999 of post-operational tour leave, which is a guaranteed period of leave when personnel return from operational detachment.

We are now confident that the recently introduced measures are fully in keeping with the best standards in practice in either the public or private sector. None the less, we keep the position under review.

Service Quarters

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many *(a)* single quarters and *(b)* married quarters there are at (i) RAF Halton and (ii) RAF High Wycombe; and how many of such quarters in each station are unoccupied. [114208]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* At RAF Halton there are currently 539 families quarters, of which 120 are unoccupied. Of these 80 are surplus for disposal and the remainder are awaiting incoming Service families or modernisation.

At RAF High Wycombe there are currently 748 families quarters, of which 65 are unoccupied. Of these all are either awaiting incoming Service families or modernisation.

Accommodation for single personnel is in the form of either individual rooms, rooms accommodating two to four people, or multiple occupancy rooms in barrack blocks which have nine to ten bed spaces per room. Based on a count of available bed spaces the figures for single accommodation are as follows:

	Total capacity	*Unoccupied*
RAF Halton	2,553	1,193
RAF High Wycombe	641	184

No-fly Zones (Iraq)

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many service personnel are involved in patrolling the no-fly zones in northern and southern Iraq. [114516]

Mr. Hoon: As at 10 March, we had some 1,048 Service personnel involved in or supporting operations in the northern and southern no-fly zones. This is further supplemented by the HMS Illustrious Carrier Task Group that is currently operating in the region, which consists of 1,895 Service personnel.

Military Exercises (Kenya)

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what estimates have been made of the quantities of unexploded munitions left behind after exercises in Kenya; and what assessments have been made of the costs of clearing such unexploded munitions. [114445]

Mr. Spellar: The quantity of unexploded munitions left behind by British units after exercises in Kenya is constantly monitored by collecting information in range log books. It is not possible, however, to estimate the quantity of unexploded munitions attributable to British units on those areas upon which the Kenyan Army also trains.

The UK has deployed advisory teams to assist the Kenyan Department of Defence (KDOD) in the planning and conduct of field firing and range management. In addition, Exercise Pineapple, the annual exercise to clear ranges of unexploded munitions, has been expanded to incorporate the KDOD training area at Archers Post, and will be significantly enhanced in 2001. The in-country cost of this exercise this year will be some £7,000, rising to some £30,000 next year.

RN Vessels

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which Royal Navy ships will take part in Naval Task Group 2000; if a round the world voyage is to be part of the deployment; and if he will make a statement. [114765]

Mr. Spellar: The Naval Task Group 2000 deployment will be headed by the Type 22 frigate HMS Cornwall and will comprise of HMS Sutherland (Type 23 frigate), HMS Newcastle (Type 42 destroyer), HMS Tireless (Fleet submarine) supported by the Royal Fleet Auxiliaries Fort Victoria, Bayleaf, and Diligence.

The Task Group will deploy to the Asia Pacific region via the Suez Canal and return via the Pacific Ocean and Panama Canal.

The deployment will provide a clear demonstration of the Royal Navy's ability to maintain an operationally effective and self-sustaining maritime force out of area for a prolonged period and provides an excellent opportunity for pursuing defence diplomacy objectives.

SERCO

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 29 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 210W, when he will deposit in the Library *(a)* the list of contracts held by SERCO, their date of execution, their length and location and *(b)* his reply to the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich. [115035]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 16 March 2000]:* I replied to my hon. Friend on 12 March and a copy of my letter was placed in the Library of the House on 14 March.

Servicemen's Allowance (London)

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what will be the loss of gross earnings per month attributable to withdrawal of the London allowance for Servicemen serving in Greater London in the financial year starting in April 2000 for *(a)* aircraftsman second class, *(b)* aircraftsman first class, *(c)* corporal, *(d)* sergeant, *(e)* flight sergeant, *(f)* warrant officer, *(g)* pilot officer, *(h)* flying officer, *(i)* flight lieutenant, *(j)* squadron leader, *(k)* wing commander, *(l)* group captain, *(m)* air commodore, *(n)* air vice-marshal, *(o)* air marshal and *(p)* air chief marshal and their army and navy equivalents. [114807]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 16 March 2000]:* I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Disaster Relief

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on his policy in respect of providing equipment and civilians and military staff for disaster relief purposes. [113700]

Mr. Hoon: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady) on 20 March 2000, *Official Report*, columns 708–09W.

HEALTH

Mental Health

Mr. Hesford: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what extra resources will be made available to help providers deliver the National Service Framework for mental health; and when such resources will be made available to providers. [114199]

Mr. Hutton: Additional investment of £700 million has been provided for health and social services over the three years 1999–2002 to modernise mental health services.

Circulars Allocation Working Paper (99–00) Health Authority 27 and Health Service Circular 1999/038: Local Authorities Circular (99)8 notified health and local authorities of their modernisation fund allocations for 1999–2000.

HSC 1999–243 "Health authority revenue cash limits: 2000–01" set out how each health authority's individual cash limit is made up for 2000–01. Local Authorities Social Services Letter (99)25 "Personal Social Services (PSS) Funding: 2000–01" set out the Mental Health Grant, including modernisation fund, for each local authority for 2000–01.

Health authorities will wish to be assured that robust plans are in place to ensure that this money is spent on the priorities locally which are based on the Mental Health National Service Framework (MHNSF) standards before

confirming allocations to providers. The plans for spend of new money will be incorporated into the mental health joint investment plans due to be submitted to regional offices on 31 March 2000. Allocation of funds to National Health Service providers will then be staged to coincide with actual cost demands.

Mental Health Grant allocations to local authorities are made in September and January of each financial year on receipt of claims confirming take up of the grant and compliance with conditions set by the Department in line with MHNSF implementation and, from April 2000, confirmation that money is identified in mental health joint investment plans.

Multiple Sclerosis

Charlotte Atkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the incidence of MS is *(a)* in North Staffordshire and *(b)* in the United Kingdom. [114472]

Mr. Hutton: The information is not available in the form requested. Figures are not available on the incidence of Multiple Sclerosis in North Staffordshire. However, it is estimated that multiple sclerosis affects between 80–90,000 people in the UK.

Population	*New cases per year (Incidence)*	*Total number of cases (Prevalence)*
England (Approx. 50m)	4 per 100,000 (2,000)	100 per 100,000 (50,000)
Under 16	2.5 per cent. of all new cases (50)	50
Over 60	2.5 per cent. of all new cases (50)	12,500
Over 70	Very Few	3,750

These figures are derived from epidemiological research studies. These studies all give slightly different figures. The table provides current best estimates for England. National Health Service figures do not provide accurate estimates of the epidemiology of MS. This is because many patients are not admitted to hospital and outpatient diagnostic data are not comprehensive.

Dental Services

Ms Ryan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people have died as a result of an anaesthetic for a dental procedure in a community dental practice since 1970. [114555]

Mr. Denham: Records show that since 1970 there have been 84 deaths associated with general anaesthesia for dental treatment outside hospital.

The review of general anaesthesia and sedation, which will be reporting to Ministers shortly, discusses the difficulties that exist in collecting data on mortality associated with general anaesthesia for dental treatment.

Domiciliary Care Charges

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will issue guidelines to local authorities to ensure that domiciliary care charges are consistent, transparent and equitable. [114720]

Mr. Hutton: Our White Paper "Modernising Social Services" recognised that the scale of variation in discretionary charges is unacceptable. We are considering the recommendations from the Royal Commission on long-term care and will consider the Audit Commission's report on home care charges when it is published. We will consult representatives of service users, carers, local authorities, and other interested parties about possible changes.

Medical Laboratory Scientific Officers

Mr. Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was the basis underlying the calculation of the number of medical laboratory scientific officers who will benefit from the 26 per cent. pay offer for 1999–2000 given *(a)* by him on 31 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 453W, and *(b)* by the Minister of State on 8 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 228WH. [115129]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 17 March 2000]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave him on 14 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 132W.

Long-term Care

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations he has received from Age Concern, the British Pensioners and Trade Union Action Association and other interested parties in relation to the report from the Royal Commission on long-term care for the elderly. [115304]

Mr. Hutton: A large number of representations to the Government on a variety of issues refer to long-term care. There have been 980 letters to the Department specifically focused on the Royal Commission's report. Many of the representations have broadly supported the recommendations in the Royal Commission's majority report; others have been critical and some have put forward alternative proposals.

Representatives of Age Concern have spoken to Ministers and officials on numerous occasions on Royal Commission issues.

We have received one representation from the British Pensioners and Trade Union Action Association. The East Grinstead and District branch collected 85 signatures on a petition which called for the end to means-testing of local authority funding of placements in residential care homes and nursing homes.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what discussions he has had with ministerial colleagues on the report of the Royal Commission on long-term care for the elderly. [115303]

Mr. Hutton: We have had frequent discussions with ministerial colleagues in the Department and in other Departments on the issues covered by the Royal Commission on long-term care.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what conclusions he has drawn concerning the report from the Royal Commission on long-term care for the elderly. [115302]

Mr. Hutton: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced on 2 December that the Government were broadly accepting one of the Royal Commission's

main recommendations by establishing a National Care Standards Commission. We are also implementing several of the Royal Commission's other recommendations—such as extending direct payments to people over 65. We are looking at other changes as part of the Year 2000 Spending Review, which will be completed this summer. We will then publish a White Paper.

Asylum Seekers (Children)

Mr. Syms: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much the Government plans to spend from his Department's budget on unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in 1999–2000 and 2000–01. [115511]

Mr. Hutton: The Department plans to spend £52.386 million towards reimbursing local councils with social services responsibilities the costs they have incurred in providing accommodation and support to unaccompanied asylum seeking children in 1999–2000.

It is not possible to forecast how much the Department might spend in 2000–01 as this will depend on the numbers of unaccompanied minors looked after by local councils and on the conditions of any special grant.

Domestic Violence (Children)

Ms Moran: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) in how many cases in England and Wales in each of the last three years contact or residence orders had been made by the courts in cases where children *(a)* were killed during contact visits with parents who had a history of domestic violence and *(b)* were killed in circumstances where the parents had separated due to domestic violence and were disputing contact or residence; [113947]

(2) how many children have been killed in England and Wales since 1 January 1995 in circumstances where the parents had separated as a result of domestic violence and were disputing contact or residence. [113948]

Mr. Boateng: I have been asked to reply.

Just over 50 children a year in England and Wales are killed by their parents, but those killed during contact visits and in cases of disputed contact cannot be separately identified in the statistics collected centrally.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Staff Bonuses

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how much his Department, its agencies and associated public bodies spent in total on extra bonuses above usual payments for staff working over the new year period; what were the *(a)* maximum and *(b)* minimum bonuses paid; how many people received the (i) maximum and (ii) minimum payments; and if he will make a statement. [104494]

Mr. Ingram: The Northern Ireland Civil Service and Northern Ireland Office spent a total of £1,187,877 on extra bonuses for staff working over the new year period.

The maximum bonus paid was £550 and 877 people received this and the minimum bonus was £75 received by 268 people.

The remaining expenditure was made up by a range of varying amounts between the minimum and maximum totals, depending on the individual circumstances.

Education Maintenance Allowances

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what the expenditure was on Education Maintenance Allowances by each education and library board in Northern Ireland in each of the last three years; and if he will make a statement. [114651]

Mr. Ingram: Expenditure over the last three years on the maintenance element of Boarding, Maintenance and Clothing Allowances paid by each Education and Library Board in Northern Ireland is as follows:

£

	1996–97	*1997–98*	*1998–99*
Belfast	5,599	8,518	8,687
North-eastern	5,232	7,272	5,109
South-eastern	9,406	10,294	4,304
Southern	14,711	11,697	13,437
Western	16,521	11,707	11,654
Total	51,469	49,488	43,191

These allowances are not directly related to Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMAs), which are presently being piloted in a number of areas in England and Wales. The progress of these pilots will continue to be monitored by the Department of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment and their possible application in Northern Ireland will be evaluated in due course.

Social Security Benefits

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what estimate his Department has made of the cost of restoring general student entitlement to social security benefits at current levels in Northern Ireland; and if he will make a statement. [114663]

Mr. George Howarth: My Department has not estimated the cost of restoring social security benefit entitlement to students generally. The primary source of financial support for full-time students comes from the education system and most full-time students are not eligible to claim income-related benefits. However, certain students in vulnerable groups, such as lone parents, can claim these benefits under the current rules.

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many students are currently in receipt of Income Support and Housing Benefit in Northern Ireland; and if he will make a statement. [114665]

Mr. George Howarth: The Social Security Agency does not hold statistics in such a way as to enable us to identify the number of students currently receiving Income Support and Housing Benefit. However, available information shows that 109 students are currently in receipt of Housing Benefit.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Zimbabwe

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what is her Department's policy on linking and twinning arrangements between local authorities in the United Kingdom and local authorities in Zimbabwe; and what plans she has to review this policy. [114177]

Mr. Foulkes: We are not supporting any twinning arrangements with local authorities in Zimbabwe at present. We have no plans to review this. A copy of our Country Strategy Paper for Zimbabwe is available in the Library of the House.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Schoolchildren (Newcastle)

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many children of school age resident in Newcastle are educated in *(a)* independent schools and *(b)* local education authority maintained schools outside Newcastle; and how many children from outside Newcastle are educated in schools maintained by Newcastle local education authorities. [112135]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 28 February 2000]:* The total number of children of school age resident in the Newcastle upon Tyne local education authority area and educated in independent schools is not collected centrally. However, in January 1999 the number of children of school age resident in the Newcastle upon Tyne local education authority area and educated in non-maintained special schools was 30 and a further 39 were receiving special educational treatment in independent schools.

The total number of children of school age resident in the Newcastle upon Tyne local education authority area and educated in local authority maintained schools outside the area was 35 in January 1999.

In January 1999, the total number of children of school age resident in other local authority areas and educated in maintained schools in the Newcastle upon Tyne local education authority area was 113, including 38 children without statements who were in hospital.

New Deal

Mr. Allan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what information he collates on the number and percentage of 18 to 24 year olds who leave *(a)* Gateway and *(b)* each New Deal option for (i) jobs lasting more than 13 weeks but less than six months, (ii) jobs lasting more than six months but less than nine months and (iii) jobs lasting more than nine months but less than 12 months; and if he will make a statement. [113676]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 9 March 2000]:* We issue currently information, by Unit of Delivery, on participants who leave New Deal for a job and have not returned to claim Jobseeker's Allowance within (a) 13 weeks and (b) 26 weeks.

Pre-school Education

Ms Harman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the average charge for an *(a)* childminder, *(b)* private nursery place and *(c)* local authority nursery place for children aged (i) nil to one, (ii) one to two and (iii) two to three years in each local authority. [114792]

Ms Hodge: The Department does not have information on child care costs in the detailed form requested.

Research commissioned by the DfEE last year, "Parents' Demand for Childcare", includes information on households' payments for child care. Among households with one or two children in England and Wales, the average hourly cost of child care was £1.93 per child. The cost varied between regions and was on average £1.62 in the north of England and the Midlands, and £2.22 in the south.

Nationally, registered childminders were paid on average £2.51 per hour and nursery provision on average cost £2.11 per hour. In the south, households paid on average £2.68 per hour to registered childminders and £2.52 for nursery provision. The survey sample size does not enable similar analysis for the north and Midlands.

In this analysis nursery provision covers all types of nurseries, including nursery classes, independent day nurseries as well as nurseries run by local authorities.

Employment and Social Affairs Council

Mr. Hood: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what was the outcome of the Employment and Social Affairs Council held in Brussels on 13 March; and if he will make a statement. [114906]

Ms Jowell: I represented the UK at the Employment and Social Affairs Council and the Standing Committee on Employment held in Brussels on 13 March.

The Presidency summarised preparations for the Lisbon Summit on 23–24 March which will focus on four themes: consolidation of the Luxembourg Process, modernising social protection, co-ordinating mechanisms for tackling social exclusion and dovetailing the Cardiff, Luxembourg and Cologne Processes.

The UK urged the Summit to focus on concrete outcomes and cautioned against setting EU level growth targets. The Presidency's strategic goals on the quality and quantity of employment and its concentration on social exclusion and lifelong learning were welcomed. The UK also called for measures to improve work/life balance and to promote investment in human resources, in particular through a European standard for investing in people and the further development of a European on-line learning and jobs bank.

As part of its contribution towards the Lisbon preparations, the Commission introduced its package of Communications on mainstreaming employment, combating social exclusion and social trends in Europe. The Commission called on the Summit to make a commitment to full employment and to adopt quantified commitments to increased economic activity, and decreased unemployment and poverty.

The Presidency reported on progress in the negotiations on the Commission's package of measures to tackle discrimination under Article 13 of the Treaty. The Presidency aims to achieve political consensus on these proposals during its term in office.

ONE Service

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what measures are in place to assess the effectiveness of the ONE service in assisting people with a mental illness. [114674]

Ms Jowell: The new ONE service provides a coherent and seamless service for people of working age, by providing a single point of access for help in finding the best way to work, and help in securing benefits. All advisers in the ONE pilots have been trained to work sensitively with all ONE clients, and have benefited from the expertise of stakeholders, e.g. with experience of working with people with mental illness, who participated in the training process.

We will assess fully the effectiveness of the ONE service for all clients. As part of the ONE evaluation, we will be carrying out in-depth interviews with ONE staff and clients to examine the effectiveness of the ONE service in identifying and meeting the needs of individual clients, including people with a long-standing illness or disability. Where particular individual needs, such as those for people with a mental illness, are identified and have a significant impact for the ONE service this would be picked up in these interviews

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to the answer of 9 March 2000, *Official Report*, columns 791–92W, if he will make it his policy to collect statistics on the numbers of people with a mental illness attending ONE meetings and the numbers who subsequently gain employment. [114673]

Ms Jowell: The ONE service is built upon the principle of treating people as individuals, with their own unique needs, abilities and circumstances, and not categorising them as members of particular groups. ONE advisers encourage everyone to use their skills and talents to the full.

Further to my reply of 9 March, we are not yet in a position to provide information on the numbers of people with mental illness who are using the ONE service. The ONE evaluation database will capture information on ONE claimants receiving sickness and disability benefits and whose main disabling condition is 'mental and behavioural disorders'. This will enable us, in due course, to provide information on those in this group passing through ONE. However, this will only given an indication of the numbers of people using the ONE service who have a mental or behavioural disorder and have claimed a sickness or disability benefit as a consequence. It will not be possible to identify clients who have not claimed a sickness or disability benefit in respect of such disorders.

Student Support

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what are the criteria determining residence by a UK student in the various component parts of the UK for the purpose of student support; and if the circumstances determining such deemed residence can change during the course of study. [115009]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 16 March 2000]:* The eligibility criteria are set out in the various regulations which cover the component parts of the UK (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) and are broadly comparable. To qualify for support, a student must normally satisfy three criteria on the first day of the first academic year of the course:

be settled in the UK for the purposes of our immigration laws;
be ordinarily resident in the UK;
have been ordinarily resident throughout the three year period preceding that date other than wholly or mainly for the purpose of receiving full-time education.

Exceptions to the ordinary residence requirement are made where the applicant, their parent or spouse:

are or have been temporarily absent or employed abroad;
have been recognised as refugees;
are EEA migrant workers working in this country who have been ordinarily resident in the European Economic Area (EEA) for the three year period, and
EU nationals (including British students) who have been resident in the EEA for three years, will be eligible for means tested fee support only.

Students who are recognised as refugees after the start of their course and students who satisfied the ordinary residence requirement but failed to satisfy the immigration requirement and who are granted exceptional leave to enter or remain in the United Kingdom after the start of their course are entitled to student support for the remainder of their course.

Qualifications

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the relationship between the proposed foundation degrees and the higher national diplomas. [115001]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 16 March 2000]:* The Foundation Degree is part of a deliberate strategy to diversify higher education to meet the differing demands of a knowledge-driven economy. Although it will build on the best elements of existing two year higher education provision, including Higher National Diplomas, this new qualification will offer a distinct combination of features. It will equip students with the employability skills, specialist technical knowledge and broad understanding needed in the new economy.

Higher Education Fees

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what obligation there is on higher education institutions to charge higher fees for part-time study to overseas students than to United Kingdom residents; if this fee regime applies to EU residents studying in the United Kingdom; and if the same fees regime applies to UK-national students whose home is in another EU country. [115002]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 16 March 2000]:* There is no obligation on higher education institutions to charge higher fees for part-time study to overseas students than to UK students. Under our European Community Treaty

obligations, other UK-based EU students must be treated no less favourably than UK students for tuition fee purposes. This also applies to UK and other EU nationals studying in the UK whose home is in another European Economic Area country.

Learning and Skills Councils

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what procedure will be adopted for appointment of members to the local learning and skills councils; and if such appointments will be subject to local advertisement and consultation. [115008]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 16 March 2000]:* Members of the local Learning and Skills Councils will be appointed on merit and in accordance with the seven principles of public appointments of the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments (OCPA). All posts will be advertised in the appropriate local press.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the reasons which underlie the revision of the timetable for appointments to the Learning and Skills Council as explained in a letter to the hon. Member for Daventry from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary dated 13 March. [115010]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 16 March 2000]:* The Learning and Skills Council Bill was published in the House of Lords on 16 December. When we published the Learning and Skills Council Prospectus, we had anticipated that the Bill would be published first in the House of Commons. We have revised the timetable for appointments to reflect the changed circumstances. I wrote to the hon. Member with details on 13 March.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what arrangements will be made for the continuation of local Education-Business Partnerships and partnerships with other public education providers and local authorities when TECs are replaced by local learning and skills councils. [115007]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 16 March 2000]:* From April 2001 Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs) will be responsible for ensuring effective systems are in place to foster links between education and business, including the maintenance of an effective network of Education Business Partnerships and other education business link organisations. My Department has published a consultation document about how best to achieve this under the Learning and Skills Councils.

The network of local Learning Partnerships—which involve colleges, local authorities, schools and a wide range of others—will have a crucial role to play alongside local LSCs. The two bodies will work closely together to identify the key actions needed to continue to improve provision in local areas with Learning Partnerships perfectly placed to provide the necessary in-depth understanding of local needs. I am making available £10 million to Learning Partnerships in each of the next two years to help them fulfil this vital role.

Personal Careers Interviews

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if a personal careers interview is now available to all 16-year-olds who request one. [115005]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 16 March 2000]:* Every 16 year old will get the careers information and guidance they need to enable them to make well-informed decisions. This may include a careers interview if this is appropriate to help them make a successful transition to post-16 learning.

Individual Learning Accounts

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on progress in the national roll out of individual learning accounts. [115004]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 16 March 2000]:* We are seeking to establish a public/private partnership to run a Customer Service Centre to administer individual learning accounts. As part of the tendering process, discussions will take place about the roll out of the national system.

TECs

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many TECs have merged their operation with chambers of commerce; and what arrangements will be made for continued business involvement by membership of their successor bodies. [115006]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 16 March 2000]:* Of the existing 72 TECs, 16 have merged their operations with chambers of commerce.

In developing our plans for the LSC, we have listened closely to business and acted on their recommendations. We recently announced that on both the national and local Learning and Skills Councils 40 per cent. of the LSC members, together with the national Chair and most local Chairs, will have substantial recent business or commercial experience.

We are also taking a wide range of steps to ensure continued involvement in the LSCs by business leaders with a strong interest in learning and skills. For example Nick Reilly, the Chairman and Managing Director of Vauxhall Motors Ltd., has set up a Business Champions Group to raise awareness in the business community about the Learning and Skills Council and to encourage business involvement.

Disabled Student Allowance

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many and what percentage of full-time students are claiming disabled student allowance; and what was the total cost in each of the last three years. [115003]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 16 March 2000]:* The number and value of disabled students' allowances made by local education authorities in England and Wales as part of the mandatory awards scheme in the academic years 1995–96 to 1997–98—the latest years for which figures are available—are shown in the following table.

The percentage of award holders in receipt of DSAs is not available since students can receive more than one allowance. There is a general disabled students allowance as well as separate allowances for specialist equipment, non-medical helpers and travel costs resulting from a disability. However, the number of mandatory award holders in each year is shown in the following table for comparison. Information on the number of students claiming DSAs in 1998–99, when DSAs were no longer means tested, should be available in April 2000.

Number[1] and value[2] of Disabled Students Allowances paid by LEAs in England and Wales academic years 1995–96 to 1997–98

Academic year	Number of allowances	Value of allowances (£ million)	Total award holders
1995–96	6,550	9.1	770,820
1996–97	8,120	10.4	765,090
1997–98	10,770	13.3	769,660

[1] Students can receive more than one type of allowance
[2] All figures are shown in cash terms. The amounts shown are the gross amounts of the allowances. Because of the effect of income assessment, the net cost of disabled students allowances paid as part of the total award will be lower.
Source:
F503G

Sixth Forms

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many state secondary schools in England *(a)* have and *(b)* do not have a sixth form. [115072]

Mr. Wicks: As at January 1999 there were 3,560 maintained secondary schools in England, of which 1,831 schools have a sixth form.

GCSE Performance

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on differences in performance at GCSE between state secondary schools *(a)* with and *(b)* without a sixth form. [115070]

Ms Estelle Morris: Provisional figures for 1999 show that the GCSE achievements of 15 year old pupils in maintained mainstream schools with and without sixth forms are:

	(a) with	(b) without	(c) Total
Percentage achieving 5 or more A-C grades	49.9	40.9	46.5
Percentage achieving 5 or more A-G grades	91.6	89.6	90.9
Percentage achieving no passes	3.9	4.5	4.1
Average GCSE point score per pupil	39.5	35.4	38.0

Westgate College, Newcastle

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many students have achieved five grade A to C passes at GCSE at Westgate College, Newcastle, since the College was formed; what proportion of students at the College this represents; and what is the position of Westgate College among schools in *(a)* Newcastle, *(b)* the North East and *(c)* England ranked in descending order of achievement of five grades A to C at GCSE in the last three years. [115307]

Ms Estelle Morris: The proportion of 15-year-old pupils achieving 5 or more GCSE passes at grades A*—C at Westgate College, Newcastle are as follows:

Year	Percentage
1994–95	6
1995–96	7
1996–97	8
1997–98	6
1998–99	10

The position of Westgate College among maintained schools in the last three years is as follows:

	1996–97	1997–98	1998–99
(a) In Newcastle	11th (out of 11)	11th (out of 11)	11th (out of 12)
(b) In the North East	162nd (out of 164)	160th (out of 164)	161st (out of 166)
(c) In England	3,075th (out of 3,130)	3,096th (out of 3,137)	3,073rd (out of 3,150)

TREASURY

Working Families Tax Credit

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many claimants of family credit there were in the city of Newcastle upon Tyne in each of the last three years; and how many claimants of the working families tax credit there are in the city. [111360]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 22 February 2000]:* It is estimated that 3,300 families in Newcastle upon Tyne local authority have been awarded the Working Families Tax Credit by the end of January 2000. A further 1,300 families were still in receipt of Family Credit giving a total of about 4,600 on either Working Families Tax Credit or Family Credit. The number of Family Credit cases in payment in earlier years is given in the table:

Family Credit cases in payment in Newcastle upon Tyne

Month/year	*Number*
February 1997	4,200
February 1998	4,600
February 1999	4,300

Notes:
1. Figures are based on a 5 per cent. sample and are therefore subject to sampling error.
2. Figures have been rounded to the nearest hundred.

Mr. Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many claims and what percentage take-up of the working families tax credit he is assuming is necessary to meet his target of taking 800,000 children out of poverty. [113786]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 9 March 2000]:* The estimate that 800,000 children will be lifted out of poverty is based on the combined effect of the tax and benefit changes announced in the last two Budgets—in particular the introduction of the Working Families Tax Credit, the 10p starting rate of tax, the introduction of the Children's Tax Credit, reforms to National Insurance and increases in Child Benefit and child premia within Income Support.

For more detailed analysis behind this estimate I refer my right hon. Friend to the written answer which the Economic Secretary gave to the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) on 14 April 1999, *Official Report*, columns 244–45W.

The Government estimate that around 1.4 million families will benefit from the WFTC. They will be on average £24 a week better off compared with Family Credit.

Mrs. Fyfe: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will place in the Library the publicity material his Department has published, aimed at low-income families, to encourage take-up of working families tax credit. [114477]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 14 March 2000]:* A complete set of the relevant Working Families Tax Credit publicity material has been placed in the House of Commons Library.

Mrs. Fyfe: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will amend housing benefit regulations so as to increase the value of working families tax credit to low-income families. [114480]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 14 March 2000]:* The Working Families Tax Credit increases the take-home pay for around 1.4 million low income working families. The Government currently estimate that one in eight Working Families Tax Credit recipients will also be in receipt of Housing Benefit. By comparison, around one in three Family Credit recipients were receiving Housing Benefit.

Changes to Housing Benefit regulations are a matter for the Department of Social Security and the wider issues will be considered in the Housing Green Paper.

Increases in the child credits in the Working Families Tax Credit from April 2000 will be matched by increases in the child credits in income-related benefits. This means that all families receiving benefits will see the extra gain because Housing Benefit entitlement will not be affected.

Housing Benefit regulations are currently being amended to ensure that gains from the child care tax credit will be received in full by all eligible families because they are disregarded in Housing Benefit. The gains from the child care tax credit are particularly targeted on those on the lowest incomes who were not able to take advantage of the child care disregard in Family Credit.

Petroleum Products Smuggling

Mr. Baker: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the loss of revenue through the smuggling of petroleum products into Northern Ireland in each year since 1997. [113539]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 7 March 2000]:* HM Customs and Excise assess the total revenue lost (excise duty and VAT) through cross-border shopping and smuggling of road fuels in Northern Ireland was about £100 million in 1998.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the level of smuggling of petroleum products into England in 1998 and 1999. [113540]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 7 March 2000]:* HM Customs and Excise do not have any estimates of the level of smuggling of petroleum products into England, due to a lack of sufficient information on which to base such estimates.

Diesel Fuel (Illegal Imports)

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what recent talks his Department has held with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on behalf of HM Customs and Excise on restrictions on illegally imported diesel fuel. [114521]

Mr. Timms: HM Customs and Excise take this matter very seriously and have introduced a range of measures to counter it.

City of London

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his most recent estimate of *(a)* the contribution to the gross national product and *(b)* total revenue to the Exchequer of the activities of the City of London. [114704]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Office for National Statistics does not publish estimates for the contribution to GNP of the City of London, nor does it have any plans to. No estimate has been made by the Government of the revenues to the Exchequer from the activities of the City of London.

Banking Industry

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if the Bank of England will respond to the Treasury on progress by the banking industry in addressing the issues and recommendations highlighted by the Social Exclusion Unit's Policy Action Team report No. 3; and if he will make a statement. [114358]

Mr. Timms: The report of Policy Action Team 3, "Enterprise and Social Exclusion", was published in November 1999. It recommended that the Bank of

England should be invited to report regularly on finance for business among deprived groups and communities. The Bank of England has agreed to take on this role, and it will report in due course.

Publicity Expenditure

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the total expenditure of his Department and its agencies on publicity for *(a)* 1996–97, *(b)* 1997–98 and *(c)* 1998–99; what estimate he has made of such expenditure for *(d)* 1999–2000, *(e)* 2000–01 and *(f)* 2001–02; and if he will break these figures down to indicate expenditure on (i) advertising and (ii) Press and public relations. [113891]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 14 March 2000]:* The information requested could be obtained only at a disproportionate cost.

Landfill Tax

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much money has been allocated from the landfill tax to environmental trusts *(a)* nationally and *(b)* in each local authority area in the County of Essex. [114885]

Mr. Timms: Contributions totalling £246 million have been made under the environmental bodies credit scheme since the introduction of the tax on 1 October 1996 to 15 March 2000. I have asked the Regulator for the scheme, ENTRUST Ltd., to provide such data as it holds on the amounts contributed to bodies in Essex, and will place a copy of their response in the Library.

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the maximum sum which could have been allocated from the landfill tax to environmental trusts *(a)* nationally and *(b)* in each local authority area in the County of Essex. [114884]

Mr. Timms: If site operators had contributed to environmental bodies from the introduction of the tax on 1 October 1996 at a level entitling them to claim the maximum tax credit of 20 per cent. of their liability, the maximum credit that could have been claimed nationally, up to 29 February 2000, is £292 million. This represents contributions of £324 million. Operators are not constrained in how they allocate these credits between local authority areas.

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will return to local authorities the full value of the landfill tax to fund schemes for reduction, re-use and recycling of waste; and if he will make a statement. [114887]

Mr. Timms: No. Revenues from the landfill tax contribute to Government spending on its priorities.

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much has been allocated from the landfill tax to develop new waste management strategies in each year since its introduction *(a)* nationally and *(b)* in each local authority area in the County of Essex. [114886]

Mr. Timms: The information requested about support for waste management strategies is a matter for the Regulator for the environmental bodies credit scheme, ENTRUST Limited. I have asked them to reply, and will place a copy of their response in the Library.

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much money has been collected since the landfill tax was introduced *(a)* nationally and *(b)* in each local authority area in the County of Essex. [114883]

Mr. Timms: Total landfill tax receipts net of credits claimed in respect of contributions to environmental bodies since the introduction of the tax on 1 October 1996 to 31 March 1999 were £806.6 million. The forecast for the financial year from 1 April 1999 to 31 March 2000 is £400 million. No figures are available for individual counties or local authority areas.

Air Passenger Duty

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the cost to the Exchequer of exempting Aberdeen from air passenger duty. [115073]

Mr. Timms: Based on existing passenger numbers and duty rates, exempting flights departing from Aberdeen from air passenger duty would cost approximately £10 million in a full year. Also exempting flights from other UK airports to Aberdeen would approximately cost a further £5 million.

Aviation Fuel Duty

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the impact of a tax on aviation fuel on air passengers; and if he will make a statement. [115300]

Mr. Timms: I have made no such assessment. The Government support removal of the international ban on taxation of aviation fuel, but only in the context of a world-wide agreement.

Mr. Moore: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the impact on revenue of introducing duty on aviation kerosene in line with the amount of fuel in aircraft leaving the United Kingdom. [114805]

Mr. Timms *[holding answer 16 March 2000]:* No such assessment has been made.

Drug Searches

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many citizens of the United Kingdom, or their relatives, have been stopped and their belongings searched for drugs at air or sea entry points equipped with separate entry arrangements for these persons. [115281]

Dawn Primarolo: Information is not available in the form requested. In 1998–99 Customs conducted a total of 19,018 personal searches of travellers from all parts of the world including British citizens.

Bank Branch Closures

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what representations he has made to Barclays Bank plc over its branch closure policy; and if he will make a statement; [114910]

(2) what representations he has made to Barclays Bank plc over its branch closure policy in respect of the Government's policy on social exclusion; and if he will make a statement; [114881]

(3) what representations he has made to Barclays Bank plc over its branch closure policy; and if he will make statement. [114907]

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what representations he has received concerning the closure of bank branches in rural areas; and if he will make a statement; [114946]

(2) what assessment his Department has made of the impact of bank branch closures on rural areas. [115203]

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what plans he has to encourage banks to install ATM machines that both dispense cash and accept cash deposits; [115255]

(2) what plans he has to encourage high street banks to co-operate in sharing premises and overheads to avert closures in villages and rural towns; [115253]

(3) what plans he has to encourage high street banks to set up mini-branches in rural sub-post offices in areas where no high street bank is present. [115254]

Dr. Jack Cunningham: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has made to Barclays Bank plc over their branch closure policy in rural areas; what reply he has received; and if he will make a statement. [115243]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Treasury have received such representations from time to time. The Treasury Policy Action Team (PAT 14) report "Access to Financial Services" said that the way forward lies in developing new and alternative means to deliver and provide banking services, including through the Post Office network. A number of banks already have agreements with the Post Office to provide banking services through post offices.

National Pay Awards

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what support he has provided to local government under the Comprehensive Spending Review to take account of pay pressures arising from national pay awards. [115140]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The Comprehensive Spending Review provided a generous settlement for local government. The details are set out in "Modern Public Services for Britain: Investing in Reform" (Cm 4011). The Government have made it clear that all pay awards will need to be paid from within the spending limits set in the Comprehensive Spending Review.

Government Debt

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answers of 19 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 516W, and 8 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 774W, if he will estimate the interest which would have been saved in the 1998–99 financial year if Government debt in the period 1990–91 to 1998–99 had been issued in the form of *(a)* Treasury bills and *(b)* floating rate notes and continuously rolled over. [114725]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Hypothetical calculations of this kind are meaningless. A wholesale change in financing of this kind would have had a major effect on relative yields. The only sure way to reduce debt interest and make room for worthwhile public spending is steadfast pursuit of disciplined fiscal and monetary policy within strict frameworks, as the present Government have done.

Industrial and Provident Societies

Mr. Love: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what plans he has to bring forward amendments to the Industrial and Provident Societies Acts arising from the recent consultation exercise; and if he will make a statement; [114248]

(2) how many submissions were received in his consultation on industrial and provident societies; in what format the submissions were published; what were the main representations made to him by the Co-operative Movement; and if he will make a statement. [114308]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Government recognise the wish to modernise the Industrial and Provident Societies Acts. 76 written responses to the consultation document were received. They have not been published. Responses were received from the Movement's promoting bodies, other interested organisations and a number of individual industrial and provident societies, who made a number of wide ranging comments on the issues and questions raised in the consultation document. Discussions with the Movement are continuing.

Gold Reserves

Mrs. Fyfe: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the effect on the price of gold of sales to date of UK gold reserves; and what effect this will have on the revenue from IMF sales of gold intended to benefit poor countries. [112862]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 14 March 2000]:* The Government's policy is to sell gold in an orderly, prudent and transparent way, in order to minimise the impact on the market. The price of gold is at around the same level as it was on the day prior to last May's announcement.

Unemployment Count Leavers

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will publish a breakdown of leavers of the unemployment count by duration, using the categories of destination and duration used in Table C.34 of "Labour Market Trends", broken down into those aged *(a)* under 25 and *(b)* 25 years or above, for each of the six most recent half-year periods for which figures are available. [109572]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 15 February 2000]:* The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Peter Lilley, dated 20 March 2000:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your parliamentary question about leavers of the claimant count by destination, duration and age.

The information you requested for the six most recent half-year periods is given in the attached tables. These are large tables and copies of them are being placed in the House of Commons Library rather than reproduced in Hansard.

Jobcentre Vacancies

Mr. Brady: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what percentage of official jobcentre vacancies consisted of *(a)* armed forces and *(b)* other vacancies which are counted more than once by reason of being registered in more than one job centre, for each of the last three years. [114684]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Graham Brady, dated 20 March 2000:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your parliamentary question on double counting of armed forces vacancies in jobcentres.

Armed forces vacancies are not counted more than once by reason of being registered in more than one Jobcentre. The armed forces vacancies displayed in Jobcentres are only a small sample of the overall numbers available. Some 40 Jobcentres around the country are nominated to take vacancies from their local armed forces careers office. There will be some duplication in the displays, as information about vacancies is shared between Jobcentres, but there is no problem with overcounting in the statistics which are obtained from the computer records.

Similarly other vacancies are only counted by the Jobcentre which takes them. Any duplication, if it exists, is likely to be minimal as employers have no need to notify a vacancy to more than one Jobcentre.

Electors

Mr. Rammell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many electors there are on the electoral registers for 2000–01 in *(a)* Essex and *(b)* England. [114513]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Bill Rammell, dated 20 March 2000:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your parliamentary question about the 2000–01 electoral registers for Essex and England.

These data are still in the process of being collected. They will be published in a First Release on 12 April. A copy of this press release will be available in the House of Commons library on that day.

Israel

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if any of the other European Community member states' customs services have taken measures in the past three years to recover duties or collect security deposits in connection with goods of any sort that have been imported from Israel under preferences in cases where *(a)* the documents submitted in support of their originating status referred to locations in the West Bank, Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip or the Golan Heights or *(b)* the goods were labelled or otherwise identified in a fashion indicating that they were produced or had undergone substantial processing in the territories occupied by Israel since 1967. [115323]

Dawn Primarolo: HM Customs and Excise are not aware of any such action taken by other member states.

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answers of 1 March 2000, *Official Report*, columns 266–67W, whether examination of the documents accompanying the consignments referred to in those answers has substantiated the alleged non-compliance with the provisions of the Agreement between the EC and Israel. [115319]

Dawn Primarolo: The information is still being evaluated. The results will be passed to the European Commission.

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answers of 1 March 2000, *Official Report*, columns 266–67W, what measures to recover duties and collect security deposits have been taken in connection with importations from Israel under preferences of consignments accompanied by documents identifying the location of their suppliers as within the West Bank, Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip and the Golan Heights. [115320]

Dawn Primarolo: No such measures have been taken.

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answers of 1 March 2000, *Official Report*, columns 266–67W, whether, upon their examination by Customs and Excise, the information contained in the documents accompanying the consignments referred to in those answers, together with the maps and other information available to Customs and Excise, justifies imposing duties and collecting deposits from the importers of those consignments under UK and Community law. [115311]

Dawn Primarolo: No decision has yet been taken by Customs and Excise to impose duties or collect deposits.

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer where the responsibility for ensuring the appropriate application of Community treaties, including external trade agreements, lies and if the United Kingdom will ask the Commission to indemnify it against liability for losses to the Community's own resources consequent on failures of UK customs enforcement that may arise out of a misapplication of EU-Israel agreements by Israel's customs service. [115317]

Dawn Primarolo: The responsibility for ensuring the appropriate application of Community treaties lies with the Community, and, where member states are also party to the agreement, with the member states.

The question of indemnity does not arise given that the United Kingdom, in conjunction with other member states, is co-operating fully with the European Commission.

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if Her Majesty's Customs and Excise has demanded security deposits from importers claiming the benefit of preferences under the Community's preferential trade agreements for importations from Israel based on evidence indicating that the products being imported may have been produced or undergone substantial processing in the territories occupied by Israel since 1967, including in Israeli settlements. [115322]

Dawn Primarolo: No.

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answers of 14 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 447W, and 1 March 2000, *Official Report*, columns 266–67W, whether the documents referred to in those answers referred to *(a)* importation of dates and *(b)* importation under preferences of other products, with particular reference to wines and carpets from the area Barkan and the Golan Heights. [115318]

Dawn Primarolo: Yes, and the evidence from the further checking referred to in previous answers has been passed to the European Commission.

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what steps HM Customs and Excise can take if Israel's customs service has been systematically misapplying the territorial clauses and origin rules in its trade agreements with the EU to prevent fraudulent preferential importations into the United Kingdom of products from settlements without the co-operation of Israeli customs. [115316]

Dawn Primarolo: The question of further action by HM Customs and Excise will not arise until the European Commission has completed its assessment of the situation.

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what account Her Majesty's Government have taken, in connection with imports from Israel under preferences, of public communications by the Government of Israel stating that Israel issues certificates of origin according to its own definition of territoriality. [115312]

Dawn Primarolo: The content of these communications has been noted.

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the extent to which achievement of the objects and purposes of the EC's trade agreements with Israel depends on the provisions of the agreement relating to the scope of territorial applicability and to bilateral customs co-operation. [115324]

Dawn Primarolo: No such assessment has been made.

EU Preferential Trade Agreements

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if Her Majesty's Customs and Excise has demanded security deposits from importers claiming the benefit of preferences under the Community's preferential trade agreements in cases where the documents accompanying the consignments being imported, or the labelling or other identifying details of the goods themselves, have given rise to strong doubts regarding their originating status under the agreements in question. [115321]

Dawn Primarolo: No.

Climate Change Levy

Mr. Green: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what advice he has received on the legality of the reduction in employers' National Insurance contributions in connection with the climate change levy for the purposes of complying with EU competition regulations; and if he will publish it. [115263]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 17 March 2000]:* The proposed reduction in the rate of employers' National Insurance contributions in April 2001 is in accordance with EU competition rules and is therefore a matter for the UK Government.

Tobacco Smuggling

Mr. Barron: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what reports he has received of the level of tobacco smuggled into each European Union member state in each of the last five years. [115408]

Dawn Primarolo: No information on this basis has been published. HM Customs and Excise do have information on levels of tobacco smuggled into the UK but there is no standard reporting of levels of smuggling into each member state of the European Union.

Customs however regularly receive and give qualitative information from and to colleagues in other member states about tobacco smuggling.

Waste Incinerators

Mr. Woolas: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to include energy generated from waste incinerators in the 100 per cent. first year investment allowance for companies moving from environmentally unfriendly to environmentally friendly technologies and processes. [115351]

Mr. Timms: The Government published a consultation paper on the additional support for energy efficiency measures available under the climate change levy package (including the proposed scheme offering enhanced 100 per cent. first year capital allowances for energy saving investments) on 9 December 1999. The consultation paper proposed that five energy saving technologies (combined heat and power plant, boilers, motors, variable speed drives and lighting systems) would be made eligible for the enhanced capital allowances. Responses received to the consultation paper are currently being assessed and further announcements will be made shortly.

Correspondence

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he will answer the question from the right hon. Member for Hitchen and Harpenden of 15 February (ref. 109572). [115579]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I did so earlier today.

Euro

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list those games which have been produced with European Community money to teach people about the euro; what age groups are targeted; and how many have been produced. [115577]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The UK Government have not produced any educational games to teach people about the euro, nor have any such games been funded by the Commission in the UK.

ECOFIN Council

Mr. Hood: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what was the outcome of the ECOFIN Council held in Brussels on 13 March; and if he will make a statement. [115547]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries (Mr. Brown) on 17 March 2000, *Official Report,* columns 352–53W.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Child Poverty

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many children were living in poverty in each year from 1979 to date in *(a)* Shrewsbury and Atcham and *(b)* Shropshire; and if he will make a statement. [107253]

Mr. Bayley: There is no single official measure of poverty. Poverty and social exclusion are complex multi-dimensional issues, affecting many aspects of people's lives; their income, health, housing, the quality of their environment and their opportunities to work and to learn. There is no single measure which captures the complex problems which need to be overcome.

We are determined to tackle the problems that condemn many individuals and communities to poverty. That is why we set out our strategy for tackling poverty and social exclusion in our first annual report "Opportunity for all" (Cm 4445). The report includes a range of indicators that capture the many aspects of poverty and social exclusion.

We are unable to present low income statistics for Shrewsbury and Atcham and Shropshire local authorities because they are not statistically robust for areas smaller than geographical regions. However, information for the whole of the West Midlands is shown in the table:

Number of children below 60 per cent. median income in West Midlands, including the self-employed

Million

	Before housing costs	*After housing costs*
1994–95	0.3	0.4
1995–96	0.3	0.4
1996–97	0.4	0.4
1997–98	0.4	0.4

Note:
Some of the fluctuation in numbers between years may be due to sample variability.
Source:
Households Below Average Income

Some indicators of poverty and social exclusion are available at the local authority level. For example, the table shows the number of children in families receiving Income Support or income-based Jobseeker's Allowance.

Number of dependants under age 16 included in Income Support and Jobseekers Allowance (income based) claims for Shrewsbury and Atcham and Shropshire

Thousand

Period	*Shrewsbury and Atcham*	*Shropshire*
May 1993	3.0	9.3
May 1994	3.3	8.4
May 1995	3.0	7.9
May 1996	3.0	7.9
May 1997	2.6	7.4
May 1998	1.9	5.8
May 1999	2.0	6.4

Notes:
1. Numbers are taken from the Income Support Statistics Quarterly Enquiries for May 1993–1999, which is a point in time survey based on a 5 per cent. sample of Income Support claimants.
2. The figures include the unemployed who until 1996 were included in Income Support caseloads. Income Support for the unemployed was replaced by income-based Jobseeker's Allowance from October 1996.
3. Numbers are based on sample cases and will therefore be subject to sampling error.
4. Numbers have been rounded to the nearest hundred and expressed in thousands.
5. The local authority district is assigned by matching postcodes against the relevant 1995–1999 version 1 postcode directories.

Improving educational attainment is an intrinsic part of our strategy for tackling the causes of poverty and social exclusion. In 1997 in Shropshire, 62 per cent. of students in English and 61 per cent. in Maths achieved Level 4 and above in Key Stage 2. By 1999 this had improved to 74 per cent. in English and 72 per cent. in Maths.The health of our children is also an important indicator of levels of poverty and social exclusion. In Shrewsbury and Atcham in 1997–98, the rate at which children (aged under 16) were admitted to hospital as a result of an unintentional injury resulting in a hospital stay of more than three days was 1.5 per thousand (to the nearest 0.5 per thousand). This is broadly unchanged from 1995–96.

Further information on the indicators we will use to monitor its progress in tackling poverty and social exclusion, including definitions and baseline data, was placed in the House of Commons Library on 21 September to accompany "Opportunity for All".

Independent Tribunal Service

Mr. Browne: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many doctors who are panel members for the Independent Tribunal Service are also employed by SEMA to report on the condition of applicants for incapacity or disability benefit. [113647]

Mr. Bayley: The Contractual Terms of employment for Sema Group Medical Services state that any employee must not, at any time during their employment with Sema Group, enter into any contract of employment with an outside employer which might lead to a conflict of interest.

In view of the conflict of interest, which would arise if a doctor employed by Sema Group Medical Services were to be employed by the Tribunal Service, no doctors would be given permission to work for the tribunal service.

We do know that some doctors employed by Nestor Disability Analysis (NDA) to work on a sessional/EMP basis for Medical Services sit on Appeals Services panels. Neither we, nor Sema Medical Services, have any details of numbers. It is however for the Appeals Service and the Lord Chancellor to ensure that panellists they appoint are sufficiently independent and impartial under paragraph 6 of the Social Security Act 1998.

Fraud

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Mr. Dobbin) on 7 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 612W, on what date he estimates these savings in respect of instrument of payment fraud will be achieved; [114689]

(2) pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Mr. Dobbin) on 7 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 612W, on what is the basis for his calculation of the amounts automated credit transfer will save from the elimination of instrument of payment fraud. [114668]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 14 March 2000]:* The move to Automated Credit Transfer as the normal method of payment will bring significant savings from reduced levels of fraud. The move will begin in 2003, but full savings will not be realised until 2005, when the transition from current paper based methods of payment is complete.

Anticipated savings from the elimination of instrument of payment fraud are based on estimates of current losses due to the fraudulent encashment of girocheques and order books, and our best estimate of the potential for further losses.

Minimum Income Guarantee

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will backdate awards of the pensioners' minimum income guarantee to the date when he announced that there would be a take-up campaign for all pensioner claimants who would have qualified had they applied earlier. [114718]

Mr. Rooker: No. An announcement of our plans to encourage pensioners to take-up their entitlement to the Minimum Income Guarantee will be made shortly.

Benefit Fraud Inspectorate

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate's programme of inspections for the forthcoming year *(a)* generally and *(b)* with special reference to housing benefit administration. [114832]

Mr. Rooker: The Benefit Fraud Inspectorate (BFI) reports to the Secretary of State for Social Security on the administration of Social Security benefits by local authorities and seeks to drive up standards of administration. This work is part of a process that will transform the delivery of Housing Benefit so that local authorities provide a faster, more accurate service, which is more secure against fraud.

To date, we have published 42 reports following BFI inspections of Housing and Council Tax Benefit administration in local authorities. The BFI programme includes a further 55 local authority inspections, which are due to be completed before April 2001. This includes the inspections that were announced last September, which focus on the 30 local authorities with the highest benefit spend. A further programme of inspections, some of which will be completed in the coming year, is due to be announced in April.

In addition to the programme of inspections in local authorities, the BFI will be completing a further inspection in the Benefits Agency during the coming year.

With the advent of Best Value, the BFI will be responsible for undertaking Best Value inspections on HB/CTB issues working, as necessary with the Housing Inspectorate and the Audit Commission. This programme of work will depend on the local authorities performance plans, which are due to be submitted by the end of this month.

SERPS

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will provide a breakdown for each of the next 20 financial years of the estimated cost of *(a)* his proposed deferral until October 2002 of the cuts in widows' SERPS and *(b)* his proposed preserved rights scheme. [115527]

Mr. Rooker: The information is in the table.

£ million, 1999–2000 prices

Year	*Cost of deferral*	*Illustrative scheme costs assuming 30 per cent. reduction in expenditure that would otherwise have occurred*
2000	60	0
2001	160	0
2002	260	0
2003	270	40
2004	260	70
2005	260	110
2006	250	150
2007	240	190
2008	240	220
2009	230	260
2010	220	300
2011	210	330
2012	200	370
2013	200	410
2014	190	440
2015	180	470
2016	170	500
2017	160	530
2018	150	560
2019	140	590
2020	130	610

Notes:

1. Estimates of gross SERPS are provided by the Government Actuary's Department in 1999–2000 prices, rounded to the nearest £10 million.
2. In order to produce long-term estimates, the figures are based on those used in the Government Actuary's Department's latest quinquennial review.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if his proposal to give preserved rights to those who were given incomplete information about their widow's SERPS entitlement will include those who were given no information. [115526]

Mr. Rooker: I refer the hon. Member to the statement my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State made on 15 March 2000, *Official Report*, columns 307–21.

Stakeholder Pensions

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what his targets are for the number of people taking out stakeholder pensions; over what time-scale this is set; and how many such people he expects to be people who do not currently have a pension. [114990]

Mr. Rooker: The Department's targets will be set out in the Public Service Agreement covering the period from April 2001 to March 2004. It will be published later this year.

Exceptional Hardship Payments

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how much of the budget for the exceptional hardship payment scheme was *(a)* spent, *(b)* unspent and *(c)* retained by local authorities in each year since it was introduced. [115310]

Angela Eagle: The exceptional hardship payments scheme was introduced from 1995–96. The amounts spent and unspent from the local government contributions to the exceptional hardship payments schemes are in the table. The amount that is unspent is retained by local authorities, and therefore, for part *(c)* of the question the amounts are as shown in the third line of the table.

Exceptional hardship payments

£ million

	1995–96	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*
Government contribution	2.50	18.25	18.25	20.00	20.00
Amount spent	0.10	3.13	6.42	7.49	[1]—
Amount unspent	2.40	15.12	11.83	12.51	[1]—

[1] Not yet known

Source:

1995–96 to 1998–99 Housing Benefit Subsidy claim forms from Local Authorities

Housing Benefit

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what assessment he has made of the conclusions of the DETR/DSS publication, Housing Benefits and the Private Rented Sector, concerning *(a)* the availability of private rented accommodation for people aged under 25 years, *(b)* the ability of people aged under 25 years to negotiate lower rents and *(c)* the impact of the single room rent restriction; [115305]

(2) what assessment he has made of the conclusions of the DETR/DSS report, "Housing Benefit and the Private Rented Sector", on the average weekly difference between rents charged and housing benefit paid to people under 25 years affected by the single room rent restriction. [115306]

Angela Eagle: The findings of the report concluded that the single room rent restriction is causing difficulties for some young people under 25 years in accessing and maintaining accommodation. We are considering the future of the single room rent as part of our wider review of housing. We will be taking account of all the available research which will include the localised reports we received from a variety of organisations on the effects of the single room rent.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of the number of people aged under 25 years affected by the single room rent restriction who have successfully applied for an exceptional hardship payment. [115309]

Angela Eagle: We do not collect statistical information on the number of single people aged under 25 years affected by the single room rent restriction who have successfully applied for an exceptional hardship payment. However, research done in 1997 showed that overall 3 per cent. of a sample of tenants affected by the Single Room Rent and Local Reference Rent restrictions interviewed in the survey had successfully applied for and received exceptional hardship payments.

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many single pensioners claiming housing benefit live in accommodation comprising two bedrooms or more. [114988]

Angela Eagle: The information requested is not available.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what representations he has received on the impact of the single room rent restriction for people aged under 25 years. [115308]

Angela Eagle: Representations about the impact of the single room rent (SRR) provision for under 25-year-olds have been received from hon. Members, members of the public and a variety of voluntary and charitable organisations. The representations we have received from voluntary organisations and others suggest that the single room rent restriction is causing localised difficulties for some young people under 25 years in that the accommodation to which the restriction relates is not readily available.

Benefit Fraud Hotline

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the number of calls received by the Benefit Fraud Hotline in each month since January 1999. [114987]

Mr. Rooker: The information is in the table.

Number of calls received at the national Benefit Fraud Hotline from January 1999 to February 2000

Calendar month	*Calls answered 1999*	*Calls answered 2000*
January	13,925	14,272
February	13,798	19,285
March	16,901	—
April	11,996	—
May	11,303	—
June	13,415	—
July	10,491	—
August	10,336	—
September	12,971	—
October	9,291	—
November	14,683	—
December	10,906	—

Sick Notes

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Health about sick notes signed by doctors for those on long-term sick leave. [114989]

Mr. Bayley: There have been no such discussions.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Home Affairs Research and Statistics Directorate

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the titles of projects *(a)* undertaken and *(b)* completed by the Home Affairs Research and Statistics Directorate in the past six months, indicating which have been published and how their findings have otherwise been made available. [114647]

Mr. Straw: I have placed a table in the Library providing the information requested.

In addition to publication, Home Office Research Development and Statistics Directorate findings are available on the Home Office website and may also be referred to at seminars and conferences. I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) on 9 February 2000, *Official Report,* columns 164–65W, concerning the Department's policy for releasing research reports.

Fire Authorities

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will investigate means of rationalisation of the system for funding fire authorities in metropolitan authorities, county councils and combined fire authorities. [114912]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister is leading a fundamental review of local government finance, which is being carried out in partnership with local authorities. The review is looking at the distribution of revenue support grant for all local authority services, including the fire service, to investigate whether there is a way of distributing the grant which is simpler, more stable and fairer than the present arrangements. The review is also considering options for improving and simplifying the local authority capital finance system. The aim is to publish a Green Paper in the summer.

Secure Facilities

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the stage reached in the planning process for all sites under consideration for future use *(a)* as prisons, *(b)* secure training centres and *(c)* other secure facilities. [114758]

Mr. Boateng: As I stated in the reply I gave to the hon. Member on 21 February 2000, *Official Report,* columns 813–14W, tenders for two new prisons have been let and these prisons are currently under construction at Rye Hill, at Onley near Rugby and Marchington in East Staffordshire. Later this year it is planned to issue tenders for the procurement of a further two prisons at Ashford in Middlesex and Peterborough. There is outline planning permission for both but detailed approval will be needed once the designs are finalised. The Prison Service also has outline planning permission for a new prison at Maghull on Merseyside and is discussing with the local planning authority the submission of a planning application for a new prison in Woolwich, South East London.

The Home Office recently acquired the site of the former Youth Training Centre at St. Charles in Brentwood for development as a Secure Training Centre (STC). An application for outline planning permission will be submitted to the local planning authority shortly. This, with the STCs already open at Medway near Rochester, Rainsbrook near Rugby and Hassockfield near Consett in Co. Durham, would bring the STC estate to four establishments with a fifth site yet to be identified.

Other secure facilities for which the Home Office is directly responsible are immigration detention centres. A planning application to redevelop the former Aldington prison near Ashford in Kent as a new purpose-built immigration detention centre has been submitted to the local planning authority. The Immigration and Nationality Department is also preparing a planning application to redevelop its Harmondsworth site near Heathrow Airport to provide another new purpose-built immigration detention centre. These form part of the proposals for implementing the recent White Paper about firmer, fairer and faster immigration controls.

Prison Working Group

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will publish the findings of the working group set up under Lord Laming on prisons. [114759]

Mr. Boateng: Lord Laming is due to submit his report to me by 1 May. In the interests of thoroughness I have informed him that this may take the form of an interim report, with the full document to be completed as soon as possible. When this is done I will arrange for copies to be placed in the Library.

Marsham Street Offices

Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the former Government offices in Marsham Street are to be demolished; and what will replace them. [115074]

Mr. Straw: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave on 20 January 2000, *Official Report,* column 558W, to the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh).

Forest Bank Prison

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the current prisoner population at HMP Forest Bank; when it will reach capacity; what is the current staff/prisoner ratio; what is the expected staff/prisoner ratio at full capacity; how many prisoner custody officers and managers have transferred *(a)* from HMP Blakenhurst, *(b)* other privately run prisons and *(c)* the Prison Service; what incidents have been reported at the establishment since it opened; what amounts have been calculated for financial penalties for contract failures to date; and if he will list the reasons for financial penalties being imposed so far. [114761]

Mr. Boateng: As at 14 March the prisoner population at Forest Bank prison and young offender institution was 420. It is due to reach full capacity on 11 May this year. The current staff/prisoner ratio is one member of staff to 1.27 prisoners and the expected staff/prisoner ratio at full capacity is one member of staff to 2.29 prisoners.

The details requested about the number of custody officers and managers who transferred to Forest Bank from other prisons are given in the table. Incidents which have occurred at Forest Bank are detailed in the table.

The imposition of financial penalties does not start until the prison reaches full capacity on 11 May; therefore, no financial penalties have yet been calculated or imposed.

Prisoner custody officers and managers transferred to Her Majesty's Prison/Young Offenders Institution Forest Bank

Transferred from	
(a) Her Majesty's Prison Blakenhurst	
Managers	7
Senior Prisoner Custody Officers	5
Prisoner Custody Officers	5
(b) Other privately run prisons	
Managers	10
Senior Prisoner Custody Officers	9
Prisoner Custody Officers	4
(c) The Prison Service	
Managers	[1]3

[1] One of whom is on secondment

Incidents reported at Her Majesty's Prison/Young Offenders Institution Forest Bank to 14 March

Incident	
Fights	3
Concerted indiscipline	2
Assaults on other prisoners	7
Assaults on staff	6
Fires in wastebins	2
Drug finds	3
Total	23

Police Recruits

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police recruits began training at Hendon for the Metropolitan police on the course due to commence on 13 March. [115495]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis tells me that the information requested is 65.

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the maximum number of police officer recruits that can be trained at Hendon for the Metropolitan police *(a)* on each course and *(b)* during a year. [115494]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis tells me that the Recruit Training School at Hendon can normally train a maximum of 190 recruits on each course. There are 10 intakes per year, giving an annual provision for 1,900 recruits. This capacity could be increased, exceptionally, to meet additional demand.

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what were the anticipated start dates of police officer recruit courses for the Metropolitan police during 2000 as at 1 January 2000. [115493]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis tells me that the information requested is: 4 January; 7 February; 13 March; 17 April; 22 May; 26 June; 31 July; 4 September; 9 October; 13 November and 18 December.

Football Offences and Disorders Act

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people have been *(a)* charged with and *(b)* convicted of an offence under the Football Offences and Disorders Act 1999 since it came into force. [115381]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Information on the number of people charged by offence is not collected centrally.

The Football Offences and Disorders Act 1999 came into force on 27 September 1999. Provisional court proceedings data for the fourth quarter of 1999 will become available in June and provisional data for subsequent quarters at three monthly intervals thereafter.

Tobacco Products

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many offences have been recorded in respect of *(a)* confectioners and tobacconists and *(b)* other retailers of the sale of tobacco products to those aged under 16 in each of the last five years; how many police cautions have been issued; and what has been the average fine levied. [115141]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The offence of selling tobacco to persons under the age of 16 is a summary offence and does not form part of the recorded crime series.

Available data taken from the Home Office Cautions and Court Proceedings Databases are given in the table. We do not hold the type of retailer for this offence because information is not recorded on the characteristics of all cases held on the database apart from those that are evident from the description of the offence with which the defendant has been charged.

Number of offenders cautioned, defendants prosecuted and convicted and average fine given for offences relating to the sale of tobacco to persons aged under 16[1], England and Wales, 1994–98

Year	*Total cautioned*	*Total prosecuted*	*Total convicted*	*Average fine (£)*
1994	13	108	83	228
1995	8	173	142	230
1996	1	140	119	226
1997	5	138	119	242
1998	—	173	135	225

[1] Offences under Section 7 of the Children and Young Persons Act 1993 as amended by Section 1 of the Children and Young Persons (Protection from Tobacco) Act 1991.

Infanticide

Ms Moran: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if he will list the *(a)* parliamentary constituency of residence, *(b)* age, *(c)* date, *(d)* location and *(e)* manner of death of each child who was killed (i) during child contact visits with parents with a history of domestic violence and (ii) in cases of disputed contact in instances of domestic violence by parents since January 1995; [113950]

(2) how many children have been killed in England and Wales since 1 January 1995 during child contact visits with parents who had a history of domestic violence. [113949]

Mr. Boateng: Just over 50 children a year in England and Wales are killed by their parents, but those killed during contact visits and in cases of disputed contact cannot be separately identified in the statistics collected centrally.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Syms: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much the Government plan to spend from his Department's budget on asylum seekers in 1999–2000 and 2000–01. [115512]

Mrs. Roche: Responsibility for the budget for supporting asylum seekers transferred to the Home Office from April 1999. It is anticipated that the total cost of operating the Immigration and Nationality Directorate and supporting asylum seekers for the financial year 1999–2000 will be in the region of around £800 million.

The Home Office has a provisional allocation of £300 million for supporting asylum seekers in 2000–01. Estimating support costs for 2000–01 is subject to a large number of variables such as the level of new applications, the speed of processing claims and the resources directed at processing cases and other work. Those estimates and the overall resourcing of the Immigration and Nationality Directorate are currently under review.

Illegal Diesel Fuel (Prosecutions)

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prosecutions have taken place in the last 12 months relating to the use of illegal diesel fuel. [114520]

Mr. Timms: I have been asked to reply.

In the financial year to date 11 prosecutions have taken place which relate to the smuggling of diesel fuel with a further 14 cases awaiting trial.

Customs and Excise also prosecute cases arising from the misuse of rebated oils but I regret that figure is not readily available.

Ballot Procedures

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is his policy on regulations appertaining to *(a)* trade union and *(b)* other organisations' ballot procedures which for public policy reasons were laid down by Parliament. [114995]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I have been asked to reply.

So far as trade unions are concerned, when conducting ballots they must comply with the relevant legal requirements set out in the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992 as amended (including by the Employment Relations Act 1999). My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will shortly be commencing provisions of the 1999 Act which provide for balloting in connection with union recognition and derecognition. He has no plans for further changes to the law governing trade union balloting procedures.

As to "balloting" by other organisations, my Department published last year a consultative document setting out the Government's proposals for strengthening the current regulatory and best practice frameworks governing the level of company directors' remuneration. The document expressed the Government's concern that many listed companies have failed to respond adequately to the current best practice provisions on transparency, linkage to performance and accountability to shareholders and canvassed views on a number of options, including some involving additional shareholder voting requirements. The Government expect to announce the outcome of their consultation shortly.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Westminster Hall (Costs)

Miss McIntosh: To ask the President of the Council what estimate she has made of the running costs of sittings in Westminster Hall; and if she will make a statement. [114094]

Mrs. Beckett: I understand that no readily available separately identifiable costs arise from the use of permanent staff of the House, but that certain extra running costs for security, for printing the *Official Report* and for the provision of sound services for the extra debate and scrutiny Westminster Hall provides will amount to approximately £155,000 in a full year.

Legislation (Environmental Impact)

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the President of the Council how many bills published since the Queen's Speech were accompanied by a statement of their implications for the environment; and what proportion this represents of the total number of Bills published in the current session. [114703]

Mrs. Beckett: There is no formal requirement on Departments to either produce or publish full environmental appraisals. However, environmental appraisals have been published alongside two Government Bills this session, representing 5.5 per cent. of the number of Government Bills published in the current Session, including the Financial Services and Markets Bill which was published last Session but carried over to complete its passage in this.

The assessment of the environmental impacts of draft legislation should be integral to the broader appraisal of policy that takes place but may not be set out in a separate statement.

Environmental appraisals are part of the overall policy appraisal process and are therefore carried out alongside, for example, regulatory impact appraisals and health impact assessments where necessary.

Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 21 March 2000

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

M25

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much compensation has been paid and is expected to be paid to householders following the widening of the M25 between junctions 8 and 9. [112543]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 2 March 2000]:* I have asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, Mr. Peter Nutt to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Nutt to Mr. Crispin Blunt, dated 21 March 2000:

The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions has asked me to reply to your question about the compensation levels paid and expected to be paid following widening of the M25 between junctions 8 and 9.

Compensation under part 1 of the Land Compensation Act 1973 is awarded for the effects of the full M25 8 - 10 widening scheme, which include the provision of road lighting. The estimate of £20M provided last week in reply to your Parliamentary Question 111815 relates to the full 8 - 10 scheme and we do not hold detailed information in the form you require.

We are however, able to give an indication only as to the levels of compensation already paid to residents living between junctions 8 and 9. This is in the region of £7.052M paid to around 680 claimants, giving an average settlement so far of some £10,300.

Of those, around 500 claimants live near the porous asphalt section between Leatherhead and Ashtead and have received in the region of £5.9M, an average settlement of £11,508 per claim.

The compensation still to be paid for the outstanding claims should be in the region of £5.2M. This makes an indicative total in the region of £12.25M for the 8 - 9 section.

Liquid and Gas Spills

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many reported incidents involving liquid and gas spills caused by hose failures there have been in the United Kingdom in the last five years for which figures are available; what was the cost of cleaning up each incident and who met the cost in each case; what the estimated cost was of the *(a)* environmental damage and *(b)* property damage caused by each incident; and how many people sustained injuries in each incident. [114220]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* Incidents involving liquid and gas spills are reported to HSE under the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 1995. From April 1996 to date (a period of just under four years), there were 69 incidents defined as "Dangerous occurrences" and "chemical transfer" (including transfer by hose, pipeline or vehicles). Dangerous occurrences include the release of 100kg or more of flammable liquid, or 10kg of a flammable gas or vapour. Information that would allow us to ascertain how many were caused by hose failures and the number of people sustaining injuries is not always recorded or readily available in all cases.

Mundic (Housing)

Ms Atherton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what research his Department has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated on the incidence of Mundic in housing. [115193]

Ms Beverley Hughes: My Department has an on-going programme of research into the better understanding of the deterioration mechanism which affects housing constructed using mundic aggregate. The work is developing methods of testing and assessment to enable the maximum number of houses to be safely accepted by mortgage lenders for obtaining mortgages. Initial recommendations were made in 1994 and 1997 from which the Council of Mortgage Lenders agreed to mortgage about 80 per cent. of houses that had previously been blighted. Further recommendations covering a proportion of the remaining houses will be made in the next few months.

Company Car Drivers

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to ensure that company car drivers pay their own insurance. [115221]

Mr. Hill: None. The law requires the user of a vehicle to have valid insurance cover. It does not require that he pay for it himself.

Transport Strategy (Gloucestershire)

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement about the public inquiry in Gloucestershire concerning the transport strategy for the region. [115027]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 16 March 2000]:* The Public Examination of the draft revised Regional Planning Guidance for the South West prepared by the South West Regional Planning Conference, is currently taking place in Exeter. The draft Guidance includes a draft Regional Transport Strategy, which will be examined on 30 and 31 March. The final version of the Guidance including the Regional Transport Strategy, will be issued by the Secretary of State next winter in the light of the advice of the Panel for the Public Examination and following consultation on any significant changes.

Carbon Monoxide Detectors

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what investigation he has carried out into the use of carbon monoxide detectors in homes; and if he will make a statement. [115028]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 16 March 2000]:* My Department, with the Health and Safety Executive and the Department of Trade and Industry commissioned the Building Research Establishment to investigate the optimal siting of electrical carbon monoxide (CO) detectors/alarms in domestic premises. The summary report of this work entitled "Evaluation of carbon

monoxide detectors in domestic premises" was published in 1999 by HSE. In partnership with some members of the gas industry we are also currently supporting further research work by BG Technology on the sensitivity and long term reliability of electrical carbon monoxide detectors.

The role of these detectors/alarms is being addressed in the HSE's fundamental review of the health and safety regime for the installation and use of gas. Currently responses to a discussion document are being evaluated and Ministers should receive a report this Summer.

My Department's view is that carbon monoxide detectors/alarms have a role to play in reducing risks from carbon monoxide but the need to properly maintain combustion appliances is paramount.

PPG17 (Sport and Recreation)

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he intends to issue for consultation a revised draft Planning Policy Guidance Note 17 (Sport and Recreation). [115376]

Mr. Raynsford: I hope to publish a consultation draft soon.

London Underground

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much London Transport has spent on external consultants to date in relation to the public-private partnership for London Underground, stating both *(a)* actual and *(b)* budgeted costs. [115420]

Mr. Hill: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas) on 21 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 525W. I will provide an up-dated figure in due course, in line with the commitment we have given to the House.

Local Government Bill

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the transparency of the decision-making process of those authorities which have experimented with the cabinet-style arrangements envisaged by the Local Government Bill [Lords]. [115491]

Ms Beverley Hughes: We have made no general assessment of experimental arrangements. However, any such experiments have been carried out within the existing statutory framework which was not designed to deliver the transparency of decision-making which will be put in place by our proposals in the Local Government Bill.

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he will take to ensure transparency in the decision-making process of the cabinet-style arrangements envisaged by the Local Government Bill [Lords]. [115489]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The arrangements we are proposing in Part II of the Local Government Bill and draft guidance are designed to ensure transparent and inclusive decision-making. These new arrangements involve:

an inclusive process of formulating a council's policy framework and budget, which will be the responsibility of the full council in public;

publicly known individuals—the executive—being personally responsible for implementing this framework and budget;

accurate recording of decisions and their reasons, and timely publication of these and of the background and factual papers available to the decision-maker(s); and

powerful overview and scrutiny committees, meeting in public:

to discuss and make recommendations on the development of policies; and

to hold each executive member to account for what he or she has done and is planning to do.

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the responses to the Consultative Draft Guidance and Regulations with respect to the Local Government Bill [Lords]. [115490]

Ms Beverley Hughes: We have received very many helpful and constructive responses to the consultative draft guidance and regulations on new constitutions for councils. We are currently analysing these responses in detail and will consider them all carefully when revising the drafts for further consultation.

Climate Change Levy

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many meetings his officials have had with European Commission officials on the climate change levy. [115264]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 17 March 2000]:* Recognising the crucial importance of state aids guidelines for our climate change levy policy, my Department's officials have met five times since September with the European Commission to discuss the climate change levy. They will continue to have further meetings to take forward our notification of the arrangements proposed for the levy.

Westminster Station

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will call for a report from London Underground as to why lifts are not operating, walls are unfinished and netted off, and considerable areas have been left unsightly, untidy and strewn with garbage at Westminster underground station. [115136]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 17 March 2000]:* I understand from the London Underground that three of the five lifts at Westminster station are in service. The work required, and safe methods for carrying it out, on the remaining two are under discussion with contractors and HM Railways Inspectorate. The walls of the station are finished to the approved architectural design. The netting is to catch any foreign objects, which might be thrown by passengers. The Bridge Street underpass is currently cordoned off by contractors to allow for the permanent lighting to be installed; this may look untidy until the work is completed.

Hedges

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will announce the results of the consultation on the Government's proposals for the control of hedges; how many letters of support he has received from individuals and organisations with regard to each of the four options outlined in his proposals; which option gained the most support; which option he will seek to implement; and what his timescale is for putting forward his proposals. [115242]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 20 March 2000]:* The deadline for responses to the consultation paper "High hedges: possible solutions" was 31 January. We are currently analysing the thousands of replies that we have received, and so are not yet in a position to provide the information requested. We will be taking account of all comments in considering the best way forward on this issue. We will announce the results of consultation, and our conclusions, when that consideration has been completed.

London Mayoral Election

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 14 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 120W, on what date the Greater London Returning Officer made *(a)* a provisional and *(b)* a firm order for the necessary paper for the Greater London mayoral elections booklet. [115510]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 20 March 2000]:* A provisional order for the printing of this booklet, including the paper, was placed on 2 March. A firm order was placed by the Department on 7 March.

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what briefing from him is available for prospective mayoral candidates for the Greater London Authority election. [116033]

Mr. Hill: Briefings for prospective Mayoral candidates on organisational and administrative matters are available on request to the Greater London Authority Transition Team.

Rail Services

Kali Mountford: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what provision he is making for the cost of rail services secured by English passenger transport executives in 2000–01. [116034]

Mr. Hill: A special grant report has been laid before the House today for the payment of Metropolitan Railway Passenger Services Grant in 2000–01 to English Passenger Transport Authorities (PTAs). The main purpose of the grant is to provide support to those PTAs for the local rail services provided by franchise operators and secured by the PTAs' Passenger Transport Executives under the terms of franchise agreements with franchisees and the Director of Passenger Rail Franchising.

Partnership Investment Programme

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to seek an amendment to the Treaty of Rome to allow the continuation of the gap funding mechanism of the Partnership Investment Programme; and if he will make a statement. [115504]

Ms Beverley Hughes: We are working with the European Commission to try to identify a means of continuing to work in partnership with the private sector to regenerate derelict sites and buildings, within the existing Treaty rules. Ministers have recently held discussions with Commissioner Monti on the problems we face since the Commission ruled that the Partnership Investment Programme (PIP) breached the State aid rules. These discussions are continuing at official level.

Sewerage Agency Payments

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to the letter to him from the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham dated 18 February on sewerage agency agreements, if he will ensure that regulations are introduced to preserve local authority employees' pension entitlements; and if he will make a statement. [115730]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Under the provisions of the Local Government Pension Scheme Regulations 1997, local authority employees who are members may already preserve their pension entitlements, indexed in line with inflation, on leaving. Alternatively, the regulations also allow for suitable actuarial transfers to be arranged to provide an equitable service award in any new scheme.

The extent to which employees in local authorities work on the delivery of privatised water company services through agency agreements, and the availability of alternative broadly comparable pension arrangements to those employed under them, is currently being established with the co-operation of the United Kingdom Steering Committee on local government pensions. The results of that survey will be considered carefully.

Commission for Integrated Transport

Mr. Syms: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will give an itemised breakdown of the £1,550,000 budget of the Commission for Integrated Transport in 1999–2000. [115635]

Mr. Hill: The Commission for Integrated Transport's provisional budget for 1999–2000 had to be allocated well before its launch. A sum of £1.5 million was originally allocated from within DETR's programme budget for this purpose.

Because CfIT was not launched until July 1999, however, it will spend much less than the £1.5 million figure. Its projected spend to the end of this financial year is £269,000.

£

	Projected spend to end of March 2000
Salaries	90,000
Consultancy	125,000
Travel and Subsistence	24,000
Hospitality	5,000
Publicity	25,000
Total	269,000

Local Government Finance

Jean Corston: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on progress with the review of local government finance. [115998]

Ms Armstrong: Joint reports prepared by central and local government officials on the revenue grant distribution and capital finance reviews will be discussed at the next meeting of Central Local Partnership on 22 March. Copies of these reports will be available from the House of Commons Library and the DETR and LGA websites after the meeting.

Decisions about the merits of the various options for reform will not be taken until we have consulted widely this summer.

Railway Yards (Handheld Radios)

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make the issuing of licences for the use of handheld radios on railway yards site-specific. [114514]

Ms Hewitt: I have been asked to reply.

The issue of licences for railway operational purposes requires that hand radios are listed in the licence, according the site where they will be used.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

EU Trade Agreements

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps the European Community takes when, in respect of existing trade agreements with other countries, there ceases to be an agreed definition and interpretation of their territorial scope of applicability. [115314]

Mr. Caborn: The Community continues to apply agreements while they remain in force.

MedicAlert

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what safeguards he will put into place to ensure that *(a)* charities and *(b)* MedicAlert will not be faced with a third change to telephone numbers and consequent expenses; and if he will make a statement. [115120]

Ms Hewitt: Numbering is a matter for the Office of Telecommunications (Oftel). The current change to London telephone numbers is the result of Oftel's wide 1996 consultation of consumers, businesses and other organisations. The new scheme ensures that there is now a large amount of additional capacity to meet new demand (for example London will now have 80 million numbers behind the 020 code). The extra capacity created is far in excess of forecast demand and will last for the foreseeable future. However, it is impossible to predict all the new services which technological change and market developments may bring into being this century. It is therefore not possible for Oftel to be certain that it will never need to change the scheme further, or that charities, including MedicAlert, will never be faced with such a change again. Oftel has ensured the current change has been widely publicised in advance to allow organisations to plan for it.

British Astronauts

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on when he expects the next British astronaut to take part in a space mission. [115192]

Ms Hewitt: Following wide consultation with industry and the science sector, the Government concluded that the provision of an astronaut did not best meet our space priorities of commercial exploitation and good space science. Within the inevitably limited funds we have available, we must prioritise in the best interests of the British space science community and industry. A British astronaut is not therefore anticipated in the near future. It is still possible, however, for British nationals to apply for overseas astronaut training schemes.

Israel (EU Agreements)

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if, prior to the conclusion of an internationally-recognised final settlement between Israel and its Palestinian and Syrian neighbours, the Commission has authority to conclude and implement agreements on behalf of the European Community without the consent of member states that would allow the benefits of trade preferences to accrue to Israeli settlements and enterprises established in the territories occupied by Israel since 1967. [115315]

Mr. Caborn: No.

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if Israel and the European Community established a single specific definition and interpretation of the territorial scope of their agreements' applicability prior to concluding them. [115313]

Mr. Caborn: No.

Utilities Bill

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to his answer of 10 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 839W, what consultations, on what dates, he held with consumer groups concerning the decision to remove the provisions concerning telecommunications and water industries from the Utilities Bill; on what date or dates he received representations from the National Consumer Council and the Consumers Association; and if he will make a statement. [115383]

Dr. Howells: There were no consultations. Representations were received from the National Consumer Council on 1 March and from the Consumers Association on 29 February.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Family Credit (Southwark)

Ms Harman: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what was the average payment per week of

(a) Family Credit and *(b)* child care allowance via Family Credit in Southwark in the last year of Family Credit. [114839]

Angela Eagle: It is not possible to provide a reliable estimate of the average Family Credit award at a local authority level. However, for Great Britain as a whole, the average amount of Family Credit received was £62.05 at August 1999 and, for the London Government Office Region, the average amount of Family Credit received at August 1999 was £66.16.

Within Family Credit, eligible child care is treated as a disregard and can be offset against earnings when Family Credit is calculated. Due to the relatively small numbers, it is not possible to provide a reliable estimate of the amount of child care disregard either by local authority or by region. However, for Great Britain as a whole, the average amount that recipients benefited from the child care disregard was £22.04 at August 1999.

Notes:

1. Average weekly payment figures are based on an average of four quarters of November 1998 to August 1999.
2. Numbers are based on a 5 per cent. sample and are therefore subject to a degree of sampling error.
3. Family Credit was replaced by Working Families Tax Credit in October 1999.
4. The amount of Family Credit quoted represents the average amount for all Family Credit recipients—including those with the child care disregard.

Source:

Family Credit 5 per cent. sample of awards.

Ms Harman: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people in Southwark were in receipt of *(a)* family credit and *(b)* the child care allowance in each of the last five years. [114835]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the tables.

Number of Family Credit recipients in Southwark local authority area, August 1995–99

Thousand

Year	*Family Credit recipients*
August	
1995	1.6
1996	2.0
1997	2.1
1998	2.5
1999	2.6

Notes:

1. Caseload figures are taken at a point in time for which the month is August.
2. Sample size is 5 per cent. As the numbers are based on a relatively small number of sample cases the estimates are subject to a high degree of sampling error i.e. for an estimate of 2,000 the true value will lie somewhere in the range 1,628 to 2,382.
3. Family Credit was replaced by Working Families Tax Credit in October 1999.
4. Local authorities are assigned by matching the postcode against the 1999 version 1 of the postcode directory.
5. Numbers are rounded to the nearest hundred and expressed in thousands.

Source:

Family Credit 5 per cent. sample of awards

Family Credit recipients benefiting from the child care disregard, London Government Office Region August 1995–99

Thousand

Year	
August	
1995	2.0
1996	2.7
1997	3.1
1998	3.7
1999	4.8

Notes:

1. Caseload figures are taken at a point in time for which the month is August.
2. Numbers are based on a 5 per cent. sample and are therefore subject to a degree of sampling error.
3. Family Credit was replaced by Working Families Tax Credit in October 1999.
4. Numbers are rounded to the nearest hundred and expressed in thousands.

Minimum Income Guarantee

Mr. Stevenson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners in *(a)* Stoke on Trent, South parliamentary constituency and *(b)* the City of Stoke on Trent are in receipt of the minimum income guarantee. [115081]

Mr. Rooker: The information is in the table.

Income Support pensioners aged 60 and over, by parliamentary constituency/local authority: November 1999

Thousand

Area	*Pensioners aged 60 and over*
Stoke on Trent, South parliamentary constituency	2.9
Stoke on Trent local authority	8.3

Notes:

1. Samples size 5 per cent., therefore subject to sampling error.
2. Pensioners are defined as benefit units where either the claimant and/or their partner is aged 60 years or over.
3. Figures have been rounded to the nearest hundred and quoted in thousands.

Source:

Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiry, November 1999

Severely Disabled Children

Mr. Ennis: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimates he has made of the number of severely disabled children aged three and four years who will benefit from the provisions of the Welfare Reform and Pensions Act 1999 in *(a)* Barnsley and *(b)* Doncaster. [115199]

Angela Eagle: This information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is as follows.

In 2001–02, we estimate that approximately 7,000 severely disabled children aged three or four in Great Britain will become entitled to the higher rate mobility component of Disability Living Allowance (DLA). If the proportion of gainers in the areas requested were in line with the proportion of all DLA higher rate mobility recipients in these areas, about 60 children would qualify in both Barnsley and Doncaster.

Single Pensioner Income

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security on what basis he has calculated the net average income of single pensioners at £132 per week. [115115]

Mr. Rooker: The £132 per week figure refers to mean incomes of single pensioners from all sources, after tax payments and before housing costs have been deducted. The figure quoted is for the financial year 1997–98 and is expressed in July 1997 prices.

The figure is taken from "The Pensioners' Incomes Series 1997/8" (PI) which is based on data from the Family Resources Survey (FRS). The PI series looks at cash incomes directly received by pensioners in Great Britain. The FRS does not collect information on people living in institutions, such as prisons or nursing homes, therefore the PI series does not cover these people.

Family Credit (Norwich)

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what was the average payment per week of *(a)* Family Credit and *(b)* child care allowance via Family Credit in Norwich in the last year of Family Credit. [115099]

Angela Eagle: It is not possible to provide a reliable estimate of the average Family Credit award at a local authority level. However, for Great Britain as a whole, the average amount of Family Credit received was £62.05 at August 1999 and for the East Government Office Region the average amount of Family Credit received at August 1999 was £61.29.

Within Family Credit, eligible child care is treated as disregard and can be offset against earnings when Family Credit is calculated. Due to the relatively small numbers, it is not possible to provide a reliable estimate of the amount of child care disregard either by local authority or by region. However, for Great Britain as a whole, the average amount that recipients benefited from the child care disregard was £22.04 at August 1999.

Notes:

1. Average weekly payment figures are based on an average of four quarters of November 1998 to August 1999.

2. Numbers are based on a 5 per cent. sample and are therefore subject to a degree of sampling error.

3. Family Credit was replaced by Working Families Tax Credit in October 1999.

4. The amount of Family Credit quoted represents the average amount for all Family Credit recipients—including those with the child care disregard.

Source:

Family Credit 5 per cent. sample of awards.

Government Pensions Liability

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the Government's liability is for *(a)* the basic state pension, *(b)* SERPS and *(c)* state second pension in *(a)* 2000, *(b)* 2005, *(c)* 2010, *(d)* 2015, *(e)* 2020, *(f)* 2030, *(g)* 2040 and *(h)* 2050 at current real values. [115102]

Mr. Rooker: The information is in the table.

Estimated future liability for basic state pension, state earnings-related pension (SERPS) and state second pension—1999–00 prices

£ billion

Year	*BSP*	*SERPS*	*State second pension*	*Total*
2001–01	33.7	4.9	0.0	38.6
2005–06	34.8	7.0	0.1	41.9
2010–11	37.5	8.6	0.9	46.9
2015–16	39.1	9.4	1.9	50.4
2020–21	40.4	9.7	3.1	53.1
2030–31	48.7	9.5	7.7	65.8
2040–41	52.2	6.9	12.9	72.0
2050–51	50.5	3.6	19.0	73.1

Notes:

1. The figures have been calculated based on the following assumptions:

SERPS expenditure is based on the assumption that State Second Pension is introduced from 2002 and so any SERPS expenditure after that date is on earlier accruals.

SERPS expenditure does not include the effects of the Inherited SERPS scheme and accompanying deferral announced on 15 March 2000.

State Second Pension expenditure assumes the scheme becomes flat rate from 2006 onwards.

From 2006 everyone aged under 40 and earning over £9,500 (in 1999 earnings terms) chooses to contract out of State Second Pension. Contracting out is based on the proposals contained in the current Bill.

2. Increases in contracted out rebates as a result of introducing State Second Pension and Stakeholder pensions are not included in the table.

3. The figures are consistent with those in the Government Actuary Department's report on the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill 1999.

4. As the costs are based on long-term estimates and assumptions the figures given for early years, particularly 2000–01, are very broad brush estimates and are subject to uncertainty.

5. The figures are shown rounded to the nearest £0.1 billion and may not sum to totals due to rounding.

Source:

Government Actuaries Department

Computers

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment he has made of automated systems for cross-checking the consistency of data between different departmental computer systems as a means of reducing fraud and error. [115367]

Mr. Rooker: A continuous programme of data matching activities has taken place since 1995. Results confirm matching data from a number of sources across the Department is an effective tool in identifying losses to programme expenditure caused by fraud and error.

Between April 1998 and March 1999, cross checking data held on departmental computer systems resulted in 139,292 referrals for further investigation, 63 per cent. of which were found to be incorrect, resulting in savings estimated at £114.8 million.

Correspondence

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, Central will receive a reply from the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency to his request for details

of the implications of the outcome of the Lawrence inquiry for the recruitment and career development procedures of the Benefits Agency. [115503]

Angela Eagle: A reply was issued to my hon. Friend on 17 March 2000.

Mortgages

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 8 March 2000, *Official Report*, columns 731–32W, what notification of interest changes he has received from the Office for National Statistics since 11 May 1999. [114821]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the table.

Percentage

Date of notification from Office for National Statistics	*Average interest rate notified*
11 May 1999	6.66
9 June 1999	6.65
7 July 1999	6.65
12 August 1999	6.60
7 September 1999	6.59
29 October 1999	6.58
9 November 1999	6.62
8 December 1999	6.67
12 January 2000	6.88
8 February 2000	6.88
8 March 2000	6.92

Note:
Information extracted from table 7.1L Building Societies: interest rates
Source:
Building Societies Commission; Bank of England

Inherited SERPS Entitlement

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the cost of exempting all persons who have reached pension age by April 2000 from the proposed 50 per cent. cut in inherited SERPS entitlement, on a basis consistent with his estimate of a cost of £2,500 million for his proposed deferral of the cut until October 2002, assuming that this policy was implemented in place of his proposals announced on 15 March. [115528]

Mr. Rooker: The estimated cost is £7,100 million.

Notes:

1. The cost has been estimated by the Government Actuary's Department (GAD).

2. The cost is expressed as the net present value of the annual figures from 2000–01 to 2050–51 in 1999–00 prices, discounted at an annual real rate at 6 per cent.

3. It has been prepared on a basis which is consistent with the latest GAD Quinquennial Review.

Disability-related Living Costs

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to carry out research into calculating disability-related living costs in a manner which allows them to be taken into account when deciding local authority service charges. [114715]

Mr. Hutton: Our White Paper "Modernising Social Services" recognised that the scale of variation in discretionary charges is unacceptable. The Audit Commission is preparing a report on home care charges and we shall take this into account when considering how to address these variations.

PRIME MINISTER

Korean War (50th Anniversary)

Mr. Walter: To ask the Prime Minister what plans the Government have to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Korean War. [115037]

The Prime Minister: The United Kingdom will be represented at the Opening Ceremony of the Commemoration Programme taking place on 25 June in the Republic of Korea, to recognise the 50th Anniversary of the outbreak of the Korean War. The ceremony will be held at the Korean War Cemetery, Seoul. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence will attend. Contingents of veterans are being invited.

A comprehensive series of commemorative events are planned over the next three years in the Republic of Korea. The United Kingdom will be represented at a number of these events at an appropriate level.

Synchrotron

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Prime Minister what factors led him to decide that the new synchrotron should be built at Rutherford Appleton Laboratory in Oxfordshire. [115138]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 17 March 2000]:* The Government's position is that the scientific case was marginally in favour of Rutherford and site issues were neutral.

Both partners expressed the view that they favoured the Rutherford site. The French Education Ministry stated publicly that

> This site was strongly supported by the French partners in the project and we are delighted with this choice.

The Wellcome Trust stated that they would withdraw from the partnership if the decision was taken to locate the project at Daresbury.

Chechnya

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on his recent meetings with Acting President Putin; and what assistance he agreed to provide in Chechnya. [115604]

The Prime Minister: I had useful and constructive meetings with Acting President Putin in St. Petersburg on 11 March which focused on Chechnya and the Russian economy. I made clear that the Russian response to events in Chechnya had to be proportionate and strongly urged that independent international observers be given access to assess whether human rights violations had taken place. I stressed the urgent need for a political process to begin in Chechnya. Mr. Putin assured me that Russia would permit access by the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights, Mary Robinson, and by international bodies such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, the Council of Europe and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

I also discussed with Mr. Putin prospects for the Russian economy and British investment in it. I made clear the need to improve conditions for investors. Mr. Putin stressed his intention to develop a liberal market economy.

The United Kingdom has already provided £1.4 million for humanitarian assistance to IRC/UN appeals for Chechnya. We have also donated through the EU which has provided 3.3 million euros. The UN launched a further appeal for Chechnya on 15 March and we are giving urgent consideration to a further UK donation.

Iraq

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister if he will meet Mr. Hans von Sponeck, on his return from Baghdad to discuss *(a)* sanctions against Iraq, *(b)* water problems and *(c)* the effects on the children of Iraq of trauma in relation to bombing. [115633]

The Prime Minister: I had detailed discussions about Iraq with the UN Secretary General when he visited London earlier this month. I see no need to discuss this further with Mr. von Sponeck.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Websites

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the expenditure incurred by his Department, agencies and non-departmental public bodies on *(a)* the setting up and *(b)* the operation of websites, indicating the cases in which the expenditure has been above that budgeted; and if he will list for each website (i) the topics which have been covered, (ii) the current average number of hits per month and (iii) the estimated expenditure on each website for each of the next three years. [115393]

Mr. Hain: The FCO has four websites:

(a) The main FCO website (www.fco.gov.uk) covers all aspects of the UK's external relations, including regular updates on current developments, travel, consular and trade matters, as well as providing material on British domestic policy for overseas audiences. Relaunched in 1998 it receives c. 1.5–2 million hits per month.

(b) The 'Planet Britain 2000' (www.planet-britain.org) website and accompanying CD-ROM is a wide-ranging site aimed at a youth audience overseas. It carries a wealth of information about British education, culture, music, sport, technology and fashion. It receives 350,000 hits per month.

(c) 'Information From Britain' (ww.informationfrombritain.com) is Whitehall's first e-commerce site, allowing customers worldwide to order and pay electronically for Foreign Office publications. It was set up in 1998 and receives c. 40,000 hits per month.

(d) The FCO's Human Rights Project Fund database is published on the Human Rights in Foreign Policy site (hrpd.fco.gov.uk) which receives about 16,000 hits per month.

The set up costs of the above sites were:

(a) £55,225

(b) £100,000

(c) £96,000

(d) £18,000.

All contracts were awarded by competitive tender. Expected running costs over the next three years are the staff costs for the FCO's three Internet editors and ancillary staff, amounting to under £130,000 p.a.

The FCO main website has won six major international awards in the last two years.

Atomic Energy Counsellor (Tokyo)

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to appoint an experienced member of an appropriate non-Governmental organisation as atomic energy counsellor to the British Embassy in Tokyo. [115357]

Mr. Hain: None.

Kosovo

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many mass grave sites have been identified in Kosovo; and how many of these have been investigated in detail. [115335]

Mr. Hain: The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) have said that there are in excess of 500 reported grave sites. ICTY have already investigated 195 sites which yielded over 2,000 bodies. Further investigations will begin again shortly with the spring thaw.

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is his estimate of the number of Kosovar Albanians killed by Serb police and armed forces in Kosovo between June 1998 and June 1999. [115334]

Mr. Vaz: Our estimate for the number of Kosovar Albanian civilians killed in Kosovo between June 1998 and June 1999 is at least 10,000.

Iran

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations have been made to the Iranian Government on the sentences on *(a)* Mr. Zabihullah Mahrami, *(b)* Mr. Musa Talibi, *(c)* Mr. Ataollah Hamid Nasirizadeh, *(d)* Mr. Zabihi-Moquaddan, *(e)* Mr. Kashefi-Najafabadi and *(f)* Mr. Manuchehro Khulusi. [115605]

Mr. Hain: We and our EU partners regularly raise with the Iranian authorities our concerns over their treatment of the Baha'i religious minority, particularly cases where the death sentence is involved. Most recently I raised the cases of Mr. Zabihi-Moquaddam, Mr. Kashefi-Najafabadi and Mr. Khulusi with Deputy Foreign Minister Sarmadi during a meeting on 7 March.

Millennium Forum

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will provide assistance to NGOs from less developed countries to enable them to participate in the Millennium Civil Society Forum in May. [115146]

Mr. Hain: To be truly representative, the Millennium Forum needs to secure the participation of civil society groups from developed and developing countries. The

Government have therefore in principle offered financial assistance to the Forum to help fund the attendance of civil society representatives from less developed countries.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Speed Cameras

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many motorists were convicted of speeding in the Greater London area as result of the use of speed cameras during 1999. [114992]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Figures relating to convictions for speeding following the use of speed cameras are not available.

However, there were 8,297 prosecutions taken and 15,323 fixed penalty notices issued for speeding offences as a result of the use of speed cameras in the area covered by the Metropolitan Police in 1997, the latest year for which figures are available. There were none in the City of London.

Metropolitan Police

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the recruitment target is for the Metropolitan Police for the current year. [115033]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) on 13 March 2000, *Official Report,* columns 91–92W.

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the number of entrants to the Metropolitan Police Service on intake start date 13 March. [115758]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis tells me that the information requested is 65.

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many investigations were carried out between 1 April 1998 and 31 March 1999 by the South West Area Major Investigation Pool of the Metropolitan Police; how many of those investigations concerned one or more deaths; how many officers worked in the pool; and what was the total sum available to the pool in that period for overtime payments. [115728]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis has informed me that between 1 April 1998 and 31 March 1999 the South West Area Major Investigation Pool undertook 37 investigations. The number of investigations involving one or more deaths was 31. There were approximately 95 police officers employed by the Pool over the year. The actual cost of overtime worked by police and civil staff was £525,756.

Ms Perham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the rate of absenteeism of Metropolitan police officers for each of the years 1990 to 1999. [115223]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis tells me that records are kept of sickness absences. Figures before 1994–95 are not readily available. Details over the last five financial years are shown in the table:

	Working days lost
1994–95	369,140
1995–96	375,829
1996–97	386,001
1997–98	395,395
1998–99	289,789

Ms Perham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many Metropolitan police officers were serving in specialist units for each of the years from 1990 to 1999. [115224]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis tells me that the numbers of officers other than recruits in training, or in units other than Boroughs and Holding Branch, since 1990 are given in the table:

	Metropolitan police officers employed in some form of specialism
December 1990	7,825.00
December 1991	8,151.00
December 1992	8,551.18
December 1993	7,882.35
December 1994	7,550.39
December 1995	7,654.47
December 1996	7,541.41
December 1997	7,502.65
December 1998	7,420.10
December 1999	7,670.73

Jill Dando Murder Investigation

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much the Jill Dando murder investigation has cost to date broken down into *(a)* salary, *(b)* expenses and *(c)* other costs; and if he will make a statement. [115238]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis has informed me that, as of 16 March 2000, the salary costs of the officers employed on the Jill Dando murder investigation were approximately £1,342,000; expenses were approximately £26,000; and other costs approximately £542,000.

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* full-time and *(b)* part-time police officers and *(c)* civilian police staff are working on the Jill Dando murder investigation. [115360]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis has informed me that, as of 16 March 2000, the investigative team comprised 38 full-time police officers and seven full-time civilian staff. There are no part-time officers on the team.

Prison Places

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the number of prison places required within the prison Service in England and Wales over the next five years. [114994]

Mr. Boateng: The estimate of the number of prison places required over the next five years is determined by the latest prison population projections, which were published on 10 February in Home Office Statistical Bulletin No. 2/00, "Projections of Long Term Trends in the Prison Population to 2007", a copy of which is available in the Library and a summary of which is available on the Home Office website http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/index.htm. The projection provides three variants. The projected average prison population for each of the next five years for the central variant is given in the table.

Under existing plans, the Prison Service will increase planned operational capacity from an average of 67,800 in 1998–99 to 71,400 in 2001–02—the third year of the Comprehensive Spending Review settlement. The number of places to be provided after 2001–02 will be determined as part of the next spending review.

Prison population projections for 1999–2000 to 2004–05

Year	*Central variant*
1999–2000	65,300
2000–01	68,100
2001–02	70,100
2002–03	70,800
2003–04	71,300
2004–05	71,900

Peat Compost

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 22 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 875W, on peat compost, what percentage of the compost used in his Department's estate gardens is peat; when use of peat compost will be phased out on his Department's estates; and if he will make a statement. [115237]

Mr. Straw: No central records are kept of the amount or percentage of peat used on the Department's estate. This information could be obtained only at disproportionate cost. However, the Department's Greening Operations Policy (published in 1998) and its Procurement Manual both state that peat free composts should be used and the current estimate is that if the Home Office makes any use of peat at all this is minimal.

Road Accident Victims

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what discussions he has had with the Association of Chief Police Officers concerning the decision by the police to prevent the release of names and addresses of people injured in road accidents; and if he will make a statement. [115298]

Mr. Charles Clarke: My officials have been in close contact with the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) Media Advisory Group which has been monitoring the effect and operation in practice of the ACPO guidelines "Naming of Victims or Witnesses Involved in Crime, Road and other Incidents". ACPO is currently reviewing the application of the guidance. Initial findings are expected to emerge by Easter.

CS Gas

Mr. Wood: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much was spent by each police force in England and Wales, and in total, on the purchase of CS gas in the year April 1998 to March 1999. [115093]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The quantities of CS incapacitant spray purchased by police forces in England and Wales is a matter for individual Chief Constables. The amount purchased and total expenditure are not collated centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Tariff Setting

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what criteria he uses in reaching decisions on whether to refer decisions on tariffs for prisoners to the Lord Chief Justice for determination. [115415]

Mr. Boateng: The statement made by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary to Parliament on 13 March 2000, *Official Report*, columns 21–24, announced transitional tariff-setting arrangements for those sentenced to be detained during Her Majesty's pleasure. Under those arrangements, detainees whose tariffs have not expired will be invited to make representations to the Lord Chief Justice. Where they do so, he will consider them and make a recommendation to the Secretary of State who will then regard himself as bound to set fresh tariffs no higher than those recommended by the Lord Chief Justice.

The tariff-setting arrangements for adult murderers remain unaltered. The Secretary of State will continue to set their tariffs after considering a report from the trial judge, the judicial recommendations on tariff and any representations from the prisoner on the tariff information disclosed to him.

City Status

Jane Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department which towns with populations of less than 200,000 have been awarded city status since 1970. [115713]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: There have been four grants of city status since 1970. Of these, St. David's and Armagh, both granted city status in 1994 in recognition of their long and venerable Christian traditions, have populations of less than 200,000.

Electoral Procedures

Ms Coffey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what pilot schemes of innovative electoral procedures he has approved for the May local elections. [115903]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I am making orders to enable the following pilot schemes to take place at this May's local elections:

Amber Valley—extension of entitlement to postal vote

Blackburn with Darwen—early voting

Blackpool—early voting

Bolton—all postal ballot

Broxbourne—electronic counting

Chester—early voting
Coventry—early voting
Doncaster—all postal ballot
Eastleigh—extension of entitlement to postal vote
Gateshead—all postal ballot
Gloucester—extension of entitlement to postal vote
Kingston upon Hull—early voting
Knowsley—early voting
Leeds—extended hours of poll
Manchester—early voting
Milton Keynes—extension of entitlement to postal vote
Mole Valley—extended hours of poll
Plymouth—early voting
Redditch—early voting
St. Helens—early voting
Stevenage—all postal ballot
Stoke-on-Trent—early voting
Sunderland—early voting and mobile voting
Swindon—all postal ballot
Wigan—all postal ballot
Windsor and Maidenhead—mobile early voting facility.

In addition, I hope to be able to make orders in relation to the following schemes very shortly:

Bury—electronic voting and counting
Norwich—all postal ballot, mobile polling facility and early voting
Salford—electronic voting and counting
Stratford—electronic voting and counting
Three Rivers—electronic counting
Watford—mobile polling facility, early voting, weekend voting and freepost facility.

Animal Experiments

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what powers are available to him governing the movement of monkeys from holding centres to research establishments; what documentation must be provided to allow such movements; and if he will make a statement; [115731]

(2) what steps he is taking to establish what will happen to monkeys held at the Shamrock Farm once that establishment is closed; and if he will make a statement. [115729]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I am advised that most of the animals were pre-allocated to purchasers on arrival at Shamrock Farm. The remaining animals are in the process of being allocated now. The establishment will remain open and continue to be licensed and regularly inspected until this process has been completed and all of the animals have been removed. I understand that there will be no surplus animals.

The Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 requires both dispatching and receiving establishments in the United Kingdom to keep detailed records of the source and disposal of animals moving from one location to another. The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food regulates the transportation of live animals, including primates. The Welfare of Animals (Transport) Order 1997, which is administered by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, requires that the animals must be fit to travel, carried in a way that does not cause injury or unnecessary suffering, and be accompanied by someone competent to look after their welfare.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many investigations were carried out in 1999 under the Animal Scientific Procedures Act 1986; how many of these revealed that a criminal offence had been committed; and if he will make a statement. [115732]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Animals (Scientific Procedures) Inspectorate carried out one major investigation commissioned by the Secretary of State in 1999. This was the Harlan UK investigation. My reply to my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) on 8 March 2000, *Official Report*, columns 661–62W, reported the outcome of that investigation.

The Inspectorate also investigated a number of other alleged infringements of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 in 1999. Most of these were self-reported. A number of these cases have yet to be completed. A report on infringements, and their outcomes, will be included in the Statistics of Scientific Procedures on Living Animals 1999 to be published in July.

Correspondence

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he intends to reply to the letters to him dated 13 December 1999 and 13 January and 17 February with regard to Mr. M. Ahmad. [115631]

Mrs. Roche: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary wrote to my right hon. Friend today. I am sorry for the delay in replying.

Senator Pinochet

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what approaches he has made to the Spanish Government regarding sharing the costs to the UK taxpayer of the legal action brought against Senator Pinochet. [114048]

Mr. Straw: It would not be appropriate for me to make any such approach. The European Convention on Extradition, to which Spain and the United Kingdom are both parties, requires, under Article 24 of the Convention, that:

> expenses incurred in the territory of the requested Party by reason of extradition shall be borne by that Party.

Costs under the Convention are, therefore, borne on a reciprocal basis. Spain bears the costs of the extradition requests which it receives from the United Kingdom.

Prisoners (Purposeful Activity)

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the average number of hours per week spent by prisoners on purposeful activity in 1990. [115757]

Mr. Boateng: The average number of hours spent by prisoners in purposeful activity in the 1990–91 financial year was 22.3 hours.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Animal Feed

Mr. David Heath: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to introduce a novel feed regulation to ensure the safety and labelling of genetically modified animal feedstuffs. [113764]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* Animal feed legislation is a harmonised area under European law, and it is not therefore possible to introduce national rules on such labelling. We are, however, pressing the EC Commission to bring forward proposals for control within this area as soon as possible. We expect these to be submitted to the Council later this year.

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) what plans the Government have to implement an authorisation process for livestock feed additives under the provisions of Regulation 13 of Article 9K of Council Directive 96/51/EC; [115246]

(2) when he will announce the Government's proposals for the implementation of Regulation 13 of Article 9K of Council Directive 96/51 concerning additives in feedstuffs. [115245]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 20 March 2000]:* The consultation on the Feeding Stuffs Regulations specifically requested comments on the proposed Regulation 13. This was in order that all the implications of a prohibition on livestock additives used outside feeds could be assessed. The Advisory Committee on Animal Feedingstuffs (ACAF) has recently recommended that non-feed uses of additives should be retained but should be subject to controls.

We will be in a position to make a decision on this issue shortly, when we have studied all the responses to the consultation and considered how we may be able to carry forward the ACAF recommendation.

Over-30-Months Scheme

Mr. Randall: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many carcases he estimates will be rendered under the over-30-months scheme in each of the next five years. [114828]

Ms Quin: The Intervention Board's current estimate is that around 600,000 over-30-months scheme (OTMS) animals a year will be rendered.

Mr. Randall: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how tallow produced as a byproduct under the over-30-months scheme is classified by his Department. [114830]

Ms Quin: Tallow from OTMS animals is classified as a waste because of the need for material from such animals to be destroyed. As such it is managed and disposed of in accordance with waste management controls. All disposals to date and those planned for the future involve energy recovery.

Mr. Randall: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the locations where tallow from Over-30-Months Scheme cattle is stored, indicating the tonnage at each site. [114829]

Ms Quin: Tallow produced from the rendering of animals under the Over-30-Months Scheme is being stored at three locations in the UK. As at 29 February 2000, the stock level at each site was:

Store location	*Tonnage as at 29 February 2000*
Canvey Island, Essex	104,229
Eastham, Merseyside	80,001
Bootle, Merseyside	24,121

Mr. Randall: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what was the price *(a)* per carcase and *(b)* per tonnage paid by the Intervention Board in each year since 1996 to each company awarded a contract to render cattle under the Over-30-Months Scheme. [114827]

Ms Quin: Renderers are paid according to the tonnage of OTMS material processed. In 1996 and 1997 a centrally negotiated rate of £105 (£110 in Northern Ireland) per tonne of Over-30-Months Scheme (OTMS) material processed (equivalent to around £52.50 per animal) was paid to contracted renderers. This rate included the cost of collection of raw material from abattoirs, estimated at £10–15 per tonne. Since 1998, and following a competitive tender, the average rate paid for the rendering of OTMS material is as set out in the reply given to the hon. Member on 24 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 11W.

Slaughterhouses

Mr. Hurst: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many premises were licensed as slaughterhouses in England and Wales in the years *(a)* 1979, *(b)* 1989 and *(c)* 1999. [114949]

Ms Quin: The table gives end of year figures for 1979, 1989 and 1999 for red and poultry meat slaughterhouses in England. Prior to 1993, slaughterhouses in England and Wales were not licensed by MAFF, but by local authorities. The England figures for 1979 and 1989 have therefore been derived from records of State Veterinary Service visits during those years and are approximate. For poultry meat slaughterhouses in England, no figures are available prior to 1983.

Year	*Red meat*	*Poultry meat*
1979	975	—
1989	690	107
1999	339	119

The licensing of slaughterhouses in Wales is a devolved matter. The National Assembly for Wales, which now has responsibility for the administration of such matters, has provided the following information in relation to slaughterhouses in Wales. No poultry meat slaughterhouse figures are available for 1979 or 1989:

Year	*Red meat*	*Poultry meat*
1979	79	—
1989	66	—
1999	34	12

DEFENCE

CVR(T) (Transmission Mechanisms)

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what exemptions from procurement rules have been granted to Alvis for the supply of transmission mechanisms for the CVR(T); and for what reasons. [113191]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 6 March 2000]:* Alvis Vehicle Ltd. have been granted no exemptions from procurement rules for the supply of transmission mechanisms for the CVR(T).

Tritium Production

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the unit cost of production of tritium for use by his Department. [114444]

Mr. Hoon: I am withholding details of the unit cost for tritium production under the terms of the Exemption Categories 1 (Defence, Security and International Relations) and 13 (Third party's commercial confidences) of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Service Quarters

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many repossession proceedings his Department initiated in respect of RAF quarters in each of the last three years; how many of those proceedings resulted in a court order for the eviction of the occupants; and if he will make a statement. [114209]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* DHE manage Service Family Accommodation (SFA) as a Tri-Service resource and records are not kept centrally or on a single Service basis. To obtain the information requested, a manual search of every repossession case over the past three years would have to be made and this could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Anti-ballistic Missile Treaty

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make it his policy to prohibit activities by United States authorities on his Department's land, which are contrary to the terms of anti-ballistic missile treaty. [114423]

Mr. Hoon *[holding answer 14 March 2000]:* The interpretation of the anti-ballistic missile treaty is a matter for the parties to that treaty, not for the United Kingdom or any other non-party.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what recent discussions his Department has had with the United States regarding a European-wide ballistic missile defence system. [114326]

Mr. Hoon *[holding answer 14 March 2000]:* We continue to monitor the threats posed by ballistic missiles, and the development of the technology available to counter them. We will continue to consult closely with the US and take account of the work they are doing, to help us take an informed decision on whether to acquire such a capability ourselves in the future.

Strategic Defence Initiative

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will place in the Library a copy of the 1985 Strategic Defence Initiative Memorandum of Understanding. [114325]

Mr. Hoon *[holding answer 14 March 2000]:* No. I am withholding this information under Exemption 1 (Defence, Security and International Relations) of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Scientific Research Projects

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list those scientific research projects on which his Department is collaborating with other European countries. [114328]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 14 March 2000]:* Details of specific projects could be provided only at disproportionate cost but, under bilateral or multilateral arrangements relating to research, my Department has significant numbers of joint programmes or information exchanges with the following countries or organisations:

Country/organisation	*Number of programmes*
France	85
Sweden	26
Netherlands/Norway	25
Germany	17
WEAG[1]/EUCLID[2]	30
GARTEUR[3]	8
Miscellaneous	10

[1] Western European Armaments Group: informal grouping of European Defence Ministers providing policy direction for armaments and research issues

[2] European Cooperation for the Long-term in Defence (EUCLID) based on competition and contracts placed on lead contractors, usually with some industrial funding

[3] European aerospace forum involving UK, France, Germany, Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and Italy

International research collaboration also takes place under the umbrella of NATO. Details are not included as NATO also includes non-European countries.

Many technologies are involved, including:

Energetic Materials and Plasmas

Structural Materials and Structural Effects Analysis

Sensor Systems

Computer Applications and Information Processing

Design Aspects—Platforms and Weapons

Photonic/Optical Materials and Devices

Electronic and Electrical Devices

Signature Control and Signature Reduction

Computing Technologies

Operating Environmental Issues

Communications and CIS Related Technologies

Integration and other Systems Issues

Guidance and Control Systems (Weapons and Platforms)

Propulsion and Powerplants

Electronic Materials

Manufacturing Processes/Design tools/Techniques.

Towers of Excellence

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the scientific areas covered by his Towers of Excellence initiative. [114327]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 14 March 2000]:* As part of our strategy for defence science and technology, the Ministry of Defence has been developing an approach known as the "Towers of Excellence" model. The intention, in partnership with industry, is to identify areas in which technological excellence might best be concentrated and defence-specific technologies enhanced to the level required to produce world class equipment for our Armed Forces.

To do this on a systematic basis requires a comprehensive view of industrial capabilities and aspirations. There must be sufficiently coherent clusters of technology to enable UK industry to continue to be able to bid for a substantial proportion of UK defence equipment. These towers must therefore align with industry's own plans. We expect this alignment to be informed by the defence industries' own technology strategy which they have prepared to complement that of MOD.

Industry and MOD have agreed on a process for bringing their respective strategies together and defining priorities for constructing technological "towers of excellence" within available resources. Work is likely to continue through to the end of 2000.

RN Vessels

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans his Department has for the use of HMS Birmingham; and if he will make a statement. [114767]

Dr. Moonie: HMS Birmingham is no longer operational and is currently awaiting disposal.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans there are to fit further Royal Navy ships with Sonar 2087; and if he will make a statement. [114803]

Dr. Moonie: We plan to fit Sonar 2087 to all Type 23 frigates. In the longer term it might also be a contender for fitment to the Future Surface Combatant.

Transport Aircraft

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the sum invoiced to his Department by Air Foyle Ltd. for the charter of an Air Foyle Antonov 124–100 aircraft to Transport four Royal Air Force Puma helicopters from RAF Brize Norton to South African Air Force Base Heudspruit on Friday 3 March. [114744]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 15 March 2000]:* I am withholding details of the sum invoiced to the MOD by Air Foyle Ltd. for the charter of an Antonov 124–100 under Exemption 13 (Third party's commercial confidences) of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the maximum number of RAF Puma helicopters which can be carried in *(a)* Hercules C130K, *(b)* Hercules C130J, *(c)* Boeing C17 and *(d)* Antonov 124–100 transport aircraft; and how many refuelling stops each aircraft requires, carrying its respective maximum complements of Puma helicopters, on a flight from RAF Brize Norton to South African Air Force Base Heudspruit. [114745]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 15 March 2000]:* The Hercules C130K Mk1 cannot carry the Puma helicopter. Both the Hercules C130K Mk3 and the C130J can carry one Puma helicopter and would normally require three en-route stops to complete the flight from Brize Norton to SAAF Base Heudspruit.

According to information publicly available the Boeing C17 is capable of carrying three Puma helicopters and would normally require two en-route stops to complete the flight.

The AN124–100 is capable of carrying four Puma helicopters and would normally require two en-route stops to complete the flight.

The degree to which the Puma is dismantled dictates whether or not the maximum number of airframes can be loaded into transport aircraft. The requirement for en-route stops can vary according to prevailing weather conditions.

Railtrack (Training)

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the cost of the facilities being offered to Railtrack for training by his Department; what is the length of time for the course; where it is taking place; and what facilities exist for re-charging Railtrack for these facilities. [115085]

Mr. Spellar: The Army has provided Railtrack with limited assistance in the form of presentations and involvement in a Railtrack seminar. Discussions have also been held at working level with the company on the possible provision of Logistic Planning Workshops by the Royal Logistics Corps. The presentations and attendance have lasted around two days and Railtrack have paid the full costs of this help. Any further assistance provided will be charged for at appropriate rates.

Peat Compost

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 10 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 828W, on peat compost, when his officials began their assessment of the full impact of phasing out the use of peat on his Department's estate; and if he will make a statement. [115234]

Dr. Moonie: My officials began their formal assessment on 7 February 2000.

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer on 10 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 828W, on peat compost, if he will list all his Department's estate gardens; and if he will make a statement. [115235]

Dr. Moonie: This information is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Gulf War Illnesses

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what experts from outside the Department he

consulted in preparing rebuttal arguments relating to the views of Professor Hooper at the meeting of the Independent Panel on Gulf War Illnesses on 29 March 1999; if he will place copies of the Government's evidence to the Panel in the Library; and if he will make a statement. [115540]

Mr. Spellar: No outside experts were consulted. The Panel is briefed on the current state of interactions research at its meetings and has therefore received copies of MOD papers on Gulf veterans' illnesses, copies of which are already in the Library of the House.

Procurement

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he will decide on the contracts for the *(a)* beyond visual range air-to-air missile and *(b)* future transport aircraft. [115128]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 17 March 2000]:* My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence hopes to announce decisions on both of these projects in the next few weeks.

British Commonwealth Occupation Force

Mr. David Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to issue a campaign medal to those who served in the British Commonwealth Occupation Force in Japan in the years 1945 to 1948; and if he will make a statement. [115593]

Dr. Moonie: There are no plans to institute a medal for service in the British Commonwealth Occupation Force in Japan between 1945 and 1948. The Committee on the Grant of Honours, Decorations and Medals, which advises the Sovereign on all matters relating to the institution of medals, has a longstanding policy that it will not consider cases for the retrospective award of medals for service given many years ago.

Strategic Export Controls

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to publish the numbers of weapons and items of equipment being exported from the United Kingdom in the next Annual report on Strategic Export Controls on a country by country basis; and if he will make a statement. [115425]

Mr. Hoon: The Government will continue publishing details of weapons and equipment exported in the Annual Report on Strategic Export Controls using information obtained from the United Nations Conventional Arms Register and HM Customs and Excise. The Government are committed to strengthening the Arms Register and also to achieving greater international transparency in the sales overseas of major defence systems. Information relating to the two previous years is contained in Part III of the 1997 and 1998 Reports, copies of which are available in the Library of the House. It is planned to publish the 1999 Report later this year.

Service Personnel (Trade Unions)

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what discussion he has had with other NATO countries about allowing members of the armed services to become members of trade unions; and if he will make a statement. [115145]

Mr. Spellar: There have been no discussions with other NATO countries about this issue. Due to the unique nature of Service life it is Ministry of Defence policy not to have a Service trade union, or federation, for members of the Armed Forces. There are no plans for change.

The Ministry of Defence has agreements with a number of major trade unions, as well as concessions with professional associations, whereby Service personnel may be recognised as eligible for membership. No restrictions are placed on attendance at meetings of civilian trade unions, professional associations, or courses of instruction run by them intended to enhance trade skills and professional knowledge, provided Service uniform is not worn, Service duties are not impeded and no action is taken which would bring the Services into disrepute. It is important that the Armed Forces maintain a position of political neutrality. Service personnel may not therefore participate in industrial action, or any form of political activity organised by a civilian trade union, or professional organisation, to which they belong.

Porton Down (Animals)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what procedures have been put in place to ensure that overbreeding of animals at Porton Down is minimized; and if he will make a statement. [115272]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Sir John Chisholm to Mr. Norman Baker, dated 21 March 2000:

I am replying to your parliamentary question about the animal breeding programmes at Porton Down since the laboratories are part of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency (DERA).

As I explained in my letter to you on 19 January 1998 the animal species currently bred at Porton Down are mice, rats, marmosets, rhesus monkeys and a few pigs. Apart from the unusual circumstances arising in 1994/95, when 94 marmosets had to be culled, there has been no excess breeding of non-human primates. Any surplus pigs, as I explained previously, are sent to market.

As you know, the independent Animal Welfare Advisory Committee (AWAC) which reviews animal care and welfare arrangements within DERA addressed the issue of animal breeding during the period of its last report (31 October 1998 - 1 November 1999). In particular, the breeding of mice and rats was considered as this leads to the largest surplus. The Porton strain of mice and rats has been used for many years and the outcome of current research programmes relies on the accumulated background data derived from these strains. For this reason, the preferred option is to continue the rodent breeding programme at Porton. The alternative would be to purchase mice and rats from a supplier, which would mean carrying out additional experiments to produce base line data for the different strain.

The scientists at Porton are, of course, mindful of the need to minimise overbreeding in this area. Porton maintains a small number of breeding pairs of mice and rats to supply ongoing research programmes. The number of breeding pairs in the colony is adjusted to meet the estimated demand of the research programmes. Research programmes, however, are not entirely predictable and on occasions there may be an urgent need for animals. Estimates for animal use

are regularly reviewed. To an extent research programmes are adjusted either by bringing forward an experiment to use a surplus or, in the case of a shortage, utilising smaller groups over a longer period or by widening the weight range where possible.

The Committee was satisfied overall that the animals bred at Porton are well cared for and only culled when necessary. The AWAC report also pointed out that all culled rodents are donated to wildlife sanctuaries to feed wild birds and so are not wasted.

I hope that this is helpful.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Lawyers (Intimidation)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what representations he has received from the Law Society and Bar Council for Northern Ireland concerning allegations of intimidation of lawyers; what surveys or research have been undertaken to determine the extent of intimidation; what assessment he has made of *(a)* under-reporting of intimidation and *(b)* malicious or unfounded allegations; and if he will commission a study to determine the extent of intimidation and make recommendations. [111946]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 2 March 2000]:* The current Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has received no representations from the Law Society or the Bar Council for Northern Ireland concerning allegations of intimidation of lawyers.

On surveys and research, the Government are aware that the Independent Commission for Police Complaints undertook a survey into the specific area of complaints relating to allegations of improper conduct by police officers towards, or in respect of, solicitors. Furthermore, the Commission monitors and supervises all complaints of intimidation of lawyers or any attempts to undermine their professional integrity. I am not aware of other survey or research work.

On under-reporting, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Independence of Judges and Lawyers in his March 1998 report concluded that there had been under-reporting, again in relation to police complaints. I note that the Special Rapporteur recommended that solicitors should lodge formal complaints and that he welcomed the steps taken by the Law Society to introduce a complaints procedure for solicitors.

Given that there have been no representations by the Law Society or Bar Council, and that there are procedures for investigation of allegations (including the Law Society's own) and these are to be enhanced in respect of complaints about police conduct when the Police Ombudsman is introduced later this year, the Government are not currently persuaded that they should commission a study.

Mrs. Rosemary Nelson

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, pursuant to his reply of 19 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 445W, if he will set out the Government's response to the specific concerns about Mrs. Nelson's safety raised by the UN Special Rapporteur in his 1998 report. [113863]

Mr. Ingram: The United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Independence of Judges and Lawyers referred in his March 1998 Report to complaints made by Mrs. Nelson. The Government had already informed the Special Rapporteur that the complaints by, and on behalf of, Mrs. Nelson were under investigation, under the supervision of the Independent Commission for Police Complaints.

In addition, the Government had already sought, in February 1998, an assessment from the police on Mrs. Nelson's security. The RUC determined that they had no intelligence to substantiate a specific threat to Mrs. Nelson.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, pursuant to his answer of 24 January 2000, *Official Report*, columns 5–6W, if he will place in the Library a copy of the assessments of Mrs. Rosemary Nelson's security made by the RUC in February and August 1998. [113472]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 10 March 2000]:* No. The assessments are confidential and are not made public. My reply on 24 January 2000, *Official Report*, columns 5–6W, however, indicated the outcome of the Chief Constable's threat assessments on Mrs. Nelson.

Road Arches

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many applications were made under Article 73 of the Roads (NI) Order 1993 for permission to erect arches over roadways between 16 June and 11 July 1999; if he will list those applications *(a)* granted and *(b)* refused; of those granted, what level of public liability insurance against claims in respect of injury was required in each case; how many arches were erected where no application was made; and how many prosecutions were brought for breach of Article 73 of the Roads (NI) Order 1993 during 1999. [115277]

Mr. George Howarth: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated to the Roads Service under its Chief Executive Mr. C. James. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from C. James to Mr. Jeremy Corbyn, dated 21 March 2000:

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has asked me to respond to your recently tabled Parliamentary Question about arches over roads.

Between 16 June 1999 and 11 July 1999, the Department's Roads Service received 4 applications under Article 73 of the Roads (NI) Order 1993 for consent to erect arches over roads. In each case, consent was given and the applicant was required to have public liability insurance of £5M. These applications were in respect of arches over the following roads:

Market Square, Lisburn, County Antrim;

North Street, Upper Ballinderry, Lisburn, County Antrim;

Bridge Street, Edenderry, Portadown, County Armagh; and

Garvaghy Road, Portadown, County Armagh.

At least a further 100 arches were erected over public roads where no applications for consent under Article 73 had been made. No prosecutions were brought for breaches of Article 73 during 1999.

I hope this information is helpful.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

BBC Film Projects

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport which BBC film projects have been awarded National Lottery funding; to what value in each case; and on what conditions. [114350]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* There have been no National Lottery awards to the BBC for film production. However, the BBC has co-financed with The Arts Councils of England and Wales, and with other financiers, the films on the following list which shows the amount of National Lottery money received.

Standard conditions for film production awards are published in the guidelines for applicants, a copy of which has been placed in the Library of the House. Conditions specific to a particular project are a commercial matter and regarded as confidential for that reason.

Project	*Award amount (£)*	*Distributing body*
Features		
Ratcatcher	615,000	Arts Council of England
The Darkest Light	708,000	Arts Council of England
The Last Yellow	550,000	Arts Council of England
A Room for Romeo Brass	850,000	Arts Council of England
Among Giants	665,000	Arts Council of England
Divorcing Jack	800,000	Arts Council of England
Hideous Kinky	1,070,000	Arts Council of England
Love is the Devil	364,551	Arts Council of England
Speak Like a Child	433,896	Arts Council of England
The Governess	907,075	Arts Council of England
Frantz Fanon	84,000	Arts Council of England
Love and Death on Long Island	750,000	Arts Council of England
Metroland	865,000	Arts Council of England
My Son the Fanatic	750,000	Arts Council of England
Peggy Su!	500,000	Arts Council of England
Photographing Fairies	890,000	Arts Council of England
Sixth Happiness	469,727	Arts Council of England
The Revengers Comedies	950,000	Arts Council of England
Wilde	1,500,000	Arts Council of England
Pandaemonium	655,094	Arts Council of England
Five Seconds to Spare	1,009,500	Arts Council of England
One of the Hollywood Ten	450,000	Arts Council of Wales
Y Mabinogi	207,137	Arts Council of Wales
Shorts		
The Night Frontier	18,635	Arts Council of England
The Albatross	29,000	Arts Council of England
The Queen's Monastery	35,000	Arts Council of England

Tourism (North Yorkshire)

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has to promote tourism in North Yorkshire. [114945]

Janet Anderson: The Yorkshire Tourist Board (YTB) will receive £367,000 for tourism projects in the region in 2000–01 from the English Tourism Council—an increase of 26 per cent. on the current year. These projects include development of the Yorkshire brand and sub-regional brands and developing training that is customised to meet customer needs, which will help promote tourism throughout Yorkshire. North Yorkshire, in common with all parts of England, also benefits from the promotion work of the British Tourist Authority (BTA), which promotes Britain as a visitor destination in overseas markets. The BTA is receiving £36 million from my Department this year.

The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy estimates that local authority expenditure on tourism promotion in North Yorkshire in 1997–98 was £1.775 million. In addition, tourism in Yorkshire has also benefited, both directly and indirectly, from the National Lottery, (649 projects in the country have received awards totalling £44,710,497 according to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport's National Lottery Awards Database which uses information supplied by the distributing bodies.

Millennium Dome

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has to alter the ticketing arrangements for the Millennium Dome; and what effect the changes will have on the *(a)* 12 million visitor target and *(b)* anticipated income stream. [114542]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 14 March 2000]:* From 1 April, the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) is introducing extended opening times. Visitors can enjoy the Dome from 09.00 to 20.00 on Sundays to Thursdays, and from 09.00 to 23.00 on Fridays, Saturdays, Bank Holidays and during school holidays and the peak summer periods—providing a maximum potential visit time of 14 hours.

The Government are extremely encouraged by the continuing upward trend in visitor numbers to the Dome. Ten million paying visitors will enable the Company to deliver a break even operating budget. However NMEC's target remains at 12 million.

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many people from North Yorkshire have bought tickets to visit the Millennium Dome in January and February 2000. [111406]

Janet Anderson: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave the hon. Member for West Suffolk (Mr. Spring) on 17 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 368W. NMEC are unable to provide a regional break down of ticket sales.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport who owns the copyright associated with each of the exhibits in the Millennium Dome. [109727]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 11 February 2000]:* The contractual terms of each exhibit vary reflecting the different nature and type of exhibit—both in terms of structure and content. Similarly arrangements regarding copyright and intellectual property rights vary. As is normal practice, these contracts contain confidentiality clauses applicable to both parties. NMEC considers that publication of details, including ownership of copyright, from individual contracts runs the risk of adversely impacting on its relationships with its designers and, therefore, on its ability to operate in an effective and commercial manner.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the payments overdue to zone designers at the Millennium Dome at 7 February. [109959]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 14 February 2000]:* The policy of the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) is to pay suppliers within the terms of the contractual arrangements agreed, which is usually 30 days from the day of the invoice, subject to resolution of any queries on the invoice within the 20 day period. As at 7 February, a total of £1.8 million of invoices registered in NMEC's Finance Department remained the subject of on-going discussion with zone designers outside the 30 day period; a total of £2.1 million overdue on the 30 day basis at 7 February—and following resolution of queries where they arose—was released for payment on 14 February.

Athletics

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions he has had with Sport England concerning the availability of £60 million to fund world-class athletics facilities. [115734]

Mr. Chris Smith: We have established the principle with Sport England that, subject to the details being worked out a viable application coming forward, the £20 million coming back from the Football Association and up to £40 million which will not now be required for the conversion of Wembley may be available to fund world-class athletics facilities.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport which sites are still under consideration as possible venues for the 2005 world athletics championships. [115735]

Mr. Chris Smith: Sport England and UK athletics are currently considering four London locations—Crystal Palace, Hillingdon, Lee Valley (Hackney Wick/Pickett's Lock) and Twickenham.

Mr. Faber: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, pursuant to his answer of 14 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 155W, concerning a national athletic stadium, if his Department has discussed with Manchester City Council its proposal for a 18,000 to 20,000 seat permanent athletics stadium to be built on the UKSI site adjacent to the City of Manchester Stadium. [115755]

Kate Hoey: As explained in the written reply of 14 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 155W, officials from my Department and Sport England have discussed proposals for holding the 2005 World Athletics Championships in Manchester with the Chief Executive of Manchester City Council. These discussions included a presentation by Manchester on 21 January at Sport England's offices to officials from UK Athletics, Sport England and DCMS. One of the options discussed during that meeting was the possibility of a permanent national athletics facility on the UKSI site adjacent to the City of Manchester Stadium. However, as my reply of 14 March explained, the decision by UK Athletics to submit a London bid for the 2005 World Athletics Championship and the British Olympic Association confirming that it will only consider a London based Olympic bid has effectively ruled out Manchester as a venue for staging these major events.

Wembley Stadium

Mr. Faber: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, pursuant to his answer of 13 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 13W, what amendments to the Lottery Funding Agreement relating to Wembley National Stadium were discussed at his meeting with Mr. Ken Bates on 22 December 1999. [115230]

Mr. Chris Smith: None.

Regional Cultural Consortiums

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, pursuant to his answer of 15 March 2000, *Official Report*, columns 245–50W, if he will list political affiliations, where known, of the members of each regional cultural consortium. [115725]

Mr. Chris Smith: Apart from the Chairs, who are appointed by the Secretary of State, members of the Consortiums are appointed from within each region by a variety of nominating bodies. Additional individual members may be co-opted. Where political affiliation is known—which is mainly where representatives are drawn from local Government—it is as follows:

Member	*Nominating body*	
East of England		
Jeremy Clover	Local Government	Con
Irene Macdonald	Local Government	Lab
Anthony Rowlands	Local Government	Lib Dem
Jacqualine Russell	Regional Development Agency	Lab
Wendy Silby	Local Government	Con
Hazel Simmons	Local Government	Lab
East Midlands		
Sandra Barnes	Local Government	Con
Ted Cassidy	Regional Development Agency	Lab
Ian Croft	Local Government	Con
John Dickie	Local Government	Lab
Ian Maclennan	Local Government	Lab
Fiona Martin	Local Government	Lib Dem
Ned Newitt	Local Government	Lab
Christine Rose	Local Government	Lab
North East		
George Gill	DCMS	Lab
John Burton	Local Government	Lab
Aileen Handy	Local Government	Lab
Dorothy Long	Local Government	Lab
Winnie Lowes	Local Government	Lab
Bob Pendlebury	Regional Tourist Board	Lab
Ione Rippeth	Local Government	Lib Dem
Don Robson	Regional Sports Board	Lab
North West		
John Commons	Local Government	Lib Dem
Guy Harkin	Local Government	Lab
Pam Hayward	Area Museums Council	Lab
Steven Matthews	Local Government	Lab
Graham Morgan	Local Government	Lab
David Newton	North West Sport	Lab
Peter Pimbley	Local Government	Con
Kath Reade	Regional Development Agency	Lab
Kath Robinson	Local Government	Lab
South East		
Mary Baldwin	Local Government	Lib Dem
Freddie Emery-Wallis	Local Government	Con
Cheryl Hall	Local Government	Lab
Jon Hartley	Local Government	Lab
Heather Hawker	Local Government	Con
Roger Thomas	Regional Tourist Board	Con
South West		
Robin Bush	Local Government	Lib Dem
Andrew May	Local Government	Lab
Pat Roberts	Regional Tourist Board	Lab
Norman Thompson	Local Government	Con
Viv Vines	Regional Sports Board	Con

Member	Nominating body	
West Midlands		
Baroness Crawley	DCMS	Lab
Jeff Carpenter	Area Museums Council	Lab
Stephen Clee	Local Government	Con
Maureen Compton	Local Government	Lab
Phillip Davis	English Heritage	Lab
Elizabeth Edmonsdon	Local Government	Lab
John Fletcher	Local Government	Lab
Mike Freeman	Local Government	Lab
Jean Holder	Local Government	Lib Dem
Sir William Lawrence	Regional Tourist Board	Con
Carl Rice	Local Government	Lab
Gwyn Roberts	Local Government	Lab
Yorkshire		
Chirs Heinitz	DCMS	Lab
David Ashton	Local Government	Con
Tina Davey	Local Government	Lab
David Gemmell	Regional Tourist Board	Lab
Sue Knowles	Local Government	Lab
Reg Littleboy	Library and Information	Lab
Pat Marsh	Local Government	Lib Dem
Christopher Price	Regional Arts Board	Lab
Peter Price	Regional Sports Board	Lab
Mike Pye	Area Museums Council	Lab
Alan Smith	Local Government	Lab

Direct Funding

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions his Department has held with representatives of the national institutions which receive direct funding from his Department over proposals to replace this direct funding arrangement; and if he will make a statement. [115524]

Mr. Chris Smith: There are no proposals to change the funding relationship between my Department and those national institutions which receive direct funding.

Free Television Licences (Morecambe and Lunesdale)

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many pensioners in Morecambe and Lunesdale will benefit from free television licences for those persons aged over 75 years. [115746]

Janet Anderson: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave to my right hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mr. Jones) on 2 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 350W.

TREASURY

Aviation Fuel

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the Government's policy is on the European Commission's proposals to compel member states to impose a tax on aviation fuel. [115288]

Mr. Timms: There are no such proposals.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the ECOFIN meeting of 13 March; and what discussions took place concerning taxation of aviation fuel. [115287]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries (Mr. Brown) on 17 March 2000, *Official Report*, columns 352–53W.

Government Borrowing

Mrs. Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will give details of the Government's borrowing programme in 2000–01. [115904]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The main details of the Government's borrowing programme are set out in Annexe B of the Financial Statement and Budget Report, published today. The financing remits for 2000–01 (including the Exchequer Cash Management remit) set by the Government for the Debt Management Office and for National Savings are also published today, in the 2000–01 Debt Management Report. Copies of the Report have been placed in the Libraries of the House. The Report sets out the Government's debt management policy, reviews the Government's borrowing programme in 1999–2000, and provides details of the Government's borrowing programme in 2000–01.

Small and Medium Enterprises

Mr. Chope: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when the report commissioned from Lord Trotman into finance for small and medium enterprises is to be published. [114443]

Mr. Timms: This report was published by the Treasury today. Copies are available in the Library.

WALES

Tourism

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what plans he has to discuss with the First Secretary the prospects of the tourist industry in Wales; and if he will make a statement. [115201]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I meet the First Secretary regularly and we discuss a range of issues. I am very aware of the importance of the tourist industry to the Welsh economy and was pleased to note that the National Assembly's Economic Development Committee recently endorsed the new tourism strategy of the Wales Tourist Board.

Welsh Language Road Signs

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will estimate the cost to public funds of the erection of Welsh language road signs in Wales for each of the years 1990 to 1999. [113301]

Mr. Hanson: Expenditure on road signs is incurred by a number of public bodies in Wales and information on costs from 1990 to 30 June 1999 is not held centrally.

On 1 July 1999 responsibility for this matter transferred to the National Assembly for Wales.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Higher Education (Student Awards)

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list areas where local education authorities currently may exercise discretion in connection with higher education student awards. [115142]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 20 March 2000]:* Under the Education (Student Support) Regulations 1999, local education authorities (LEAs) are able to exercise discretion in three broad areas: eligibility for support, assessment of income and payment of support.

LEA discretion when assessing a student's eligibility for support is limited to specific circumstances relating to: the time limits for applying for support and its duration; the information required to assess eligibility; whether a student meets the residence conditions; whether support may be transferred to another course; and whether a student is unfitted to receive support. LEAs also have discretion in determining whether students meet certain conditions for receiving particular elements of support. There is discretion in determining eligibility for fee support when students have previously attended a higher education course or are repeating part of a course. There are specific circumstances in which LEAs have discretion when determining: eligibility for and the amount of disabled students allowances; the amount of care leavers grant for which a student is eligible; the income of dependants; and the maximum student load for which a student is eligible.

There are also circumstances in which LEAs are able to exercise discretion in determining the residual income of the student, the student's parent or the student's spouse relating to: the financial year of assessment; treatment of a student's income when payments are made as a result of previous obligations incurred; and determining which parent's income to assess when the parents do not live together. LEAs also have discretion to pay support for periods when students are absent from a course and in determining the method of recovering overpayments of support.

Agricultural Education

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to facilitate rationalisation of provision for agricultural education at higher and further levels to reflect changing economic conditions in that industry. [115760]

Mr. Wicks: LANTRA, the National Training Organisation for the land based industries, has recently carried out a Labour Market Information and Skills Foresight Survey covering the land-based industries. This exercise provides the foundation for the forthcoming Workforce Development Plan to meet the skill and educational needs of the land-based industries, including agriculture, for the short and medium term. LANTRA is also consulting the agricultural industry on the viability and value of vocational qualifications. A project is underway to revise standards of competence within the land based sector to reduce duplication and increase the relevance of vocational qualifications. The work is due to be completed by 31 December 2001.

For higher education, it is for individual institutions to make their own decisions about the scope of agricultural provision.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the decision by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority to end the setting of GCSEs in agriculture after 2002. [114750]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 15 March 2000]:* The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) is working with the awarding bodies to develop advice on the list of GCSE titles to be offered from 2001, QCA will consult widely as part of this exercise, and no decisions have been reached at this stage. There is a wide range of vocationally-related qualifications in agriculture and horticulture already available, including GNVQs in land and environment. We shall ensure that there continues to be an appropriate range of such qualifications in the future for young people.

E-University

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on progress in developing the e-university concept. [115766]

Mr. Wicks: The Higher Education Funding Council for England has responsibility for the development of the e-Universities project. It is intended to harness expertise in the public and private sectors to exploit information and communication technology and provide novel means of teaching and learning. To date, HEFCE has:

- established a Steering Group to commission studies to the concept and give practical and detailed advice on options for implementation;
- approved and invited tenders for an initial feasibility study to flesh out the e-Universities concept, to begin by the end of February and report by summer;
- commissioned a study into the market for virtual distance learning.

Disabled Students

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if special arrangements are made to equalise the level of support for disabled students who have to cross from one part of the United Kingdom to another to study on account of their disability. [115768]

Mr. Wicks: Currently, disabled students' allowances (DSAs) are available to all eligible students across the United Kingdom on the same basis. Additional travel costs, incurred by reason of a student's disability, are covered by the DSAs. Students with disabilities studying at least 50 per cent. of a full-time course in Scotland are currently eligible for DSAs. From September 2000, part-time disabled students in England, Wales and Northern Ireland will also be eligible for DSAs.

Teaching (Quality Assurance)

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what, in relation to the current assessment of academic teaching quality is *(a)* the annual cost to public funds in each of the last three years, *(b)* the estimated cost of compliance by the higher education sector and *(c)* the assessed benefits of the process. [115767]

Mr. Wicks: The Higher Education Funding Council for England has a statutory responsibility under the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 for assessing the quality of the provision which it funds. Quality assessment/ subject reviews are carried out under contract between HEFCE and QAA, the cost of which for the last three years is:

	£ million
1997–98 (HEFCE and DENI)	4.1
1998–99 (HEFCE only)	4.2
1999–2000 (HEFCE only)	5.6

The cost of compliance by the HE sector is not collected centrally.

Quality assurance provides: accountability for the use of public funds; public information on the purpose and quality of provision to prospective students and other stakeholders; encouragement to improve; and opportunities for sharing best practice across the sector.

Free School Meals

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list *(a)* the percentage of pupils entitled to free school meals in each of the grammar schools in England and *(b)* the average percentage of pupils entitled to free school meals in each local education authority where there are one or more grammar schools. [115505]

Ms Estelle Morris: Information on free school meals for individual schools is not published centrally.

The available information on school meals is shown in the table.

Percentage of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals in maintained secondary schools [1] in those local education authorities with one or more selective grammar schools, January 1999

	Percentage of pupils known to be eligible for free schools meals
England	16.9
Barnet	15.9
Bexley	14.1
Bromley	13.0
Enfield	21.4
Kingston-upon-Thames	8.8
Redbridge	17.7
Sutton	8.3
Birmingham	33.6
Walsall	18.7
Wolverhampton	21.6
Liverpool	37.6
Wirral	26.6
Trafford	19.0
Calderdale	17.1
Kirklees	18.6
North Yorkshire	6.9
Buckinghamshire	7.4
Poole	8.2
Bournemouth	11.8
Stoke on Trent	24.9
Wiltshire	6.9
Reading	13.5
Slough	16.5
Devon	10.1
Plymouth	15.4
Torbay	16.2
Essex	11.0
Southend-on-Sea	15.5
Kent	12.3
Medway	11.8
Lancashire	17.3
Telford and Wrekin	19.1
Cumbria	13.1
Gloucestershire	8.2
Lincolnshire	8.7
Warwickshire	8.3

[1] Includes selective grammar schools

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what was the average percentage of pupils entitled to free school meals in the *(a)* 100 and *(b)* 200 schools with the (i) highest and (ii) lowest proportion of pupils achieving five grade A*–C passes at GCSE in the last year for which figures are available. [115533]

Ms Estelle Morris: The proportions of pupils

"known to be eligible for free school meals"

averaged over the 100 maintained, mainstream secondary schools with the highest, and lowest, percentages of 15 year old pupils achieving five or more GCSE/GNVQ grades A*-C in 1999 were two and 44 per cent. respectively.

The proportions of pupils

"known to be eligible for free school meals"

averaged over the 200 maintained, mainstream secondary schools with the highest, and lowest, percentages of 15 year old pupils achieving five or more GCSE/GNVQ grades A*-C in 1999 were 3 per cent. and 42 per cent. respectively.

School Standards

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) in how many secondary schools fewer than 15 per cent. of pupils achieved five A*-C grades at GCSE in 1999; [115291]

(2) what was the average improvement in science at Key Stage 2 in *(a)* schools in education action zones and *(b)* all schools between 1998 and 1999; [115293]

(3) what proportion of pupils in schools in education action zones obtained five A*-C grade GCSEs in *(a)* 1998 and *(b)* 1999; [115295]

(4) how many pupils were excluded from schools in education action zones, expressed as a proportion of the number of pupils on roll, in *(a)* 1998 and *(b)* 1999; [115296]

(5) what was the rate of truancy of pupils in schools in education action zones, expressed as a proportion of the number of pupils on roll, in *(a)* 1998 and *(b)* 1999. [115297]

Ms Estelle Morris: There were 126 secondary schools in England where fewer than 15 per cent. of pupils achieved five A*-C grades at GCSE/GNVQ in 1999. The average improvement, between 1998 and 1999 in the percentage of pupils achieving Level 4+ in KS2 science test was, *(a)* 12 percentage points in schools in those education action zones which began in 1998–99, and *(b)* 10 percentage points in all maintained mainstream schools in England.

The percentage of pupils who attained 5 A*–C GCSE/GNVQs in schools in those education action zones which began in 1998–99 was 20 per cent. in 1998 and 23 per cent. in 1999.

The permanent exclusion rate for schools in Education Action Zones was 0.25 per cent. in 1997–98. (This is the latest year for which data are available. Exclusion data for 1998–99 from the 2000 Schools' Census will be published in June).

The percentage of half days missed by pupils due to unauthorised absence in schools in Education Action Zones was *(a)* in 1997–98, 1.8 per cent. and *(b)* in 1998–99, 1.7 per cent.

City Technology Colleges

Mr. Kenneth Clarke: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what differences there will be in legal status and powers between his proposed new academies and existing city technology colleges; and if he will facilitate the creation of more city technology colleges. [115727]

Ms Estelle Morris: Details of the legal arrangements for city academies are under consideration. We expect academies to be established under the city technology college (CTC) legislation. However, there will be a different approach to funding, curriculum and the diversity of promoters.

Computers

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proportion of the adult population is computer-literate to at least basic level; and what was the annual percentage increase in that figure over the last three years. [115765]

Mr. Wicks: A survey carried out in November 1999 showed that 44 per cent. of the adult population in Britain consider themselves to be very or fairly computer literate. 36 per cent. consider themselves to be not at all computer literate. The Department has not collected this information on an annual basis. Therefore no information can be given regarding increases in the overall level of computer literacy.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list *(a)* the areas in which he has approved pilot projects for Computers within Reach and *(b)* the criteria for such projects; and what estimate he has made of the number of people who will benefit from such projects. [115375]

Mr. Wills: The selection of computer suppliers for the Computers within Reach initiative is currently underway, and includes assessment of proposals submitted in response to the prospectus published in autumn 1999 and follow-up visits to shortlisted suppliers. The successful suppliers, with the geographical areas which they intend to cover, will be published later this spring. In selecting computer suppliers the following criteria are being taken into account:

- evidence of status, financial stability and accountability
- ability to provide quality reconditioned or unsold equipment in sufficient quantities for geographical coverage
- in the case of reconditioning, evidence of a reconditioning track record and the ability to ensure reconditioning to relevant functional and technical standards
- ability to guarantee quality control, safety and software licence protection
- ability to ensure a complete delivery service
- evidence of a plan for set-up and basic training on delivery
- evidence of links with local charities and communities in delivering reconditioned or remaindered computers to low income learners and families learners
- firm proposals for the future continuation of the project once DfEE funding ceases and for other sources of funding (which should be named).

We anticipate that up to 100,000 people could benefit from the project.

Education Action Zones

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the businesses involved in the leadership of each education action zone. [115294]

Ms Estelle Morris: Each EAZ is led by a forum made up of the main partners in the zone. In all cases this includes business partners.

The following EAZ forums are chaired by business people: Barnsley (Non-Executive Director for a number of local companies), Barrow (Furness Building Society), Bedford (Chamber of Commerce), Blackburn and Darwen (MTM Associates), Brighton (KPMG), Bristol (HSBC), Corby (Grant Thornton), Dingle, Granby and Toxteth (ICI), Easington and Seaham (Seaward Electronics), East Cleveland (Cleveland Potash Mining), Grimsby (Tioxide UK), Hastings and St. Leonards (Marshall Tufflex), Lambeth (Shell), North East Sheffield (Yorkshire Water), Salford and Trafford (Kellogs), Wednesbury (Spring), Weston-super-Mare (Ron Fowler Communications), Wigan (North West Water), Wythenshawe (Manchester Airport). Some of the new EAZs have not yet elected their Chair.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many education action zones have attracted maximum matched funding from his Department as a result of funds raised from business or other partners. [115292]

Ms Estelle Morris: Direct pound for pound match funding of private sector sponsorship was introduced for the second round of EAZs. We will be in a position to provide a detailed statement when they submit their audited financial accounts.

Education Services (Islington)

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will place in the Library

a copy of the contract between Islington Local Education Authority and Cambridge Education Associates for the provision of education services. [115637]

Ms Estelle Morris: The final contract between Islington Local Education Authority and Cambridge Education Associates is commercial in confidence. However, I have already placed in the Library the "Invitation to Negotiate" that was issued to selected bidders in August. This includes a draft contract, proposed performance standards and their link to the payment mechanism and a description of the services to be outsourced.

Fresh Start Schools

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many Fresh Start schools *(a)* have increased pupil numbers and *(b)* are oversubscribed. [115290]

Ms Estelle Morris: The official school census is undertaken in January of each year and we do not yet have data for January 2000. We can therefore only provide a comparison for the three schools which were opened as Fresh Start schools in September 1998, and not for the other seven Fresh Start schools which opened in September 1999 or later.

School name	*LEA*	*Pupil numbers January 1998*	*Pupil numbers January 1999*
Blakelaw/Firfield	Newcastle upon Tyne	361	404
Earl Marshall/Firvale	Sheffield	403	439
Regis School/The King's School	Wolverhampton	626	631

Information on the number of applications for each school is not collected centrally.

Teachers' Employment Conditions (Disparities)

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what appraisal he has made of disparities in respect of *(a)* remuneration, *(b)* conditions and *(c)* access to Government professional development initiatives for (i) teachers and (ii) further education lecturers. [115764]

Ms Estelle Morris: Disparities in pay and other employment arrangements are inevitable in different sectors where staff are employed by different employers. My right hon. Friend has acted to improve the quality of schoolteachers and the attractiveness of school teaching as a profession as a response to the particular issues relating to that profession.

The terms and conditions of the staff who work in further education are a matter for the employers to determine. The Government play no part in the discussions between the employers and staff representatives on questions relating to terms and conditions of service and are not involved in the setting of pay levels in the sector.

Age Profiles (Academics)

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what reply he has sent to the representations by the Association of University Teachers on the age-profile of teaching academics. [115071]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 20 March 2000]:* As independent bodies, higher education institutions appoint and retain the staff they need to run their academic programmes. It is for individual institutions to tailor their recruitment policies if they wish to alter the age balance of their staff or to plan for the forthcoming retirement of a particular age group.

Head Teachers

Mr. Rammell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) when he expects the revised versions of the document entitled "Head Teachers Facing Allegations" to be circulated; [115601]

(2) what progress his Department has made in the current review of the document entitled "Head Teachers Facing Allegations"; [115602]

(3) who has been consulted on the current review of the document entitled "Head Teachers Facing Allegations". [115603]

Ms Estelle Morris: The document referred to was not produced by my Department. It was produced jointly by representatives of local government employers and the teacher unions.

Mr. Rammell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many head teachers in *(a)* secondary, *(b)* primary and *(c)* special schools have been dismissed for misconduct in each of the last three years. [115600]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Department does not collect information on the number of head teachers who have been dismissed for misconduct.

Mr. Rammell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many head teachers in *(a)* secondary, *(b)* primary and *(c)* special schools were suspended under accusations of misconduct in each of the last three years. [115599]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Department does not collect this information.

Education Spending (Tyne and Wear)

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the *(a)* SSA and *(b)* total estimated spending per head in each local education authority in Tyne and Wear in each year from 1995–96 to 1999–2000; and if he will estimate the comparable figures for 2000–2001; and what assessment

he has made of the impact of changes in (i) school population, (ii) overall population and (iii) take-up of free school meals on these figures. [115286]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 20 March 2000]:* The tables list *(a)* the SSA per pupil, calculated by adding primary and secondary SSA together and dividing by total numbers of pupils between five and 15 used in the SSA methodology; and *(b)* spending per pupil in LEA maintained primary and secondary schools for 1995–96 to 1997–98, the latest year for which finalised figures are available, based on Net Institutional Expenditure, which is not directly comparable with the SSA figure.

Table A: SSA per pupil

	Local Education Authority				
	Gateshead	*Newcastle upon Tyne*	*North Tyneside*	*South Tyneside*	*Sunderland*
1995–96	2,223	2,337	2,124	2,211	2,200
1996–97	2,299	2,401	2,237	2,305	2,299
1997–98	2,355	2,461	2,295	2,409	2,379
1998–99	2,471	2,599	2,412	2,530	2,500
1999–2000	2,597	2,736	2,529	2,662	2,625
2000–01	2,721	2,878	2,653	2,800	2,743

Note:
Cash figures: no allowances have been made for Nursery Vouchers, or for changes in SSA methodology.

Table B: Spend per pupil

	Local Education Authority				
	Gateshead	*Newcastle upon Tyne*	*North Tyneside*	*South Tyneside*	*Sunderland*
1995–96	1,897	1,985	1,892	1,753	1,871
1996–97	1,934	2,119	1,928	1,771	1,880
1997–98	1,937	2,167	1,938	1,767	1,870

Changes in the size of the school population do not have a direct impact on the SSA per pupil, nor do changes in the overall population and take up of free school meals, since they do not form part of the calculation of an authority's education SSA. No assessment can be made of the impact of changes in population and take up of free school meals on overall expenditure per pupil.

Special Educational Needs

Mr. Hesford: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how pupils with special educational need will be supported and advised in Excellence in Cities areas. [115048]

Jacqui Smith: Pupils with special educational needs (SEN) in all areas of the country, including Excellence in Cities (EIC) areas, are supported by schools and LEAs in accordance with the guidance in the SEN Code of Practice. My right hon. Friend aims to consult publicly later this year on a revised SEN Code of Practice. The revised Code is expected to come into effect in September next year. Within EIC areas pupils with SEN in mainstream schools benefit from all aspects of Excellence in Cities. In addition special schools are eligible to become specialist or beacon schools as part of the specialist and beacon school expansion under EIC.

CABINET OFFICE

Relocation

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what relocation companies the Government makes use of when relocating civil servants. [115379]

Mr. Stringer: Departments and agencies have delegated authority to make their own arrangements for employing relocation companies. No central record of relocation companies is maintained.

Civil Service Entrants

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what is the average starting salary for new graduates employed by the Civil Service. [115487]

Mr. Stringer: Salary ranges and pay arrangements vary from Department to Department. Information is not held in the form requested. Entrants to the Civil Service Fast Stream Development Programme can expect salaries in London to start from around £17,500, with additional amounts for relevant experience.

Many graduates join the Service as junior managers. The average starting salary at this level during 1998–99 was £15,640.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Property Law Report

36. **Mr. Clifton-Brown:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans the Lord Chancellor has to implement the Law Commission report No. 152, entitled "Property Law: Liability for Chancel Repairs." [114045]

Mr. Lock: My noble and learned Friend, the Lord Chancellor, announced in response to a written parliamentary question on 29 July 1998, *Official Report*, House of Lords, column WA201, that the Law Commission Report No. 152, "Liability for Chancel Repairs" would not be implemented. This remains the Government's position.

Court Fees

37. **Mr. Brady:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what meetings he has had with the Law Society over the Lord Chancellor's proposals to raise court fees. [114046]

Mr. Lock: I have had no meetings with the Law Society over proposals concerning court fees, and there has been no request for such a meeting. We have however consulted the Law Society regarding our proposals, in the usual way. Its response has been considered along with the other responses received.

40. **Mr. Burns:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what meetings the Lord Chancellor has had with the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux over his proposals to raise court fees. [114050]

Mr. Lock: We have had no meetings with the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux (NACAB) over proposals to raise court fees and there has been no request for such a meeting. We have however consulted NACAB regarding our proposals, in the usual way. Its response has been considered along with other responses received.

Small Claims Courts

39. **Mr. Gapes:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans the Lord Chancellor has to assess the effectiveness of the enforcement of decisions of the small claims courts. [114049]

Mr. Lock: Since March 1998, we have been engaged in a comprehensive review of the enforcement of all civil court judgments, including small claims decisions. I anticipate being able to report the conclusions of the review in June.

Crown Court Juries

41. **Mr. Kidney:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what research the Lord Chancellor's Department has commissioned regarding the gender balance of juries in Crown court trials. [114051]

Jane Kennedy: The Lord Chancellor's Department has not commissioned any research into the gender balance of juries in Crown court trials.

Civil Actions

42. **Mr. McWalter:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans the Lord Chancellor has to make provision for those for whom the cost of civil actions is increased by a change mid-trial of presiding judge. [114052]

Jane Kennedy: Under section 53 of the Administration of Justice Act 1985, the Lord Chancellor may consider claims from parties in respect of those costs incurred where a judge is incapacitated, or dies during a trial and the case has to be re-heard.

Judiciary (Training)

43. **Ms Moran:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans the Lord Chancellor has for training for the judiciary in respect of child contact in cases of domestic violence. [114053]

Jane Kennedy: Judicial training is the responsibility of the Judicial Studies Board (JSB) which is a non-departmental public body and is chaired by Lord Justice Waller.

Circuit Judges, Recorders and Assistant Recorders newly authorised to hear Private Family Law cases attend a JSB Family Law induction seminar. Thereafter they attend a JSB Family Law continuation seminar every three years. Training on the issues relating to child contact in cases involving domestic violence is given at these seminars.

Magistrates Courts

Ms Blears: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what steps the Lord Chancellor is taking to ensure that local communities have access to justice in local magistrates courts. [114047]

Jane Kennedy: It is the Government's policy that the administration of magistrates courts is best decided locally. It is for each magistrates courts committee to decide how best to deploy their resources, in order to fulfil their statutory responsibility to provide an efficient and effective service to court users.

The Department does encourage each Committee to take account of new legislation and administrative initiatives.

Magistrates Courts (Devon)

Mr. Bradshaw: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what recent representations he has received about the future of magistrates courts in Devon; and if he will make a statement. [114044]

Jane Kennedy: I have recently received 11 representations from hon. Members, justices of the peace and other local interested parties, following Devon and Cornwall magistrates courts committee's proposals to close 13 of its 25 courthouses.

The Government's policy is that magistrates courts in Devon are best managed by the local magistrates courts committee. Decisions concerning the number of magistrates courts in its area are for Devon and Cornwall magistrate courts committee to determine.

Court of Protection

Mr. Alan Williams: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what arrangements have been put in place to monitor the financial affairs of people who lack capacity and who no longer come within the protective jurisdiction of the Court of Protection since the capital threshold was raised to £10,000; what plans he has to raise the threshold further; and what further safeguards he plans to enable ministers to exercise their responsibility for the protective oversight of the financial affairs of the people affected. [115724]

Jane Kennedy: The capital threshold of £10,000 is one of the criteria used when considering the appropriate arrangements which need to be made to protect peoples finances where they lack capacity. It is one of a set of stringent criteria applied when determining what level of intervention is required in day-to-day affairs of clients who have widely differing circumstances. The level of monitoring is considered in every individual case.

I will consider raising the threshold further when the effectiveness of these new arrangements has been assessed.

Websites

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will list the expenditure incurred by his Department, agencies and non-departmental public bodies on *(a)* the setting up and *(b)* the operation of websites, indicating the cases in which the expenditure has been above that budgeted; and if he will list for each website (i) the topics covered, (ii) the average number of hits per month and (iii) the estimated expenditure on each website for each of the next three years. [115089]

Mr. Lock: The information sought regarding the websites of my Department, agencies and non-departmental bodies is as listed:

Websites

1. The Lord Chancellor's Department

a. Set up costs: £7,368

b. Operating Costs (1999–2000): £16,200

c. Topics covered: What's New?; Press notices; The department; LCD research; The courts; Judges & QCs; Magistrates; Speeches; Civil Procedure Rules; Consultation papers; Access to Justice; Legal aid; Civil matters; Individual and Family matters; Criminal matters; Statute Law database; Year 2000; Complaints procedures; and links to related sites.

d. Average number of unique access hits per month: 22,000

e. The estimated expenditure on the website for each of the next three years:

i. 2000–01: £65,000

ii. 2001–02: £65,000

iii. 2002–03: £65,000

f. The Department is currently developing a Community Legal Service website which will be launched in April. Final costs are not available at this time.

2. The Court Service

a. Set up costs: £18,542

b. Operating Costs (1999–2000): £16,000

c. Topics covered: What's New; Court of Appeal and High Court judgments; Practice Directions; Daily Lists for the Supreme Court and the Crown Court (together with their Warned Lists); Supreme Court Costs Office; Crown Court and county court contact details; county court Parish Index; Courts with Divorce, Family and Care jurisdiction in England and Wales; Vexatious Litigants; Civil Procedure Rules Practice Directions; court forms and information leaflets; Court Service Annual report (in English and Welsh); Court Service Plan; Job Opportunities; Judicial Statistics; an Introduction to the Court Service; the Courts' Charter; the Office of the Social Security and Child Support Commissioners; the Immigration Appellate Authority; Special Commissioners for Income Tax; VAT and Duties Tribunal; and links to 19 Related Sites

d. Average number of unique access hits per month: 27,280

e. The estimated expenditure on the website for each of the next three years;

i. 2000–01: £16,000

ii. 2001–02: £16,000

iii. 2002–03: £16,000

3. The Northern Ireland Court Service

a. Set up costs: nil

b. Operating Costs (1999–2000): nil. The NICS maintains a number of pages on the Northern Ireland Civil Service website.

c. Topics covered: Courts Charter and complaints procedures

d. Average number of unique access hits per month: not monitored by NICS

e. The estimated expenditure on the website for each of the next three years:

i. 2000–01: unknown at this stage

ii. 2001–02: unknown at this stage

iii. 2002–03: unknown at this stage

4. The Public Trust Office

a. Set up costs: £2,500

b. Operating Costs (1999–2000): £2,000

c. Topics covered: introduction to the PTO; charter statements for each business area; details of the complaints procedure; "dormant funds in court" and links to other relevant sites.

d. Average number of unique access hits per month: Not currently monitored.

e. The estimated expenditure on the website for each of the next three years:

s: i. 2000–01: estimated at £20,000. A contract to re-design, build and maintain the website is about to be let. This will provide both for initial work and ongoing development over the next year.

ii. 2001–02 and 2002–03: the future location of the work done by the PTO is under consideration, following the Quinquennial Review of the agency published in October 1999. Due to this, it is not possible to say what the expenditure will be nor by which department it might be incurred.

5. The Public Record Office

a. Set up costs: Total development cost £2,100,000.

b. Operating Costs (1999–2000): £70,000.

c. Topics covered: the public records; the services provided by the PRO and Family Records Centre; the operation of the public records system; the PRO contribution to the National Grid for Learning; information for records managers, conservators and the archives profession; the interactive enquiries service; interactive consultation on new developments; and links to other sites of archival or historical interest.

d. Average number of unique access hits per month: 1,430,262

e. The estimated expenditure on the website for each of the next three years:

i. 2000–01: £80,000 (development costs—£500,000)

ii. 2001–02: £90,000 (development costs—£500,000)

iii. 2002–03: £100,000 (development costs—£500,000)

6. Her Majesty's Land Registry

a. Set up costs: £1,000

b. Operating Costs (1999–2000): £31,350

c. Topics covered: About the Land Registry; Exhibitions and Events; Complaints procedure; Areas served by the Land Registry; Direct Access Service; Fees Calculators; Online publications including Annual Report and Accounts; Business Plan; information leaflets; application forms, District Land Registries, Residential Property Price Reports; Guide to Land Registry Services; Feedback facility; Online Property price database.

d. Average number of unique access hits per month: 29,000

e. The estimated expenditure on the website for each of the next three years:

i. 2000–01: £44,431

ii. 2001–02: £44,431

iii. 2002–03: £44,431

7. The Law Commission

a. Set up costs: £2,400

b. Operating Costs (1999–2000): £12,000

c. Topics covered: library containing full text of all Law Commission publications since March 1997; background information on the organisation of the Law Commission; summary of projects currently being undertaken by the

BEST COP

Commission; information on current recruitment campaigns; information on all law reform projects underway in all government departments ("Law Under Review").

d. Average number of unique access hits per month: 3,500

e. The estimated expenditure on the website for each of the next three years:

i. 2000–01: £18,500

ii. 2001–02: £18,500

iii. 2002–02: £18,500

8. The Official Solicitor's Office

a. Set up costs: nil

b. Operating Costs: (1999–2000): £120

c. Topics covered: History of the Office; current legal basis and staffing of the office; areas of work covered and workloads; information for the legal profession and for individuals.

d. Average number of unique access hits per month: not known.

e. The estimated expenditure on the website for each of the next three years:

i. 2000–01: £120 (but website development to be reviewed)

ii. 2001–02: £120

iii. 2002–03: £120

9. The Judicial Studies Board

a. Set up costs: £925

b. Operating Costs (1999–2000): £1,080

c. Topics covered: the structure and work of the JSB and its committees; all publications that are available free of charge to members of the public (for example, the "Annual Report" and "Annual Lecture") as well as those publications whose circulation on paper was previously limited simply for financial reasons (for example, the "Equal Treatment Bench Book" and the "Specimen Directions").

d. Average number of unique access hits per month: 450

e. The estimated expenditure on the website for each of the next three years:

iv. 2000–01: £1,000

v. 2001–02: £5,000

vi. 2002–03: £3,000

10. HM Magistrates' Court Service Inspectorate

a. Set up costs: £7,000.

b. Operating Costs (1999–2000): £7,208

c. Topics covered: What's new; Who MCSI are; what MCSI do; how to contact MCSI; Published documents—field inspection, thematic review, business plan and guidelines; Order forms; feedback from the public; links to other related sites

d. Average number of unique access hits per month: 116

e. The estimated expenditure on the website for each of the next three years:

i. 2000–01: £15,000

ii. 2001–02: £6,500

iii. 2002–03: £6,500

11. The Legal Aid Board

a. Set up costs: £47,000.

b. Operating Costs (1999–2000): £12,920

c. Topics covered: the Legal Aid Board's Regional Legal Services Committees; details of the Legal Aid Franchise Quality Assurance Standard; Civil contracting documentation; guidance issued by the Legal Aid Board in relation to the current legal aid scheme, the franchising quality assurance standard and on contracting regime; details on the development of legal aid policies and research reports together with draft consultation documents and final versions of documents for the new funding scheme under the Access to Justice Act 1999, including the Funding Code and the guidance on the Code; addresses and locations of legal aid area/regional offices; details of how to obtain legal aid forms; information on current legal aid leaflets; News about legal aid—copies of Press releases, issues of FOCUS, the Board's newsletter to legal aid providers; and other information of importance; Links to other related websites (e.g. LCD/NACAB etc.).

d. Average number of unique access hits per month: 15,000

e. The estimated expenditure on the website for each of the next three years:

i. 2000–01: £43,000

ii. 2001–02: £25,000

iii. 2002–03: £25,000

12. The Civil Justice Council

a. Set up costs: £1,116

b. Operating Costs: £1,175

c. Topics covered: the background of the Council; the membership of the Council and its Sub-Committees; and summary reports of Council and Sub-Committee meetings.

d. Average number of unique access hits per month: Not monitored.

e. The estimated expenditure on the website for each of the next three years:

i. 2000–01: £1,175

ii. 2001–02: £1,175

iii. 2002–03: £1,175.

HEALTH

Alcohol Strategy

Ms Atherton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress there has been on the National Alcohol Strategy; and if he will make a statement. [111086]

Yvette Cooper: The Department is committed to tackling alcohol misuse including its impact on our key priorities of cancer, heart disease and mental health and are continuing to work with key stakeholders across Government, the alcohol field and the alcohol industry, on a coherent and balanced framework for action that we plan to publish later this year.

Concrete Recycling Plants

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment his Department have made on the impact on health of silica dust from concrete recycling plants. [111162]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 21 February 2000]:* The Department has not undertaken any specific studies into the effects on health that might be produced by exposure to dust generated by recycling concrete. Crushing or drilling of concrete releases silicious dust and exposure can lead to silicosis. This is uncommon, but can occur among those exposed through their work. Regulation of levels of dust in the workplace is the responsibility of the Health and Safety Executive while regulation of emissions is the responsibility of the Environment Agency and local authority environmental health departments. Research shows that it is very unlikely that members of the public exposed to low concentrations of dust near to concrete crushing activity would be placed at any significantly increased risk.

AVAILABLE

Residential and Nursing Care

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the variations in local authorities' baseline fee rates for residential and nursing care in England. [110699]

Mr. Hutton: The Social Services White Paper, "Modernising Social Services", made clear that contract prices should be determined having regard to providers' costs and planned outcomes for users. The costs of providers of residential care and nursing home care vary across the country.

Mr. Burnett: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proportion of nursing home patients means-tested by social services were granted fully-funded NHS nursing care *(a)* between 1980 and the judgment of the Court of Appeal in the Coughlan case and *(b)* from the Coughlan judgment to date. [114739]

Mr. Hutton: Information is not available in the format requested. Information on people newly meeting eligibility criteria for continuing National Health Service in-patient care is collected on a quarterly basis. Between 1 April 1995 and 30 June 1999, 125,429 people newly met eligibility criteria for continuing NHS in-patient care. From 1 July 1999 to 31 December 1999 12,076 people newly met eligibility criteria for continuing in-patient care funded by the NHS. Changes in the way the data have been collected since April 1995 may mean that the figures are not comparable.

Mr. Burnett: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what funding arrangements exist in other European Union countries for individuals whose needs are primarily for nursing rather than social care; and if he will make a statement. [114738]

Mr. Hutton: Information is not available in the format requested. Information on international provision of nursing home care in other European Union countries is contained in Chapter 6 of Research Volume 1 which accompanied the report of the Royal Commission on Long Term Care "With Respect to Old Age", copies of which are available in the Library.

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list by local authority *(a)* the average cost per resident per week of providing accommodation in council non-residential care homes and *(b)* the rate paid per resident per week for accommodation in privately run residential care homes. [115117]

Mr. Hutton: Information on reported gross expenditure per week of residential placements by local councils for older people on a per capita basis in 1997–98 is contained in the Department's Key Indicator Graphical System, copies of which are available in the Library.

Coughlan Case

Mr. Burnett: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) for what reason he has not issued guidance to area health authorities following the Court of Appeal judgment in the Coughlan case; [114737]

(2) what steps he is taking to ensure that eligibility criteria issued by area health authorities following the judgment of the Court of Appeal in the Coughlan case are lawful. [114736]

Mr. Hutton: We issued interim guidance on 11 August 1999 (Health Service Circular 1999/180 and Local Authority Circular (99) 30). This requires health and local authorities, in consultation with each other and, where appropriate, involving primary care groups, to satisfy themselves that their continuing and community care policies and eligibility criteria and other relevant procedures are in line with the Court of Appeal judgment on the Coughlan case and existing guidance, and to take further legal advice where necessary. The interim guidance also states that where authorities revise eligibility criteria following any review, they should consider what action they need to take to reassess service users against the revised criteria.

Revised continuing care guidance will be issued in the autumn. In the meantime we continue to monitor the situation.

NHS Walk-in Centres

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many NHS walk-in centres have been introduced to date; [115260]

(2) how many further NHS walk-in centres are planned. [115259]

Ms Stuart: There are 36 walk-in centre pilots approved last year. Four have opened to date, with the remaining sites to open by December 2000. Walk-in centres will improve access to and convenience of services for patients.

No decisions have been made about the number of further walk-in centres which might be developed in the future.

Private Health Care

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what guidance he gives local authorities on the regulation of private health care. [115282]

Ms Stuart: Local authorities do not hold responsibility for the regulation of private healthcare. Private hospitals and clinics are regulated by health authorities under Part II of the Registered Homes Act 1984. Health authorities apply the Act with reference to guidance on the Registration and Inspection of Nursing Homes issued in 1985 by the then National Association of Health Authorities and Trusts. In addition, the Department issued guidance to health authorities in 1995 which was aimed at promoting a more consistent application of regulation by regulation authorities. The Care Standards Bill, currently before Parliament, seeks to introduce a new regulatory system for care homes and private and voluntary healthcare which will be administered by a single body, the National Care Standards Commission.

Elderly People (Sunderland)

Mr. Etherington: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to improve the standard of *(a)* nursing and *(b)* residential home care of elderly people in Sunderland; and if he will make a statement. [115078]

Mr. Hutton: Nursing home standards are maintained and improved through the Nursing Homes Registration and Inspection Unit, which is the responsibility of

Sunderland Health Authority and Sunderland Social Services. Residential care homes standards are maintained and improved through the Registration and Inspection Department, which is the responsibility of the City of Sunderland Council. In the future, the inspection and regulation of nursing homes and residential care homes will become the responsibility of the National Commission for Care Standards.

Mental Health Services (Sunderland)

Mr. Etherington: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to extend provision for *(a)* hospital-based and *(b)* community-based mental health services in Sunderland. [115079]

Mr. Hutton: Sunderland health authority has indicated that it plans to expand provision for *(a)* hospital and *(b)* community based mental health services through the following initiatives:

(a) Hospital

A strategic review of bed provision at the Cherry Knowle Hospital site.

(b) Community

Development of an assertive outreach service.

Out of hours community practice nurse/social worker team.

Roll out of pilot scheme looking at multi-disciplinary working between a community practice nurse team and social services.

Social Services

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much was spent on social services *(a)* nationally and *(b)* in London in each year from 1979 to 1999. [115104]

Mr. Hutton: Gross expenditure on local authority personal social services for England and London is provided in the table.

Local authority personal social services gross expenditure 1979–80 to 1997–98 England and London

£ million

Year[1]	*England*	*London*[2]
1979–80	1,489	[3]—
1980–81	1,844	[3]—
1981–82	2,038	[3]—
1982–83	2,249	[3]—
1983–84	2,492	645
1984–85	2,642	681
1985–86	2,804	716
1986–87	3,080	794
1987–88	3,423	865
1988–89	3,776	963
1989–90	4,204	829
1990–91	4,698	1,140
1991–92	5,127	1,214
1992–93	5,470	1,294
1993–94	6,278	1,401
1994–95	7,503	1,595
1995–96	8,393	1,771
1996–97	9,263	1,898
1997–98	9,984	2,064

[1] Data for 1998–99 are expected to be published in May 2000
[2] Includes all 33 inner and outer London authorities
[3] Denotes information not available
Source:
RO3 return

Ministerial Visit (Worcester)

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for Health for what reasons he cancelled his visit to Worcester on 17 March to top-out the new hospital building; what plans he has to reinstate this visit; and if he will ensure that hon. Members whose constituents will be served by the hospital are given adequate notice of such visits. [115630]

Yvette Cooper: Owing to other unforeseen diary engagements my right hon. Friend regrets that he was unable to visit Worcester on 17 March. The visit will be rearranged as soon as possible. Hon. Members whose constituents will be served by the hospital will be notified of the revised arrangements.

Private Treatment

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent representations his Department has received from patients who have been on NHS waiting lists but have paid for private treatment. [115337]

Ms Stuart: We have received a number of letters from patients and hon. Members on this subject.

Correspondence

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will reply to the letter of 26 January from Mr. John Wood of 21 The Martels, Barton on Sea. [114728]

Ms Stuart: A reply was sent to Mr. Wood on 20 March.

Telecommunications Masts

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the need for further investigation into the health effects of mobile telecommunications masts. [114189]

Yvette Cooper: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave him on 16 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 300W.

SCOTLAND

Oil and Gas Industry

5. **Mr. Savidge:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the future of oil and gas industry businesses in Scotland. [114012]

Mr. Wilson: I am a member of Pilot, the successor body to the Oil and Gas Industries Task Force. It has set up a support group for the oil fabrication sector, involving government agencies and the industry. This group is charged with identifying the way forward, and ensuring that the skills base is maintained.

18. **Mr. David Stewart:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the export opportunities for Scottish businesses in the oil and gas industry. [114025]

Mr. Wilson: The Government are working hard to promote exports by the oil and gas industry. It is essential we do everything possible to maximise opportunities for

Scottish companies. For example, I recently undertook a four-nation tour of the Far East where the oil and gas sector was central to many of my discussions.

Scottish Economy

6. **Mr. Ernie Ross:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he last met representatives of business and trade unions to discuss the state of the Scottish economy; and if he will make a statement. [114013]

Dr. Reid: I meet regularly with representatives of the business community and the trade unions in Scotland. There is widespread recognition of the benefits which the Government's economic policies are producing.

10. **Mr. Tynan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will ensure that the Chancellor of the Exchequer takes into account the state of the Scottish economy when drawing up his next Budget. [114017]

Dr. Reid: My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will have regard to the economy of the whole UK, including Scotland, in preparing for his Budget.

Working Families Tax Credit

7. **Mr. Jim Murphy:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement about the impact of the Working Families Tax Credit in Scotland. [114014]

Dr. Reid: We estimate that around 70,000 families in Scotland have taken up the Working Families Tax Credit.

14. **Mr. Hood:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the criteria under which people living in Scotland will be able to take up the Working Families Tax Credit. [114021]

Dr. Reid: The Working Families Tax Credit is available to families, either couples or lone parents, who have one or more children; work at least 16 hours a week; are resident in the UK and entitled to work here and have savings of £8,000 or less. We estimate that the WFTC could provide help to 130,000 families in Scotland and that the current take-up in Scotland is around 70,000 families.

17. **Mr. Worthington:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what reports he has received on the impact of the Working Families Tax Credit on the Scottish economy. [114024]

Dr. Reid: The Working Families Tax Credit, along with other measures we have taken, will lift an estimated 60,000 Scottish children out of poverty by the year 2002.

New Deal

8. **Mr. Nigel Griffiths:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will estimate the number of Scots who have moved from benefits into work under the New Deal scheme; and if he will make a statement. [114015]

Mr. Wilson: By the end of December 1999, 21,370 young people in Scotland had secured jobs through the New Deal. A further 2,870 people had found work through the New Deal for those aged 25 or over.

19. **Mr. Connarty:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many people in Scotland have moved into unsubsidised employment as a result of the New Deal; and if he will make a statement. [114027]

Mr. Wilson: At December 1999, 18,300 young people in Scotland have moved into unsubsidised employment as a result of the New Deal. A further 1,700 people have entered into unsubsidised employment in Scotland as a result of the New Deal 25+.

21. **Mr. Brady:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the cost of the new deal scheme in Scotland. [114029]

Mr. Wilson: Up to the end of January 2000 the cost of New Deal scheme for Young People, in Scotland, was £45 million.

Parliament Building

9. **Sir Teddy Taylor:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what recent discussions he has had with the Scottish Executive about the new Parliament building at Holyrood. [114016]

Dr. Reid: Responsibility for the new Parliament building rests with the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body.

Disabled People

11. **Mr. Tom Clarke:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the implementation for disabled people in Scotland of the new deal. [114018]

Mr. Wilson: New Deal for Disabled People pilots are making good progress. As of January 2000, 2,180 people across Britain previously on incapacity benefits have found work through the programme, including over 300 for pilots based in Scotland. The Government are actively considering what can be provided across the country as a whole, including Scotland. An announcement is expected shortly.

Scottish Parliament (Elections)

12. **Mr. Donohoe:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will bring forward proposals to amend the Scotland Act 1998 in respect of the method of election of members of the Scottish Parliament. [114019]

Dr. Reid: I have no plans to review the system of election of members of the Scottish Parliament.

Exchange Rate

13. **Mr. Swinney:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what assessment he has made of the effect of the level of sterling on Scottish manufacturing industry, tourism and agriculture. [114020]

Dr. Reid: The Government understand the concerns of organisations and businesses, particularly manufacturers trading within Europe, about the value of the pound. But it is determined to take a long-term view and it would be wrong to let short-term pressures lead back to policies that produced boom and bust in the past. Short-term fixes

would be the biggest threat of all to industry, tourism and agriculture with the illusion of temporary relief followed by the reality of long-term damage.

Scottish Executive (Shared Objectives)

15. **Mr. Browne:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland in what areas of policy he is working jointly with the Scottish Executive to deliver shared objectives. [114022]

Dr. Reid: We are working jointly with the Scottish Executive across a wide range of issues to optimise the benefits of devolution for the people of Scotland. The Joint Ministerial Action Committees on Poverty and the Knowledge Economy are good examples of such joint working.

National Pay Awards

16. **Mr. Malcolm Bruce:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will bring forward measures to compensate local authorities for national pay awards above inflation through an appropriate contribution to the block grant; and if he will make a statement. [114023]

Dr. Reid: The Scottish Executive have the responsibility for determining the level of support which it makes available to local authorities in Scotland. The total budget that is available to the Scottish Executive for this and other purposes is determined in accordance with the Statement of Funding Policy published by HM Treasury in March 1999.

Forth Bridge

20. **Mr. Dalyell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on his role in respect of the safety and maintenance of the Forth Bridge. [114028]

Mr. Wilson: My right hon. Friend takes an active interest in the safety and maintenance of the Forth Bridge but it is primarily for the Rail Regulator to ensure that Railtrack complies with its obligations under the Railways (Safety Cases) Regulations 1994 and other legal obligations in relation to the safety of the bridge and its operation.

Pig Industry

22. **Mr. Nicholas Winterton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what discussions he has held with the First Minister on the future of the Scottish pig industry. [114030]

Mr. Wilson: My right hon. Friend has regular discussions with the First Minister on a wide range of issues.

Television Reception (Rural Areas)

23. **Mr. Alasdair Morgan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport regarding television reception in rural areas of Scotland. [114031]

Mr. Wilson: The Government are aware of the particular problems in receiving terrestrial television signals in rural areas. I understand that, with the introduction of digital television, new analogue transmitters are no longer being planned. However, the BBC and Independent Television Commission, which are responsible for the television transmission network, are now considering, in consultation with the digital broadcasters, the Government, and other interested parties, how to develop the coverage of digital television across the whole of the UK. The Government will ensure that no fewer than those who presently receive analogue television (in Scotland 98.1 per cent. of the population) can receive the main free-to-air channels digitally before the analogue signals are switched over. The process of switch over is subject to close liaison and consultation with all those involved, including viewers.

Unemployment

Mr. Wray: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the claimant count rate of unemployment in Scotland *(a)* currently and *(b)* a year ago. [114026]

Mr. Wilson: The claimant count rate of unemployment in Scotland in February 2000 was 5.1 per cent., down from 5.6 per cent. in February 1999, and the lowest rate since April 1976.

ADVOCATE-GENERAL

Scottish Legislation

25. **Mr. Savidge:** To ask the Advocate-General if she will make a statement on the arrangements for considering whether Bills passed by the Scottish Parliament are within its legislative competence. [114033]

The Advocate-General for Scotland: I receive copies of all Bills introduced to and passed by the Scottish Parliament to enable me to consider whether their provisions are within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament. Similar arrangements enable all UK Departments with an interest to do likewise.

Responsibilities

26. **Sir Teddy Taylor:** To ask the Advocate-General if she will make a statement on the opinions for which she has inherited responsibilities from the Lord Advocate. [114034]

The Advocate-General for Scotland: One of my functions as a UK Law Officer is to give opinions, when required, to the UK Government on Scots law. This function was performed by the Lord Advocate before devolution.

European Convention on Human Rights

28. **Mr. Browne:** To ask the Advocate-General what recent discussions she has had with the Lord Advocate and Solicitor-General regarding the incorporation of the European convention on human rights into Scots law. [114036]

The Advocate-General for Scotland: I have regular discussions with the Lord Advocate and Solicitor-General regarding a variety of matters of mutual interest.

29. **Mr. David Stewart:** To ask the Advocate-General what steps she is taking to monitor the impact of the European convention on human rights in Scotland. [114037]

The Advocate-General for Scotland: Questions relating to the European Convention on Human Rights may now be raised as "devolution issues" in courts or tribunals in Scotland and must be intimated to me under schedule 6 of the Scotland Act 1998.

Devolution Notices

30. **Mr. Connarty:** To ask the Advocate-General what subjects have been raised with her as devolution issues; and how many cases have now been intimated to her. [114038]

The Advocate-General for Scotland: Since May 1999 around 500 devolution notices have been intimated to me. A variety of subjects have been raised and almost all have been in criminal cases. Common subjects include: delay in raising proceedings; access to a solicitor; legal aid; temporary sheriffs; questioning in road traffic cases; and use of hearsay evidence.

Lockerbie

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Advocate-General what discussions she had with the Solicitor-General for Scotland before his recent visit to Washington to discuss the Lockerbie trial. [114035]

The Advocate-General for Scotland: I meet the Lord Advocate, as he now is, from time to time, and our discussions are wide-ranging.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Trade Union Recognition

51. **Angela Smith:** To ask the President of the Council to ask the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, representing the House of Commons Commission, if it will formally recognise the TGWU 1/427 parliamentary staff branch which represents the staff of hon. Members. [114064]

Mr. Kirkwood: No. The Commission is not responsible for the pay and conditions of service of Members' staff. Therefore, the question of formal recognition of a union by the Commission does not arise.

Modernisation

52. **Mr. Rammell:** To ask the President of the Council what assessment she had made of the impact of the work of the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons on the way in which the House operates. [114065]

Mr. Tipping: I refer my hon. Friend to the oral answers I gave earlier today to my hon. Friends the Members for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane) and North-West Norfolk (Dr. Turner), *Official Report*, column 853.

53. **Mr. Gapes:** To ask the President of the Council if she will make a statement on future plans to modernise the working hours of the House. [114066]

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend will be aware that at present, we have experiments both on providing extra sittings in Westminister Hall and on bringing forward the hours of sitting on Thursday.

I have no further proposals to change sitting hours at present.

Westminster Hall

54. **Helen Jackson:** To ask the President of the Council if she will make a statement on the progress of the experiment with sittings in Westminster Hall. [114067]

Mr. Tipping: The experiment of sittings in Westminster Hall appears to be successful and will be evaluated by the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons in due course.

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Chairman of the Accommodation and Works Committee what plans the Committee has for improving the acoustics for sittings in Westminster Hall. [115250]

Sir Sydney Chapman: An additional loudspeaker is being installed adjacent to the press table in the Grand Committee Room, which should improve audibility in that area; however, as Sittings of the House in Westminster Hall are still an experiment, it would be premature at this time to allocate additional funds, which could prove to be nugatory, in order to improve the acoustics further.

If my hon. Friend has been experiencing problems with the acoustics in the Grand Committee Room, she may wish to discuss the nature of the problem directly with the Director of Parliamentary Works.

Legislation Timetables

55. **Mr. Levitt:** To ask the President of the Council what progress there has been in the development of timetables for legislation in the House this Session. [114068]

Mrs. Beckett: I refer my hon. Friend to the oral reply I gave earlier today to my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, South (Mr. Griffiths), *Official Report*, column 851.

Parliamentary Website

Mr. Baker: To ask the Chairman of the Information Committee what plans the Committee has to review the design of the parliamentary website. [115248]

Mr. Allan: As part of its ongoing examination of the information services provided for Members, the Information Committee has discussed the design and content of the parliamentary website with officials. I am advised that a number of improvements have been initiated. These include the addition of Bound Volume text of Hansard back to Session 1988–89, a rebuilding of the publications search engine, the introduction of links to a redesigned internet POLIS and the preparation of a site map.

Discussions are also taking place with the House of Lords about site design. These include consideration of a major redesign of the site. The work is being undertaken by the Joint Working Party on Information Management and the Parliamentary Intranet, who will be identifying priorities for improvements to the site

and making recommendations accordingly. Members of the Information Committee have agreed to provide feedback on their use of the parliamentary website as part of this process.

E-mail and Internet Service

Mr. Fabricant: To ask the Chairman of the Information Committee if he will make a statement concerning the continued provision of free remote access to the parliamentary e-mail and internet service. [114055]

Mr. Allan: There are currently no plans to withdraw the arrangements for free access to the PDVN. As the hon. Member knows, the Parliamentary Communications Directorate is presently conducting trials of Virtual Private Network (VPN) technology, which would enable Members' constituency offices to connect to the PDVN using an Internet Service Provider (ISP). VPN access to the PDVN would be quicker and more reliable than the current system. No choice of ISP has yet been made and no decision about any charging arrangements has been taken. The Information Committee is closely monitoring developments.

Committee members generally are committed to the principle of providing the best information services at the least cost to Members. We will consider the proposals from PCD from that point of view and make recommendations accordingly. However, the Committee does not have the authority to make spending decisions of this nature and any recommendation from the Committee with financial implications will have to be passed to the Finance and Services Committee and then on to the House of Commons Commission for decision.

Refreshment Department

Miss Kirkbride: To ask the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, representing the House of Commons Commission, what the salaries are for the two most senior positions in the Refreshment Department in financial year 1999–2000; and what the percentage increase in those salaries will be in the next financial year. [115252]

Mr. Kirkwood: Information on the salary ranges of staff of the House is published in the Commission's Annual Report (Annexe B, Appendices 1 and 2). The pay rates shown in Appendix 2 to Annexe B were increased by 2.9 per cent. and 2.3 per cent. for Band 3 and Band A2 respectively, on 1 April 1999. The pay remit for the next financial year has not yet been approved by the Commission. Pay increases for staff in these pay bands are linked to performance and the salaries of individual members of staff are not published.

Written Answers to Questions

Wednesday 22 March 2000

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Tenant Subsidies

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what has been the average annual subsidy per tenant, taking into account housing benefits and capital grants paid by the Exchequer, to *(a)* council tenants and *(b)* tenants of registered social landlords, in each of the last 10 years for which figures are available. [114719]

Mr. Mullin: Table 1 shows the information that is available on the level of Exchequer support for tenants of local authorities and of registered social landlords (RSLs), but the information does not allow a direct comparison between the two sectors. The table shows the Exchequer subsidy which is paid to local authorities in respect of their tenants as Housing Revenue Account subsidy, and the Housing Benefit paid to tenants of RSLs.

Capital support for local authorities is in the form of permissions to borrow (known as Basic Credit Approvals) rather than capital grants; the interest on this borrowing is subsidised as part of the Housing Revenue Account subsidy.

Table 2 shows the Exchequer capital grants paid as Social Housing Grant (SHG) to RSLs by the Housing Corporation through the Approved Development Programme (ADP). SHG enables RSLs to provide affordable housing for rent and sale. Because the benefit of the SHG is realised over the lifetime of the property there is no direct correlation between the grant paid in any one year and the number of tenants.

Table 1

£ per dwelling per annum

	Average per dwelling of Housing Element and Rent Rebate subsidy paid to local authorities	*Average gross expenditure on rent allowances for tenants of registered social landlords*
1990–91	922	—
1991–92	964	—
1992–93	1,044	—
1993–94	1,100	1,222
1994–95	1,145	1,430
1995–96	1,146	1,640
1996–97	1,173	1,825
1997–98	1,140	1,892
1998–99	1,078	1,977

Notes:

1. The figures are averages per dwelling.
2. Local authority information is derived from subsidy claim forms, and shows the sum of Housing Element and Rent Rebate subsidy.
3. For registered social landlords, estimates derived from quarterly and annual statistical returns, and annual subsidy claim forms, from local authorities.
4. Information on average gross expenditure for registered social landlords is not available before 1993–94.
5. England only

Table 2: Housing corporation gross approved development programme expenditure

£ million

Year	
1992–93	2,351
1993–94	1,810
1994–95	1,484
1995–96	1,142
1996–97	1,044
1998–99	684
1998–99	607

Notes:

1. Housing Corporation's Approved Development Programme is the main component of the Social Housing Grant. RSLs bid for capital grants from the ADP to develop new social housing, with rents at sub-market levels.
2. Figures taken from Housing Corporation Stewardship Reports. Reliable information is only available from 1992–93.
3. England only

Rail Safety

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) how many of the directors of the safety company subsidiary of Railtrack will have a background in an industry other than railways; what will be the composition of the board; what arrangements have been made for funding the company; and to what extent he has been consulted on the appointments of directors; [114833]

(2) what talks he has held with the board and Chief Executive of Railtrack since the announcement of their decision to create a separate subsidiary safety company; what timetable is proposed for its establishment; who is to be its Chief Executive, to whom the board will report; and who are its members. [114834]

Mr. Hill: Work to establish the company is being overseen by a committee chaired by a senior DETR official on which Railtrack are represented at board level.

The composition and arrangements for the appointment of the board of the safety subsidiary and its funding arrangements are matters for the Rail Regulator and the Health and Safety Commission to consider when taking forward changes to Regulations and to Railtrack's network licence, which are subject to public consultation procedures.

Empty Properties

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if there is a centrally held list of empty properties owned by housing associations; and if so how many *(a)* have been empty for under six months, *(b)* have been empty for under one year and *(c)* have been empty over a year; [114801]

(2) how many properties owned by housing associations have been empty for *(a)* under six months, *(b)* under one year and *(c)* over one year. [114800]

Mr. Mullin: A centrally held list of properties owned by housing associations does not exist.

The Housing Corporation is the regulatory body for housing associations (also referred to as registered social landlords—RSLs). The Corporation keeps various details about stock owned/managed by RSLs (from the annual Regulatory and Statistical Return and other returns), but this does not include a list of property addresses.

The RSLs themselves maintain records of all their properties in order that they can manage their properties to the standards set down by the Corporation—and to provide information for audit purposes.

The performance standards laid down by the Corporation include some that cover the control of empty properties. For instance, no more than *two per cent.* of properties under management should be empty at any time.

The overall RSL vacancy rate is not monitored continuously, so the current situation is not known. However, as a guide, the table shows the vacancy rates as at 31 March in 1998 and 1999—and how many vacant units had been empty for less than six months, for between six months and a year and for more than a year.

Number of vacant self-contained RSL units

At March 31 each year	*Available for letting*	*Percentage*	*Not available for letting*	*Percentage*	*Total vacancies*	*Percentage*
Vacancies in 1998						
Less than 6 months	13,547	88	6,049	47	19,596	69
6 months to 1 year	1,043	7	2,908	23	3,951	14
More than a year	782	5	3,874	30	4,656	17
Total	15,372	100	12,831	100	28,203	100
Vacancies in 1999						
Less than 6 months	15,143	88	7,852	53	22,995	72
6 months to 1 year	1,156	7	2,504	17	3,660	11
More than a year	863	5	4,514	30	5,377	17
Total	17,162	100	14,870	100	32,032	100

Sources:
Profile of the RSL Sector, 1998 (Table 3.9), published by the Housing Corporation
Profile of the RSL Sector, 1999 (provisional draft of table 3.9)—unpublished but due to be published during 2000 by the Housing Corporation

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will list the number of empty council-owned properties in each local authority; [114799]

(2) if there is a centrally held database on the amount of council-owned empty property. [114798]

Mr. Mullin: Local authorities in England provide information on the number of vacant dwellings in their ownership as part of their annual Housing Investment Programme submission to the Department. The latest available information, as reported by local authorities on their 1999 HIP returns, is on a computerised dataset available in the Library.

A level of vacancy is a usual feature of housing management, reflecting turnover and movement within the stock. There is likely to be some variation in the proportion of dwellings that are vacant in a local authority from one date to another during the year.

Homelessness

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many people are registered on each local authority list as homeless. [114769]

Mr. Mullin: Homeless households accepted by local authorities are those which, after investigation, were found to be eligible for assistance, unintentionally homeless and in priority need under part VII of the Housing Act 1996. The latest available information is given in the table.

Number of households accepted by local authorities as being unintentionally homeless and in priority need under the provisions of the 1996 Housing Act: October-December 1999

	Number
North East	
Alnwick	7
Berwick-upon-Tweed	5
Blyth Valley	9
Castle Morpeth	0
Chester-le-Street	4
Darlington	48
Derwentside	29
Durham	10
Easington	15
Gateshead	89
Hartlepool	65
Middlesbrough	94
Newcastle upon Tyne	74
North Tyneside	246
Redcar and Cleveland	63
Sedgefield	34
South Tyneside	40
Stockton-on-Tees	46
Sunderland	138
Teesdale	2
Tynedale	n/a
Wansbeck	13
Wear Valley	8
Yorkshire and The Humber	
Barnsley	47
Bradford	282
Calderdale	66
Craven	n/a
Doncaster	n/a
East Riding of Yorkshire	60
Hambleton	2
Harrogate	26

Number of households accepted by local authorities as being unintentionally homeless and in priority need under the provisions of the 1996 Housing Act: October-December 1999

	Number
Kingston upon Hull	56
Kirklees	273
Leeds	530
North East Lincolnshire	16
North Lincolnshire	63
Richmondshire	2
Rotherham	59
Ryedale	4
Scarborough	41
Selby	14
Sheffield	n/a
Wakefield	49
York	67
East Midlands	
Amber Valley	55
Ashfield	10
Bassetlaw	52
Blaby	3
Bolsover	14
Boston	12
Broxtowe	27
Charnwood	23
Chesterfield	53
Corby	10
Daventry	27
Derby	242
Derbyshire Dales	6
East Lindsey	62
East Northamptonshire	12
Erewash	33
Gedling	35
Harborough	12
High Peak	34
Hinckley and Bosworth	20
Kettering	25
Leicester	162
Lincoln	13
Mansfield	42
Melton	13
Newark and Sherwood	61
North East Derbyshire	19
North Kesteven	11
North West Leicestershire	55
Northampton	73
Nottingham	n/a
Oadby and Wigston	6
Rushcliffe	11
Rutland	0
South Derbyshire	51
South Holland	5
South Kesteven	55
South Northamptonshire	26
Wellingborough	1
West Lindsey	9
East of England	
Babergh	15
Basildon	82
Bedford	91
Braintree	n/a
Breckland	59
Brentwood	9
Broadland	42
Broxbourne	61
Cambridge	60
Castle Point	14
Chelmsford	74
Colchester	101
Dacorum	n/a
East Cambridgeshire	45

Number of households accepted by local authorities as being unintentionally homeless and in priority need under the provisions of the 1996 Housing Act: October-December 1999

	Number
East Hertfordshire	n/a
Epping Forest	26
Fenland	24
Forest Heath	8
Great Yarmouth	44
Harlow	68
Hertsmere	10
Huntingdonshire	30
Ipswich	46
Kings Lynn and West Norfolk	46
Luton	55
Maldon	26
Mid Bedfordshire	11
Mid Suffolk	19
North Hertfordshire	49
North Norfolk	24
Norwich	137
Peterborough	54
Rochford	9
South Bedfordshire	50
South Cambridgeshire	23
South Norfolk	29
Southend-on-Sea	18
St. Albans	26
St. Edmundsbury	36
Stevenage	28
Suffolk Coastal	26
Tendring	73
Three Rivers	22
Thurrock	n/a
Uttlesford	17
Watford	36
Waveney	22
Welwyn Hatfield	49
Greater London	
Barking and Dagenham	66
Barnet	239
Bexley	66
Brent	252
Bromley	189
Camden	331
City of London	22
Croydon	291
Ealing	278
Enfield	201
Greenwich	294
Hackney	n/a
Hammersmith and Fulham	165
Haringey	428
Harrow	158
Havering	125
Hillingdon	229
Hounslow	192
Islington	295
Kensington and Chelsea	112
Kingston upon Thames	48
Lambeth	242
Lewisham	259
Merton	59
Newham	383
Redbridge	159
Richmond upon Thames	94
Southwark	303
Sutton	176
Tower Hamlets	264
Waltham Forest	n/a
Wandsworth	n/a
Westminster	288

Number of households accepted by local authorities as being unintentionally homeless and in priority need under the provisions of the 1996 Housing Act: October-December 1999

	Number
South East	
Adur	58
Arun	46
Ashford	20
Aylesbury Vale	26
Basingstoke and Deane	44
Bracknell Forest	16
Brighton and Hove	201
Canterbury	60
Cherwell	25
Chichester	32
Chiltern	34
Crawley	52
Dartford	33
Dover	19
East Hampshire	29
Eastbourne	73
Eastleigh	10
Elmbridge	38
Epsom and Ewell	16
Fareham	44
Gosport	45
Gravesham	n/a
Guildford	25
Hart	32
Hastings	47
Havant	62
Horsham	55
Isle of Wight	49
Lewes	44
Maidstone	29
Mid Sussex	28
Milton Keynes	n/a
Mole Valley	21
New Forest	57
Oxford	83
Portsmouth	150
Reading	88
Reigate and Banstead	34
Rother	36
Runnymede	20
Rushmoor	n/a
Sevenoaks	32
Shepway	47
Slough	n/a
South Bucks	8
South Oxfordshire	46
Southampton	165
Spelthorne	12
Surrey Heath	30
Swale	28
Tandridge	21
Test Valley	41
Thanet	n/a
The Medway Towns	n/a
Tonbridge and Malling	23
Tunbridge Wells	85
Vale of White Horse	47
Waverley	20
Wealden	58
West Berkshire	53
West Oxfordshire	7
Winchster	12
Windsor and Maidenhead	23
Woking	33
Wokingham	24
Worthing	54
Wycombe	75

Number of households accepted by local authorities as being unintentionally homeless and in priority need under the provisions of the 1996 Housing Act: October-December 1999

	Number
South West	
Bath and North East Somerset	58
Bournemouth	n/a
Bristol	278
Caradon	21
Carrick	50
Cheltenham	41
Christchurch	21
Cotswold	29
East Devon	36
East Dorset	18
Exeter	41
Forest of Dean	19
Gloucester	37
Isles of Scilly	0
Kennet	47
Kerrier	34
Mendip	26
Mid Devon	36
North Cornwall	42
North Devon	20
North Dorset	31
North Somerset	40
North Wiltshire	59
Penwith	27
Plymouth	260
Poole	n/a
Purbeck	16
Restormel	40
Salisbury	68
Sedgemoor	28
South Gloucestershire	n/a
South Hams	54
South Somerset	83
Stroud	3
Swindon	n/a
Taunton Deane	70
Teignbridge	56
Tewkesbury	20
Torbay	55
Torridge	10
West Devon	31
West Dorset	34
West Somerset	19
West Wiltshire	72
Weymouth and Portland	58
West Midlands	
Birmingham	1,247
Bridgnorth	7
Bromsgrove	39
Cannock Chase	35
Coventry	90
Dudley	53
East Staffordshire	6
Herefordshire	51
Lichfield	13
Malvern Hills	20
Newcastle-under-Lyme	40
North Shropshire	20
North Warwickshire	6
Nuneaton and Bedworth	16
Oswestry	17
Redditch	60
Rugby	n/a
Sandwell	235
Shrewsbury and Atcham	29

Number of households accepted by local authorities as being unintentionally homeless and in priority need under the provisions of the 1996 Housing Act: October-December 1999

	Number
Solihull	136
South Shropshire	n/a
South Staffordshire	46
Stafford	18
Staffordshire Moorlands	13
Stoke-on-Trent	32
Stratford-on-Avon	20
Tamworth	20
Telford and Wrekin	50
Walsall	295
Warwick	56
Wolverhampton	106
Worcester	n/a
Wychavon	29
Wyre Forest	89
North West	
Allerdale	13
Barrow-in-Furness	2
Blackburn with Darwen	36
Blackpool	36
Bolton	178
Burnley	57
Bury	31
Carlisle	6
Chester	25
Chorley	31
Congleton	n/a
Copeland	10
Crewe and Nantwich	53
Eden	12
Ellesmere Port and Neston	18
Fylde	7
Halton	n/a
Hyndburn	20
Knowsley	40
Lancaster	29
Liverpool	196
Macclesfield	n/a
Manchester	632
Oldham	269
Pendle	16
Preston	35
Ribble Valley	15
Rochdale	124
Rossendale	49
Salford	101
Sefton	22
South Lakeland	8
South Ribble	35
St. Helens	25
Stockport	56
Tameside	123
Trafford	109
Vale Royal	n/a
Warrington	62
West Lancashire	4
Wigan	116
Wirral	156
Wyre	23

Notes:

1. n/a indicates the authority did not provide a return.
2. Figures reported may include a small number of residual cases eligible under 1985 Housing Act.

Source:

DETR quarterly P1(E) returns

Regional Development Agencies

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is *(a)* the annual cost, *(b)* the number employed and *(c)* the total expenditure of (i) the integrated regional office and (ii) the regional development agencies in (1) Yorkshire and Humberside, (2) the Northern Region, (3) the North West and (4) all English regions in (A) 1997, (B) 1998 and (C) 1999, respectively. [114903]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The first table shows the Regional Development Agencies' gross expenditure on their administration for the 1998–99 financial year when the agencies were being set up; and their allocations for administration and programmes for 1999–2000 at the start of the financial year. It also shows staff-in-post figures for 1 April and 30 September 1999, the latest data that are available.

The second table shows the relevant data for Government offices. Information on programme expenditure in 1999–2000 is not available yet.

Regional Development Agencies

	Administration (£000)		*Programme (£000)*	*Staff numbers*	
	1998–99	*1999–2000*	*1999–2000*	*1 April 1999*	*30 September 1999*
Yorkshire Forward	403	8,036	152,203	174.5	211
One North East	2,395	9,771	139,039	203	232
North West	327	12,131	212,595	182	199
East Midlands	406	7,155	60,193	107	132
Advantage West Midlands	384	7,678	114,764	118.5	147
East of England	350	4,803	28,957	38	71
South East	411	5,486	82,850	60	95
South West	461	7,488	46,509	143	171
Total (all RDAs)	5,137	62,548	837,110	1,026	1,258

Note:

Staff numbers are full time equivalents except North West RDA which is staff-in-post

Government Offices

	Running costs (£000)	*Programme costs (£000)*	*Staff numbers*
1997–98			
GO-NE	8,617	447,900	243
GO-NW	9,443	702,970	244
GO-M	4,200	404,920	113
GO-YH	8,475	575,470	237
GO-WM	9,758	564,720	316
GO-EM	6,436	349,640	191
GO-East	6,271	325,300	162
GO-SW	6,826	308,890	185
GO-SE	8,545	473,120	159
GO-L	13,459	1,057,600	305
GO-total	82,028	5,210,530	2,155
GO-CU	4,356	0	
Grand total	86,384	5,210,530	
1998–99			
GO-NE	8,619	383,660	248
GO-NW	13,702	886,000	365
GO-M	n/a	n/a	n/a
GO-YH	8,683	521,770	241
GO-WM	9,474	535,830	305
GO-EM	6,754	332,590	192
GO-East	6,268	393,900	165
GO-SW	6,985	361,000	186
GO-SE	8,561	495,470	177
GO-L	12,722	1,439,600	311
GO-total	81,769	5,349,820	2,190
GO-CU	3,095	0	
Grand total	84,864	5,349,820	
1999–2000			
GO-NE	8,356	—	234
GO-NW	13,020	—	351
GO-M	n/a	—	n/a
GO-YH	8,878	—	240
GO-WM	9,345	—	239
GO-EM	6,935	—	206
GO-East	6,991	—	165
GO-SW	7,865	—	199
GO-SE	8,657	—	209
GO-L	13,681	—	346
GO-total	83,728		2,189
GO-CU	3,757		
Grand total	87,484		

Notes:

1. GO-Merseyside and GO-NW merged during 1998–99
2. Running cost figures shown are final out-turns for 1997–98 and 1998–99; and budgets for 1999–2000
3. Programme costs 1997–98 and 1998–99 for GO-WM exclude European Programme payments covering period 1994–99 of total value £627.9m and £762.6m respectively; for 1997–98 GO-L excludes London Transport Funding
4. Staff numbers are staff-in-post averages (not full time equivalents) taken over the course of the year
5. GO-CU is the Government Offices' Central Unit

Aircraft Safety

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will require commercial airlines to make available sufficient leg room to ensure that all passengers can adopt the brace position in the event of an emergency. [114937]

Mr. Mullin: The Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) has set minimum requirements relating to the spacing of passenger seats for aircraft on the UK register. This is because, in the event of an emergency, it is one of a number of factors which can have an effect on the evacuation of an aircraft. We are not aware that any other country has a similar requirement.

The CAA has also conducted extensive research into passenger brace positions and published its preferred brace position in a Notice to Air Operator Certificate Holders in 1993. This requires that the upper body is bent forward as far as possible with the head touching the back of the seat in front. However, it is recognised that there is not a seat pitch at which people from both extremes of the height range will be able to achieve this position. Where the preferred brace position cannot be adopted passengers should adopt a position as close as possible to it as the circumstances allow.

Landfill Tax

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has made to the Chancellor of the Exchequer for the return to local authorities of the full value of the Landfill Tax to fund schemes for reduction, re-use and recycling of waste; and if he will make a statement. [114888]

Mr. Mullin: None. The revenue raised from Landfill Tax is general Government revenue, not earmarked for particular purposes.

The local government settlement for 2000–01 provides an additional £2.9 billion (5.8 per cent.) for councils' total revenue spending. The Government are considering the question of resources for local authority waste management as part of the overall year 2000 Spending Review.

Heathrow Slots

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what EU legislation governs the allocation of departure and arrival slots at Heathrow to British airlines which merge with non-EU airlines; and if he will make a statement. [115226]

Mr. Mullin: Slot allocation at Heathrow is governed by EC Regulation 95/93, which was transposed into UK law by the Airports Slot Allocation Regulations 1993 (SI 1993/1067). Under these regulations, an independent co-ordinator has been appointed to allocate slots. He is charged with carrying out his duties in a neutral, transparent and non-discriminatory manner. No account is taken in the slot allocation process of the nationality of applicant airlines. However, European and national competition authorities have in the past had regard to the number of slots that would be controlled by a single operating entity, and any possible resultant detrimental effect on competition, when considering proposed mergers and acquisitions.

Private Zoos

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many private zoos there are in the UK; and how many reported accidents involving *(a)* animals and keepers and *(b)* animals and the public resulted in (i) hospitalisation and (ii) death in the last five years. [115118]

Mr. Mullin: Official statistics about the ownership of zoos are not kept.

The table shows the breakdown of injuries and death in zoos in Great Britain for the years 1994–98. These figures are reported to local authorities under the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 1995 (RIDDOR) and relate to accidents arising out of work activities at zoos.

	Injured by animal				
Severity of injury	*1994–95*	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*Total*
Employees					
Fatal	1	—	—	—	1
Major	—	—	—	—	—
Over 3 day	—	2	1	1	4
Member of public					
Fatal	—	—	—	—	—
Major	1	—	—	1	2
Total	2	2	1	2	7

Water (Kent)

Mr. Rowe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what forecasts he made of water availability in Kent prior to deciding on the number of new homes to be built in the county. [115338]

Ms Beverley Hughes: I would refer the hon. Member to the reply which my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Planning gave on 13 March 2000, *Official Report,* column 35W. The Secretary of State has made no decision on the number of new homes to be built in Kent. Details of our proposed changes to regional planning guidance in the South East will be published on 27 March 2000. These will include an illustrative breakdown of housing within the region to county level, including an annual rate of provision for Kent. We will be consulting SERPLAN and others on the distribution of housing within the region. Water availability will be one of the factors to be taken into account.

Post Offices

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to require councils to allow people to pay *(a)* rents and *(b)* council tax at post offices. [115485]

Ms Beverley Hughes: There is a range of payment facilities which local authorities offer to local tax and rent payers, including payment at Post Offices.

Since the costs of payment facilities vary, we believe it is right that individual local authorities should be able to decide which facilities to offer in the light of local circumstances.

Zoos and Safari Parks

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what controls exist in respect of the methods used to cull diseased stock at *(a)* zoos and *(b)* safari parks; and if he will make a statement. [115276]

Mr. Mullin *[holding answer 21 March 2000]:* In accordance with the Zoo Licensing Act 1981, all zoos and safari parks in the UK must be licensed by the appropriate local authority.

Inspectors appointed by the Secretary of State make recommendations to local authorities whether to grant a licence. In doing so, they are required to take account of the Secretary of State's Standards of Modern Zoo Practice.

There is no guidance on culling in the existing Standards issued in 1988. Earlier this month, I published new Standards which include a requirement that zoos and safari parks must have a policy that ensures humane and timely euthanasia to minimise suffering. Such a course of action may be justifiable under certain conditions, particularly if an animal poses a serious and unavoidable threat to human safety. However, it should not take place without guidance from a veterinary surgeon. The actual method involved will vary depending on the species of animal in question. The new Standards come into force on 3 April.

Aviation Expenditure

Mr. Syms: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will publish an itemised breakdown of the £27 million additional expenditure for aviation on Page 55 of the supply estimates 1999–2000. [115634]

Mr. Mullin *[holding answer 21 March 2000]:* A breakdown of the application of the £27 million additional funding provided to the Civil Aviation Services section of the Transport Industries Vote during the Spring Supplementary Estimates is given in the table.

Description	*£ million*
Shortfall in Eurocontrol Receipts[1]	8.0
Costs of Bechtel[2]	2.0
National Air Traffic Services (NATS) Public Private Partnership (PPP) Consultants[3]	6.0
Other Civil Aviation Authority (CAA)/NATS Costs[4]	11.0
Total	27.0

[1] Eurocontrol—This is mainly due to a shortfall in Eurocontrol receipts, which results from a reduction in the UK Government's entitlement, to adjust for an over-recovery two years previously.

[2] Costs of Bechtel—This is the Government's share in the cost of employing Bechtel, who were jointly hired by NATS and DETR to manage the New Scottish Centre air traffic control project. Bechtel expect to make savings of £80-£100 million on the cost of the project.

[3] NATS PPP Consultants—Cost of employing professional advisers to assist the Government in preparing for NATS PPP.

[4] Other CAA/NATS Costs—Government reimbursement to CAA and NATS of separation of the two, eg physical separation of CAA and NATS within CAA House in London, and separation of previously common functions. Under the terms of the Civil Aviation Act 1982, NATS and the CAA are entitled to reimbursement from the Government for the costs of advisers to help them to prepare for the NATS PPP.

Interactive Website

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans his Department has to set up an interactive website. [114822]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The central DETR has had an interactive website (at *www.detr.gov.uk*) since November 1997. The site provides access to a wide range of information about the Department and its policies and, in addition to the normal interactivity of any website, includes more than 300 inquiry e-mail addresses, which can be used to contact any area of the Department, four searchable databases, streamed video and audio and now a sub-domain for schools. There are plans for further developments in interactivity this year.

Draft Structure Plan (Avon)

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to reach a final decision in response to the draft structure plan for the former Avon area. [115853]

Ms Beverley Hughes: On 17 March the Secretary of State directed the four unitary authorities in the former Avon area not to adopt the structure plan before he has decided whether or not he should intervene. Every effort will be made to reach a final decision as quickly as possible.

Flooding (Copeland)

Dr. Jack Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will provide financial assistance to Copeland Borough Council under the Bellwin Scheme in respect of costs incurred following flooding in the area on 5 November 1999. [116066]

Ms Beverley Hughes: I am satisfied that financial assistance under the Bellwin scheme is justified in the case of Copeland Borough Council given the exceptional nature of the flooding and the damage caused. A scheme will, therefore, be established under section 155 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989. Grant will be paid to the authority to cover 85 per cent. of its eligible costs above a threshold, which have been incurred by the authority in dealing with the flooding.

Property Advisory Group

Mr. Watts: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what are the findings of the Financial Management and Policy Review on the Property Advisory Group; and what is the Government's response. [116104]

Mr. Raynsford: The Property Advisory Group (PAG) advises DETR Ministers and officials on commercial property issues. Established in 1978, the PAG is a link with the property world, providing access to sources of expertise on property, financial and legal matters. The Group's current terms of reference are:

> "to keep under review changes in the land and property market, advise on matters concerning the development process, and advise the Department generally on property issues".

As a non-Departmental public body, the PAG is subject to a financial management and policy review every five years, carried out internally. The review takes account of consultations both with the Group and relevant external bodies. This review has now been completed, and found in the first stage of its work that the Department had a continuing need for regular impartial advice from external sources on property matters, and that the Group was the most cost-effective means of providing this.

The second stage of the review considered the operation of the Group, with a full review of its term of reference and the scope of its work as well as its composition, working methods, and public profile. The overall impression was favourable, but the review made a number of detailed recommendations in these areas. We accept these recommendations, and will be taking them forward in co-operation with the Chairman, Robin Broadhurst, and members of the Group.

Green Ministers

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when was the last meeting of Green Ministers; what was discussed; and which Departments were represented by *(a)* Ministers and *(b)* officials. [116205]

Mr. Meacher: Green Ministers held their first meeting of this year on 16 March. The Committee agreed the publication of a series of guides to help promote sustainable development and the greening of Government across Whitehall and beyond. "Work of Green Ministers" lists all of the Government's targets and commitments in this area. It is also a good summary for those who would like to understand more about the role of Green Ministers and their work. "Sustainable development—what it is and what you can do" helps to explain sustainable development for the ordinary civil servant. The other leaflets will help public sector bodies prepare sustainable development awareness raising strategies and address biodiversity issues.

At the meeting, Green Ministers discussed progress on environmental management systems, travel plans and integrating the environment into policy. The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Office, their Green Minister, outlined progress on greening the police and prison service as well as the main department.

Green Ministers agreed:

there should be an annual meeting of departments' senior officials responsible for sustainable development

to continue their work to make the Government's funding regimes, such as the Spending Review and the Private Finance Initiative, as sustainable as possible, including taking account of the environment.

target a number of associate bodies (including non-departmental public bodies and executive agencies) and help them become models for best practice on sustainable development, encouraging others to follow suit.

Since Green Ministers' last meeting in November, the Government have agreed proposals for new energy targets. From 1 April, Government will reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 1 per cent. a year. In addition, Green Ministers will continue to make the benchmarking of Government buildings a priority and will investigate the feasibility of reporting on emissions from transport as well as buildings.

The Departments represented by Ministers were: Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions; Cabinet Office; Foreign and Commonwealth Office; Department for Health; Department of Social Security; the Chancellor's Departments; Law Officers

Departments; Home Office; the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food; and the Welsh Office. Those represented by officials were: Department for International Development and Department of Trade and Industry.

Manchester Metrolink

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress has been made in respect of the Manchester Metrolink light rail scheme; and if he will make a statement. [116206]

Mr. Prescott: Following the announcement in the Budget of an extra £280 million for transport spending, we intend to provide funding for the three extensions to the Manchester Metrolink for which Manchester Passenger Transport Authority has sought public funding. This is subject to formal completion of the project appraisal and agreement of the overall funding package. We expect that package to include a local contribution to the costs of the scheme. I shall make further announcements about the other elements of our package of additional transport spending shortly.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Asylum Seekers

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the cost of the tendering process for the scheme to provide vouchers for asylum seekers; how many firms bid for the contract; on what basis was the contract awarded to Sodexho Pass International; what is the duration and cost of the contract with Sodexho Pass International; what profit margin is built in to the contract; and if he will publish the contract. [114760]

Mrs. Roche: The cost of the tendering process for the new voucher scheme is not separately identifiable from the costs of other procurement activity undertaken in the course of establishing the new asylum support arrangements.

In response to an advertisement placed in the "Official Journal of the European Communities" (OJEC) on 10 July 1999, we received nine expressions of interest from prospective suppliers in designing and operating the voucher scheme. Four suppliers were subsequently invited to prepare detailed proposals as a basis for negotiation and three of these went forward to submit revised formal offers.

As anticipated in the OJEC, the decision to award the contract was taken with regard to the following factors: ability to achieve time scales; cost; technical competence; experience/ability; flexibility; commercial and financial strength; and, quality.

The initial duration of the contract is three years. This may be extended by two further one-year periods. Contractual details are commercially confidential.

Road Accident Victims

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received about the decision of the police to refuse to release to the media the names and addresses of people injured in road accidents; and if he will make a statement. [115299]

Mr. Charles Clarke: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has received representations from the Director and Members of the Society of Editors about the Association of Chief Police Officers guidelines "Naming of Victims or Witnesses Involved in Crime, Road and other incidents", which he is carefully considering. A number of hon. Members have also made representations.

Anti-social Behaviour Orders

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 14 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 162W, on anti-social behaviour orders, when the records of ASBOs will be collated centrally by his Department; and if he will make a statement. [115362]

Mr. Charles Clarke: We will be writing to local magistrates courts committees during the next few weeks asking them to provide us with information concerning the number of orders granted at their courts. We will be collating this information centrally as soon as we receive the responses.

Europol

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list those powers of Europol whose extension is under discussion; and what is his policy in respect of them. [115620]

Mr. Charles Clarke: At the European Council held in Tampere in October 1999, it was agreed that Europol's powers should be extended to cover money laundering in general, regardless of the type of offence from which the laundered proceeds originate. The Government welcome this proposal.

It was also agreed at Tampere that arrangements for the setting up of joint investigation teams, as envisaged in Article 30(2) of the Treaty of Amsterdam, should be put in place without delay, as a first step to combat trafficking in drugs and human beings as well as terrorism. The arrangements should allow representatives of Europol to participate, as appropriate, in the joint teams in a support capacity. It is not envisaged that Europol's mandate will need to be extended to give effect to this conclusion.

There are no other current proposals to extend Europol's powers.

Force Crest

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what are the average dimensions of the force crest on police cars in England and Wales; and what is the size of the *(a)* largest and *(b)* smallest crest on the side of police cars in England and Wales. [115570]

Mr. Charles Clarke: We do not collect this information from forces.

Prison Accommodation

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prisoners in each prison establishment are held *(a)* two to a cell in a single cell and *(b)* three to a cell in a double cell. [115614]

Mr. Boateng: The average number of prisoners for the financial year April 1999 to February 2000 held two in a single cell in each prison establishment is listed in the table. The Prison Service does not collect data on the number of prisoners held three in a double cell.

These data are provisional and are subject to validation by prisons.

Average number of prisoners held two to a cell for one— April 1999 to February 2000

Prison name	*Two to a cell*
Acklington	0
Albany	0
Altcourse	416
Ashfield	0
Ashwell	0
Askham Grange	0
Aylesbury	0
Bedford	137
Belmarsh	0
Birmingham	758
Blakenhurst	371
Blantyre House	0
Blundeston	0
Brinsford	157
Bristol	102
Brixton	337
Brockhill	0
Buckley Hall	0
Bullingdon	77
Bullwood Hall	0
Camp Hill	138
Canterbury	223
Cardiff	471
Castington	0
Channings Wood	216
Chelmsford	66
Coldingley	0
Cookham Wood	54
Dartmoor	0
Deerbolt	0
Doncaster	589
Dorchester	147
Dover	0
Downview	32
Drake Hall	0
Durham	538
East Sutton Park	0
Eastwood Park	40
Elmley	218
Erlestoke	1
Everthorpe	64
Exeter	367
Featherstone	0
Feltham	47
Ford	0
Forest Bank	0
Foston Hall	0
Frankland	0
Full Sutton	0
Garth	0
Gartree	0
Glen Parva	301
Gloucester	180
Grendon	0
Guys Marsh	61

Average number of prisoners held two to a cell for one— April 1999 to February 2000

Prison name	*Two to a cell*
Haslar	0
Hatfield	0
Haverigg	0
Hewell Grange	0
Highdown	0
Highpoint	4
Hindley	0
Hollesley Bay	0
Holloway	0
Holme House	105
Hull	0
Huntercombe	3
Kingston	0
Kirkham	0
Kirklevington	0
Lancaster	0
Lancaster Farms	41
Latchmere House	0
Leeds	613
Leicester	286
Lewes	29
Leyhill	0
Lincoln	304
Lindholme	0
Littlehey	46
Liverpool	420
Long Lartin	0
Low Newton	36
Lowdham Grange	15
Maidstone	74
Manchester	387
Moorland	41
Morton Hall	0
Mount	8
New Hall	60
North Sea Camp	0
Northallerton	252
Norwich	213
Nottingham	0
Onley	0
Parc	0
Parkhurst	21
Pentonville	341
Portland	139
Preston	519
Ranby	50
Reading	140
Risley	65
Rochester	0
Send	0
Shepton Mallet	36
Shrewsbury	0
Stafford	0
Stanford Hill	0
Stocken	29
Stoke Heath	0
Styal	22
Sudbury	0
Swaleside	0
Swansea	198
Swinfen Hall	43
Thorn Cross	0
Usk	149
Verne	35
Wakefield	0
Wandsworth	432
Wayland	30
Wealstun	10
Weare	0
Wellingborough	0
Werrington	0
Wetherby	0

Average number of prisoners held two to a cell for one—April 1999 to February 2000

Prison name	*Two to a cell*
Whatton	0
Whitemoor	0
Winchester	299
Wolds	0
Woodhill	103
Wormwood Scrubs	270
Wymott	0

Secure Units

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to divide prison establishments into smaller units. [115626]

Mr. Boateng: The Woolf Report recommended that prisons should be divided into small and manageable secure units. Since the Report was published, the Prison Service has focused upon this need when designing both new prison buildings (public and private) and new houseblocks (extensions of existing prisons). It is also a consideration when refurbishing existing prison accommodation—special attention is always given to improving the security of wings by adding new gates, control and restraint staircases and reinforcing the protection of roof spaces.

Roger Sylvester

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what internal disciplinary actions have been taken by the Metropolitan police concerning officers who were responsible for the custody of Roger Sylvester in January 1999. [115642]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis has informed me that the reports of the investigations into the death of Roger Sylvester by Essex police, supervised by the Police Complaints Authority, have been referred to the Crown Prosecution Service to consider whether criminal charges should be laid against any of the police officers involved in this case.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what special police actions by officers not based at Tottenham police station took place from 10 to 13 January 1999 in the Tottenham police division. [115643]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis has informed me that an investigation by the Complaints Investigation Bureau into the circumstances surrounding the detention of Roger Sylvester by officers based at Tottenham police station began on 11 January 1999.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he expects the Police Complaints Authority report into the circumstances surrounding the death of Roger Sylvester to be published. [115644]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The circumstances surrounding the death of Roger Sylvester have been investigated by Essex police, supervised by the Police Complaints Authority. The publication of Investigating Officers' reports resulting from public complaints is a matter for individual Chief Officers of Police, in this case the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis.

The Government have accepted recommendation 10 of the Macpherson report regarding disclosure of Investigating Officers' reports to complainants. The action being taken to implement this recommendation is detailed in the First Annual Report on Progress on the Home Secretary's Action Plan, published on 23 February.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received concerning the death of Roger Sylvester in January 1999; and if he will make a statement. [115645]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Since January 1999, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has received a number of representations about the death of Roger Sylvester from several hon. Members, relatives of Roger Sylvester, members of the public and supporters of the Roger Sylvester Justice Campaign.

Most of the representations call for a public inquiry into the circumstances surrounding Roger Sylvester's detention by the Metropolitan police. This matter has been investigated by Essex police, supervised by the Police Complaints Authority. The Investigating Officers' reports have now been referred to the Crown Prosecution Service for consideration.

Electoral Register

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he intends to publish his plans for the regulation of the use of the electoral register under paragraphs 10 and 11 of Schedule 2 to the Representation of the People Act 1983 as amended by the Representation of the People Act 2000; what discussions he has had regarding those plans; and if he will make a statement. [115815]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I have met representatives from the banking, credit and mail order industries on several occasions. Officials are also engaged in a series of meetings with these and other organisations aimed at clarifying the issues to be addressed by the regulations. As soon as these discussions have been concluded the regulations will be drafted and published.

Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if it is his intention that press notices issued by a Minister of the Crown, Government Department and local authority during the relevant period referred to in Clause 118 (2) of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill should be *(a)* posted on the internet and *(b)* otherwise be made publicly accessible; [115859]

(2) if he will publish a definition of the term press notice used in Clause 118 (3)(d) of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill. [115858]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: As I indicated during the Report Stage of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill on 14 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 255, a press notice for the purpose of clause 120(3) of the Bill (as it is now) is a notice to the press and not to the general public.

It is the general practice of Government Departments to place their press notices on the internet. They are not otherwise made available to the general public except in response to specific requests. We do not think that these facilities need to be suspended or modified during referendum periods.

The arrangements in respect of press releases issued by local authorities are a matter for them.

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to the oral statement of the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien), of 14 March 2000, *Official Report*, columns 255–56, if he will publish guidelines on the role of *(a)* civil servants, *(b)* special advisers and *(c)* local government officers in future referendum campaigns; if he will publish draft guidelines whilst the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill is before Parliament; and if he will make a statement. [115857]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Government fully intend that civil servants (including special advisers) should continue to be issued with guidance as to their conduct during general election and referendum campaigns. Such guidance is prepared and issued in respect of each general election and referendum campaign as and when it is required. Copies of the guidance issued in respect of previous referendums are available in the Library. Guidance to the employees of local authorities is not a matter for central Government.

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he intends to publish draft orders to be made under Clause 122 of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill. [115813]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The purpose of the order-making power in clause 124 of the Bill (as it is now) will be to set up arrangements for the administration of referendums by applying relevant provisions of the Representation of the People Acts and Regulations. A recent example of this kind of order is the Greater London Authority (Referendum Arrangements) Order 1998 (SI 1998–746). We do not envisage exercising the order-making power in the Bill until a referendum to which Part VII of the Bill applies is in immediate prospect.

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the increase in the number of registered political parties as a result of the restriction on the description of candidates contained in Clause 19 (2) of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill; and if he will make a statement. [115832]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: It will be for candidates and the organisations which they represent, if any, to decide whether to register. It seems likely that the number of registered parties will increase, but no basis is available for any reliable estimate of the extent of any increase.

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what research he has undertaken into the cost to registered political parties of compliance with the requirements of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill; if he will place a copy of that research in the Library; and if he will make a statement. [115827]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: On 26 May 1999, the Home Office wrote to the main political parties requesting, among other things, a broad indication of the additional administrative costs that would be incurred in order to establish the systems to comply with the statutory disclosure regime. Only the Liberal Democrats submitted any estimate of such costs.

Clause 32 of the Bill enables the Electoral Commission to allocate up to £500,000 in grants or assistance in kind (for example software programmes) to registered political parties to help them meet the initial costs involved in complying with the provisions of Parts III (accounting requirements) and IV (control of donations). This sum has been set on the basis of what the Government believe is both reasonable and affordable.

The Home Office will shortly be inviting the main parties to enter into further discussions about the grants or assistance that the Commission might provide.

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he intends to appoint the interim Chief Executive of the Electoral Commission. [115830]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: As soon as is practicable after the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill receives Royal Assent.

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if it is his intention that the duty placed on the Electoral Commission to promote the institutions of the European Union under Class 11(1)(c) of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill should extend only to those institutions of the European Union that are directly elected; and if he will make a statement; [115835]

(2) if *(a)* the European Single Currency and *(b)* the European Central Bank are institutions of the European Union within the meaning of Clause 11(1)(c) of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill. [115834]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: As part of the Electoral Commission's role of encouraging greater public participation in the democratic process, including by voting at elections, clause 12 (formerly clause 11) of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill provides for the Electoral Commission to promote public awareness of the

institutions of the European Union.

For the purposes of this clause, the term includes any body constituted under the Treaty establishing the European Community and is not, therefore, confined to the European Parliament. Promoting greater understanding of the role of the Parliament cannot be achieved without reference to the other institutions of the European Union, including the Council of Ministers, the European Commission, the European Court of Justice and the European Central Bank. The European single currency is not an institution of the European Union.

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the progress of his discussions with the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Executive about the extent to which the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill should apply to Scotland. [115814]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Subject to a number of express limitations in respect of local government and local government elections, clause 151 provides for the whole of the Bill to apply to Scotland.

As I announced during the Report Stage of the Bill on 13 March 2000, *Official Report,* columns 47–48, the Scottish Parliament and Executive have indicated that they would welcome an enabling power, akin to that in clause 18 but exercisable in this case by Scottish Ministers, to transfer any of the functions of the Local Government Boundary Commission for Scotland to the Electoral Commission. They have also agreed that there should be an enabling power, again exercisable by Scottish Ministers with the agreement of the Parliament, to extend the Electoral Commission's remit under clauses 9(3)(a)(ii), 12(1), and 135(1)(b) to local government elections in Scotland. Amendments to this effect will be introduced by the Government during the Bill's passage in Another Place.

In addition, the Scottish Parliament and Executive have agreed that proposed Government amendments to the Bill to amend section 75 of the Representation of the People Act 1983, so as to make it compatible with the European Convention on Human Rights following the European Court's decision in the Case of Bowman, should extend to local government elections in Scotland.

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he intends to begin the appointments process for electoral commissioners. [115829]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Preparatory work is already under way. A recruitment firm has been selected to assist in filling the posts and it is expected that advertisements will appear next month. The process will follow the Code of Practice for Public Appointments. A panel with independent representation will determine whom to recommend for appointment so that the procedure set out in Clause 3 of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill can be followed.

Criminal Justice and Court Services Bill

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what statutory mechanisms exist to ensure that *(a)* an offender convicted of an offence against a child not listed in Schedule 4 to the Criminal Justice and Court Services Bill and *(b)* an offender sentenced to a term of imprisonment of less than 12 months for an offence committed against a child is prohibited from working with children; what is the maximum term of such a prohibition; and if he will make a statement; [115818]

(2) if it is his intention that a disqualification order issued under Part II of the Criminal Justice and Court Services Bill, should apply indefinitely; and if he will make a statement; [115831]

(3) what mechanisms prevent *(a)* sex offenders and *(b)* other offenders from working with children; and if he will make a statement. [115833]

Mr. Straw: There are several statutory mechanisms that currently exist to prevent sex offenders and other offenders from working with children. The Education Reform Act 1988, the Education Act 1996 and the Protection of Children Act 1999 provide for lists to be kept by the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, the Secretary of State for Health or the National Assembly for Wales of individuals deemed unsuitable, and therefore banned, from working with children in the areas of healthcare, social services, and education. In addition, there are Regulations relating to particular areas of work with children made under the Children Act 1989.

The Criminal Justice and Court Services Bill introduces measures that would complete the establishment of an integrated system for the protection of children. Under this system, a judge would be able to disqualify those who commit serious criminal offences against children from working with them. In addition, the Bill proposes a new criminal offence of breaching a ban on working with children imposed either through inclusion on one of the relevant lists or by the courts. It also proposes a new definition of working with children which covers all such work in the public, private, voluntary and volunteering sectors.

Under the Bill, an offender convicted of an offence not listed in Schedule 4, or convicted of such an offence but sentenced to a term of imprisonment of less than 12 months, would not be subject to the statutory disqualification against working with children imposed by a judge. However, if they already work with children in one of the areas covered by the lists kept under the Education Reform Act 1988, the Education Act 1996, or the Protection of Children Act 1999, they could be banned by the Secretary of State. They could also be banned under those lists as a result of conduct which demonstrates that they are unsuitable to work with children even if they are not convicted of any offence. Under Part V of the Police Act 1997, an offender's full criminal record will be available to those registered under the Act who countersign applications for criminal or enhanced criminal record certificates in respect of those to whom they intend to offer positions which involve working with children.

An offender who is disqualified by a court under Part II of the Bill or is placed on one of the lists will be disqualified from working with children indefinitely. However, the Bill provides for a review of the disqualification order by a Tribunal. The individual must first prove to the Tribunal that his circumstances have changed sufficiently to warrant a review of the disqualification order. The individual must then demonstrate to the Tribunal that this change of circumstances is such that he is no longer a risk to children, and therefore need no longer be subject to disqualification. This review process is only available after a period of ten years (five years for juveniles) after the disqualification was imposed or the offender released from custody.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the number of persons who will be sent to prison annually as a result of the introduction under Clause 55 of the Criminal Justice and Court Services Bill of the three-month sentence for failing to secure regular attendance at school; what will be the cost to public funds; and if he will make a statement. [115854]

Mr. Straw: At present, some 80 per cent. of parents fail to turn up in court when prosecuted for school attendance offences. The intention of this measure is to compel the parent to attend court. Introducing the risk of imprisonment allows magistrates to issue a warrant for the arrest of a defendant who fails to turn up at court to

answer charges when summonsed to do so. It also allows magistrates to impose other sentencing options such as community service orders. Magistrates will want to consider how best to secure education for the child involved, and we expect such a sentence will be appropriate only in wholly exceptional circumstances.

The costs of implementing the measure are estimated at up to £1.2 million per annum. This assumes legal aid costs of up to £1 million, and some minor costs associated with enforcing the warrant to attend court and prosecution costs for education authorities.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of *(a)* the average cost to public funds of an exclusion order made under Part III of the Criminal Justice and Court Services Bill, *(b)* the number of orders that will be made annually and *(c)* the number of other community orders that will include exclusion requirements; if magistrates courts will be able to make such an order; and if he will make a statement. [115824]

Mr. Straw: The Bill contains provisions to enable these powers to be piloted. This will enable us to make a better judgment about the extent to which they may be used and their financial impact.

In the meantime, the figures quoted in the Explanatory Memorandum assume that there will be about 440 free-standing exclusion orders and 755 exclusion conditions imposed annually. The estimated net impact on public resources (taking into account both costs and savings) is approximately £500 per exclusion imposed.

As with all other community orders, magistrates courts will be able to make an exclusion order, or impose exclusion as a condition of a community order.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the number of prisoners who will be released on licence earlier than at present as a result of the introduction of *(a)* monitoring and *(b)* drug testing requirements for release on licence under the provisions of Part III of the Criminal Justice and Court Services Bill; and if he will make a statement. [115820]

Mr. Boateng: The measures will not change any prisoner's eligibility for release. The basis of any discretionary release decision will continue to be careful risk assessment. The use of the new licence conditions will be subject to piloting before any consideration is given to wider implementation. Evaluation of the pilots will include consideration of the impact of the new licence conditions on discretionary release decisions taken by the Parole Board and by the Prison Service, on behalf of the Secretary of State.

We estimate that the new powers to impose drug testing as a licence condition will have no impact at all on release decisions, but will act solely as a reinforcing measure in cases where release would have been authorised or required in any case. However, the wider availability of electronic monitoring may influence release decisions in a small number of cases involving prisoners serving determinate sentences of four years or more who are eligible for parole, and where the risk assessment is finely balanced. We currently estimate that the parole rate may rise by up to 4 per cent., which would represent approximately 230 additional prisoners granted parole per annum. These estimates will be tested through the pilots, and guidance will be issued to the Parole Board in the light of the pilots.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if it is his policy that a person breaching the provisions of *(a)* an exclusion order and *(b)* a drug abstinence order made under the provisions of the Criminal Justice and Court Services Bill should be taken before a court after the first breach; and if he will make a statement. [115822]

Mr. Straw: The Criminal Justice and Court Services Bill provides that an offender over 18 who fails unacceptably to comply with the conditions of an exclusion order or a drug abstinence order may be given a statutory warning that a second unacceptable failure to comply within 12 months would result in a return to court. There remains the option of returning an offender to court for a first unacceptable failure to comply.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if it is his policy that a positive test for *(a)* Class A and *(b)* Class B drugs conducted under Clause 48 of the Criminal Justice and Court Services Bill should be taken into account as an aggravating factor in the sentencing exercise if the suspect is subsequently convicted of the offence with which they have been charged; and if he will make a statement. [115819]

Mr. Straw: Clause 48 of The Criminal Justice and Court Services Bill provides for drug testing for specified Class A drugs only. The purpose is to identify and monitor drug misusers, who may need treatment; to inform bail decisions; and to assist in appropriate sentencing. The Bill does not make drug use an aggravating factor in relation to an offence.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if it is his policy that any suspect charged with an offence who subsequently tests positive for *(a)* Class A and *(b)* Class B drugs under the provisions of Clause 48 of the Criminal Justice and Court Services Bill should be prosecuted for unlawful possession of such a drug (i) in addition to prosecution for other offences with which they have been charged and (ii) in cases where the charges for other offences are subsequently dropped; and if he will make a statement. [115817]

Mr. Straw: The purpose of drug testing, for specified Class A drugs, as provided for in Clause 48 of the Bill, is to identify and monitor drug misusers who may need treatment and to inform bail decisions. A positive test will not, in itself, result in prosecution for unlawful possession.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the average cost to public funds of a drug abstinence order made under Part III of the Criminal Justice and Court Services Bill; what estimate he has made of the number of orders that will be made annually; what estimate he has made of the number of other community orders that will include drug abstinence requirements; if magistrates courts will be abe to make such an order; and if he will make a statement. [115823]

Mr. Straw: The average cost of a Drug Abstinence Order/ Requirement under community supervision is estimated at £1,500. The new drug testing regime will be

piloted in the first instance. It is estimated that initial piloting in three areas would result in 3,500 offenders being made subject to the drug abstinence requirement.

Home Detention Curfew Scheme

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many offenders have been released to date under the home detention curfew scheme; how many offenders convicted of each category of offence have been released; how many offenders convicted of *(a)* unlawful supply of a controlled drug and *(b)* possession of a controlled drug with intent to supply have been released on the scheme; how many have re-offended while on the scheme, and what offences have been committed; and if he will make a statement. [115816]

Mr. Boateng: As of 13 March 2000, 17,871 prisoners have been placed on home detention curfew since the scheme commenced on 28 January 1999. The original offences committed by these prisoners, and the number of prisoners convicted of each type of offence, are shown in the table.

Of those prisoners released up to and including 13 March 2000, 969 were convicted of unlawful supply of a controlled drug and 1,238 were convicted of drugs possession with intent to supply.

As of 13 March 2000, the Prison Service had received notification of 185 curfewees who had been charged with an offence committed while subject to the home detention curfew scheme. The offences with which the curfewees were charged are shown in the table.

I refer to the replies I gave to the right hon. Lady on 7 March 2000, *Official Report*, columns 571–72W and on 17 March 2000, *Official Report*, columns 378–80W.

Original offences committed by prisoners released on home detention curfew

Offence type	*Number*
Manslaughter	43
Other homicide and attempted homicide	150
Wounding	2,258
Assaults	441
Cruelty to children	21
Other violence against the person	235
Indecent assault	16
Buggery	1
Unlawful sexual intercourse	1
Abduction	1
Bigamy	10
Burglary	1,697
Robbery	717
Taking and driving away	216
Other theft	1,643
Handling stolen goods	563
Fraud	1,476
Forgery	77
Drugs	2,931
Arson	116
Criminal damage	82
In charge or driving under the influence of drink or drugs	617
Other motoring offences	1,530
Drunkenness	64
Blackmail	52
Kidnapping	26
Affray	472
Violent disorder	204
Perjury/libel/pervert the course of justice	267
Threat/disorderly behaviour	83

Original offences committed by prisoners released on home detention curfew

Offence type	*Number*
Breach of Court Order	187
Other offences	673
Offence not recorded	1,001
Total	17,871

Offences with which home detention curfewees have been charged

Offence type	*Number*
Burglary, theft and theft from shops[1]	66
Assault	32
Driving and Traffic Offences	18
Drug Offences	15
Breach of the peace[2]	15
Criminal Damage	10
Handling Stolen Goods/Deception	9
Threatening Behaviour	7
Possession of an offensive weapon	3
Breach of court injunction or Restraining Order	3
Rape	2
Harassment	1
Going Equipped	1
False Imprisonment	1
Arson	1
Indecent Exposure	1
Total	185

[1] Including taking without consent/taking and driving away.
[2] Including Drunk and Disorderly.

Note:
Where a curfewee was charged with more than one offence, they appear in the table next to the most serious offence. The table excludes those where, following initial notification, the Prison Service was informed that the charges had been withdrawn. Between 29 February (the date for which the data in this table were last provided) and 13 March, the Prison Service was informed of six cases where the curfewee had been charged with a further offence and three cases where earlier charges had been withdrawn.

Probation Service

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the cost to public funds of his plans to change the name of the probation service. [115856]

Mr. Boateng: Creating a national unified service from the current 54 independent services involves a number of changes, of which the change of name is only one part. Others include structural changes to amalgamate some area services and to make all area services more accountable to the Home Secretary. We estimate that the costs involved in establishing a national identity may require central funding of around £800,000, although the cost of changing the name of itself is minimal.

Orders (Name Changes)

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the cost to public funds of his plans to change the name of *(a)* probation orders, *(b)* community service orders and *(c)* combination orders. [115825]

Mr. Boateng: Any administrative costs arising from the change of names of probation orders, community service orders and combination orders will be minimal and can be absorbed within current funding.

DEFENCE

Courts-Martial (Royal Navy)

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what percentage of the courts-martial held for Royal Navy ratings between 1993 and 1999 were at the election of the accused. [107867]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 1 February 2000]:* This information is only available from 1994, and the details are as follows.

	Total numbers of courts martial for Royal Navy ratings	*Percentage at request of accused*
1994	80	18
1995	64	25
1996	44	14
1997	56	34
1998	52	37
1999	49	47

Until 1996 only Leading Rates and higher ranks were able to elect for courts martial. In 1996, the Armed Forces Act extended this right to all naval ratings, which accounts for the increase in the figures from 1997 onwards.

Sea King

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many units of the active noise reduction system for the Sea King MK2 his Department is seeking to acquire and at what cost; what estimate he has made of the additional cost of such an upgrade to the MK7; and if he will make a statement. [113900]

Dr. Moonie: One hundred Analogue Active Noise Reduction (ANR) systems for the Sea King MK2 were delivered in 1999: the total cost of the programme was some £660,000 VAT inclusive. A further 30 are to be procured to support the Sea King Airborne Early Warning (AEW) MK7 flight trials programme at a unit production cost of £599. Work to develop an improved Digital ANR for the Sea King MK7 is still at an early stage but the cost of introducing such a system is estimated to be in the region of £1 million.

Minefield Detection System

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the results were of the phase 1 testing of the remote minefield detection system; what is his estimate of the total cost of the system; and if he will make a statement. [113904]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Sir Robert Walmsley to Mr. Mike Hancock, dated 22 March 2000:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about the result of the phase 1 testing of the remote minefield detection system and the estimate of the total cost of the system. This letter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

The aim of phase 1 of the remote minefield detection system Technology Demonstration Programme (TDP) was to evaluate a number of remote sensing technologies. Five emerging technologies were investigated over a ten month period for applicability to the remote minefield detection role. Following feasibility studies a formal sensor selection methodology recommended as Infrared Polarimetric Camera (IPRC) coupled with Ultra WideBand Synthetic Aperture Radar (UWB SAR) as the best complimentary combination. Other technologies were discarded as being too immature, poorly performing, or impractical for airborne operations. Phase 2, which began in November 1996, covers the detailed design and build of the sensors.

The cost of phase 1 of the TDP was some £411k. The technology is still at a very early stage and, as a consequence, it is too early to estimate the potential cost of any resulting system.

Shoeburyness

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he intends to visit Warden Bay to investigate the complaints by local residents about the noise levels of explosions from the firing range at Shoeburyness. [114508]

Dr. Moonie: There are no plans for the Secretary of State for Defence, or indeed any Defence Minister, to visit Warden Bay to investigate the complaints by local residents about the noise levels of explosions from the firing range at Shoeburyness.

My noble Friend the Minister for Defence Procurement is, however, due to discuss this issue shortly with the hon. Member for North Thanet (Mr. Gale).

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) how much notice is given to local residents prior to the commencement of gun explosions at Shoeburyness; [114510]

(2) when the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency last visited Warden Bay to check monitoring levels for gun explosions at Shoeburyness; [114507]

(3) what work of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency at the firing ranges at Shoeburyness has been carried out on behalf of *(a)* the UK's armed forces only and *(b)* the armed forces of foreign countries in the last 12 months. [114509]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Sir John Chisholm to Mr. Derek Wyatt, dated 22 March 2000:

I am replying to three of your parliamentary questions about activities at the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency range at Shoeburyness.

You ask how much notice is given to local residents prior to the commencement of gun explosions at Shoeburyness. A recorded message on a freephone telephone gives details of the firings scheduled for the following working day. The information given includes the type of activity, whether gunfire and/or explosions and the start time and the expected finish time. Additional information will be given if, for example, an activity is planned to take place outside normal working hours or it is expected to be particularly noisy. That said, the noise levels of activities undertaken at Shoeburyness are, for the most part, comfortably within the Ministry of Defence's guideline limit. We also endeavour to place notice of the out of hours and noisier activities in the local press and/or broadcast details on local radio. The timing of a press announcement will depend very much on the day of publication of the newspaper but could be up to a week in advance of the actual activity.

The closest monitor to Warden Bay is located at Sheerness Docks. All monitors are covered by an on-call maintenance contract which provides maintenance and repair cover for any failed monitor. Staff in the range operations office check the operation of all monitors on a daily basis and also hold records of the noise levels detected.

The majority of work carried out at Shoeburyness has been on behalf of UK's armed forces. In the course of the last 12 months, a very small amount of work has been undertaken for non-UK customers, but only with the support of the relevant MOD authorities. These activities did not generate any noise complaints.

I hope the above explains the situation.

Military Exercises (Kenya)

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the exercises carried out by Her Majesty's armed forces in Kenya in each of the last five years. [114429]

Mr. Spellar: The Following exercises have been carried out, or are to take place in the immediate future, in Kenya by Her Majesty's Armed Forces in the years 1996 to 2000:

a. *1996*

1. 4 January-15 February 1996—Ex GRAND PRIX 1/96.
2. 4 January-28 March 1996—Ex OAK APPLE 96.
3. 16 February-28 March 1996—Ex GRAND PRIX 2/96.
4. 29 March-29 April 1996—Ex MONO PRIX 96.
5. 29 March-29 April 1996—Ex SHARP POINT 96.
6. 29 March-29 April 1996—Ex PINE APPLE 96.
7. 28 October-9 December 1996—Ex GRAND PRIX 3/96.
8. 28 October-9 December 1996—Ex CRAB APPLE 96.

b. *1997*

1. 4 January-15 February 1997—Ex GRAND PRIX 1/97.
2. 4 January-28 March 1997—Ex OAK APPLE 97.
3. 16 February-28 March 1997—Ex GRAND PRIX 2/97.
4. 29 March-29 April 1997—Ex MONO PRIX 1997.
5. 29 March-29 April 1997—Ex SHARP POINT 97.
6. 29 March-29 April 1997—Ex PINE APPLE 97.
7. 23 April-15 May 97—Ex HIGH SLOPE.
8. 28 October-9 December 97—Ex GRAND PRIX 3/97.
9. 28 October-9 December 1997—Ex CRAB APPLE 97.

c. *1998*

1. 4 January-15 February 1998—Ex GRAND PRIX 1/98
2. 4 January-28 March 1998—Ex OAK APPLE 98.
3. 16 February-28 March 1998—Ex GRAND PRIX 2/98.
4. 29 March-29 April 1998—Ex MONO PRIX 98.
5. 29 March-29 April 1998—Ex SHARP POINT 1998.
6. 29 March-29 April 1998—Ex PINE APPLE 98.
7. 28 October-9 December 1998—Ex GRAND PRIX 3/98.
8. 28 October-9 December 1998—Ex Crab APPLE 98.

d. *1999*

1. 5 January-16 February 1999—Ex GRAND PRIX 1/99.
2. 5 January-31 March 1999—Ex OAK APPLE 99.
3. 5 January-17 February 1999—Ex CYGENT GOLD.
4. 17 February-31 March 1999—Ex GRAND PRIX 2/99.
5. 31 March-1 May 1999—Ex MONO PRIX 99.
6. 31 March-1 May 1999—Ex SHARP POINT 99.
7. 31 March-1 May 1999—Ex PINE APPLE 99.
8. 5 August-24 September 1999—Ex CAPE AVALANCHE.
9. 21 October-31 December 1999—Ex GRAND PRIX 3/99.
10. 21 October-3 December 1999—Ex CRAB Apple 1999.

e. *2000*

1. 11 January 20 February 2000—Ex GRAND PRIX 1/00.
2. 30 January-1 April 2000—Ex OAK APPLE 00.
3. 21 February-1 April 2000—Ex GRAND PRIX 2/00.
4. 21 February-1 April 2000—Ex DEVILS HORIZON.
5. 2 April-3 May 2000—Ex MONO PRIX 00.
6. 2 April-3 May 2000—Ex SHARP POINT 00.
7. 2 April-3 May 2000—Ex PINE APPLE 00.

Defence Diversification Council

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) when he expects the Defence Diversification Council to present its first Annual report; [115038]

(2) if he will name the Chairman and members of the Defence Diversification Council. [115039]

Dr. Moonie: The Defence Diversification Agency began to operate last year and is already providing a substantial service, particularly to small and medium enterprises. The Defence Diversification Council has not yet been established.

Deterrent Capability

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the impact of, and reasons underlying, the change from minutes to days, as a measure of the United Kingdom's deterrent capability. [115539]

Mr. Hoon: There has been no impact on our ability to deter threats to our interests. As we made clear in the Strategic Defence Review (SDR), improvements in the strategic environment now enable us to safeguard our national security at a lower level of nuclear deterrent readiness.

One element of the change in posture announced in the SDR was the decision to maintain our nuclear forces at a "notice to fire" measured in days, rather than minutes. This reduced state of alert allows greater use of ballistic missile submarines for secondary tasks. The flexibility of the Trident system ensures, however, that we can restore a higher state of alert should it ever become necessary to do so.

Pensions

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what would be the cost of making payments, in line with the payments which would be made to the spouse of someone who had served all of their time in the armed forces after 6 April 1978, to spouses of deceased ex-service personnel *(a)* who married after their spouse retired from the armed forces, *(b)* whose spouses served in the armed forces before 6 April 1978 and *(c)* to both groups. [115355]

Mr. Spellar: The MOD could not identify from its records the number of servicemen who retired before 1978 and subsequently married or remarried. As such marriages did not create pension entitlements, records of them were not kept. It would theoretically be possible to identify from pensions records the surviving widows of servicemen who retired after 1978 and subsequently married or remarried, and to calculate the pension entitlement which would be generated if service before 1 April 1978 qualified for a

widow's pension; however, this would require a manual search of 76,000 widow's pensions files and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to review the position of spouses of deceased ex-servicemen who are not entitled to the forces family pension as part of his review of forces' pensions. [115354]

Mr. Spellar: The question of spouses' pensions is being addressed as part of the Review of the Armed Forces Pension Scheme (AFPS) in which all aspects of the AFPS are being examined. The Review is scheduled to report during the summer and it would be premature to speculate about its outcome.

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) how many spouses of deceased ex-service personnel are not eligible for a forces family pension; and for what reasons; [115352]

(2) what is the notional total value of pensions to which spouses of deceased ex-service personnel are not entitled. [115339]

Mr. Spellar: No records are kept of the numbers of spouses of deceased service personnel who are not eligible for a Forces Family pension. When a serviceman dies, unless survivor benefits are payable, the pension record is closed and the personal file is archived. It follows that it is also impossible to calculate the notional total value of pensions which might be paid to the spouses of deceased ex-service personnel who at present do not receive them.

Surviving spouses of service personnel are currently entitled to receive a widow/widowers' pension unless:

Their partner was engaged on non pensionable terms of service.

They have remarried or co-habit (except that widows over 60 and widowers over 65 continue to receive the Guaranteed Minimum Pension contracted out of SERPS).

They are a widow of a post retirement marriage whose partner retired from the armed forces before 6 April 1978.

They are widowers whose partner retired from the Service before 1 October 1987.

Their partner has opted out of the Armed Forces Pension Scheme in favour of a personal pension plan, and their death was not attributable to service.

Where a spouse's pension is received, it is calculated at one half the rate of the spouse's pension for service after 1 April 1973; and at one third the rate of the spouse's pension for service before that date.

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many spouses of deceased ex-service personnel are entitled to only a part of the forces family pension; and for what reasons. [115353]

Mr. Spellar: This information could be provided only at disproportionate cost as each of the Armed Forces Pension Scheme's 76,000 widow's files would have to be searched manually.

A widow or widower might receive only a part of a Forces Family Pension for any of the following reasons:

If she is the widow of a deceased officer or other rank who married after retirement but on or after 6 April 1978. Such an individual would be entitled only to half that part of the spouse's pension which relates to service from that date.

If he is the widower of a deceased officer or other rank who married on or after 1 October 1987. Such an individual would be entitled only to half that part of the spouse's pension which relates to service from that date.

Where a widow, on or after reaching age 60, or a widower, on or after reaching age 65 remarries or cohabits. In those circumstances only the Guaranteed Minimum Pension contracted out of SERPS remains in payment.

In some circumstances, the Forces Family Pension may be abated by the amount commuted under life commutation terms.

Where a widow or widower is separated from their partner at the time of the Serviceman's death, the award of the Forces Family Pension is at the discretion of the Defence Council.

Imphal Barracks

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if the Medical Group HQ can be accommodated at Imphal Barracks; at what cost; and if he will make a statement; [115536]

(2) when a new Medical Group HQ will be set up at Imphal Barracks, Yorkshire. [115535]

Mr. Spellar: The HQ Medical Group will consist of three discrete elements; a deployable 1* Headquarters, HQ Army Medical Services (AMS) TA currently based at Imphal Barracks, York, and the Field Training Centre currently based at Strensall. All the elements of HQ Medical Group will ultimately be co-located in Strensall. This co-location will concentrate the command and control and training that is required to deliver hospital support on operations. To achieve this, a re-build at Strensall costing some £1.9 million is required, and it is estimated that this will take 18 months to complete (including the procurement process). The HQ Medical Group will therefore not be able to form up in Strensall until late 2001 at the earliest. In the meantime, the new HQ element will form up in Imphal Barracks at a cost currently estimated at some £0.2 million.

Absence without Leave

Mr. Denis Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if a standard procedure is followed when a person goes absent without leave from the armed forces. [115572]

Mr. Spellar: Each of the Services follows a set procedure when a person goes absent without leave, although there are slight differences of detail between the Services. After initial investigations by commanding officers to establish cases of absence, in all three Services it is standard procedure to inform the absentee's local police force, the Central Criminal Records and Information Office, and the Services' own internal provost, administrative and manning staffs of the absence. The three Services' procedures differ slightly regarding the time allowed to elapse before formal reporting proceedings commence. In the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force a period of seven days is allowed to elapse before formal reporting proceedings commence, whereas in the case of an Army absentee, formal reporting action is carried out immediately.

Live Firing Exercises

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many live firing exercises have been undertaken by the Royal Navy in each of the last five years stating in each case *(a)* the name of the exercise and *(b)* the number and cost of rounds expended by (i) the Goalkeeper gun system, (ii) the Phalanx gun system and (iii) the 114mm gun system; and if he will make a statement. [114547]

Mr. Spellar: I am withholding this information in accordance with Exemption 1 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information, which relates to Defence, Security and International Relations.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

John Howes

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Solicitor-General if he will make a statement on the meeting between Mr. John Howes of the Treasury Solicitor's Department and members of the JDS Tribunal on 2 December 1999. [115412]

The Solicitor-General: Mr. John Howes is a member of the Treasury Solicitor's staff. Between 1994 and 1998 he had conduct, on behalf of the Department of Trade and Industry (Companies Investigation Branch), of disqualification proceedings against the former Directors of Astra Holdings plc. These were pursuant to section 8 of the Company Directors Disqualification Act 1986. Those proceedings were finally discontinued on the instructions of the DTI in 1998. Mr. Howes was not involved in any consequential proceedings before the Accountants Joint Disciplinary Scheme ("JDS") Tribunal. Moreover he did not attend a meeting with the members of the JDS Tribunal on 2 December 1999 or at any other time.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

UNGASS Meeting

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development who will be attending the June UNGASS meeting on the implementation of the World Summit for Social Development. [115147]

Mr. Foulkes: The composition of the UK delegation is being actively considered. The Minister for Employment, Welfare to Work and Equal Opportunities plans to attend for part of the discussions.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

New Deal

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many New Deal participants have found sustained unsubsidised jobs of 13 weeks or more before having had a New Deal interview. [102104]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 9 December 2000]:* By the end of December 1999, 12,520 young people had left the Gateway for sustained unsubsidised jobs having been sent a letter telling them they are now on the New Deal.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many participants in the New Deal have been offered permanent employment to date. [101833]

Ms Jowell: Statistics are not collected using a category of "permanent" as this is not a term that adequately describes the realities of the modern labour market. However, we do know that by the end of December 1999, 185,250 young people under the New Deal for young people found jobs. Of these, 135,350 were sustained jobs lasting 13 weeks or more. In addition, 34,170 people under the New Deal for long-term unemployed people aged 25 and over found jobs (28,550 were sustained). A recent survey showed also that 57 per cent. of young people leaving the New Deal Gateway for unknown destinations had found a job.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what projects have been completed by the New Deal Environmental Task Force in the North-Essex Employment Service area since its inception. [115271]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 20 March 2000]:* In the North-Essex New Deal Unit of Delivery, the following 10 projects have been completed by the Environment Task Force:

Dyke clearance, pathway construction at Jaywick

Wide area clearance at Dovercourt

Planting, pathway construction, footbridge at Parkeston

Laying bark paths, constructing footbridge at Frinton

Refurbishment of lightship museum at Harwich

Alteration and decoration of Church Hall at Harwich

Construction of memorial gardens and play equipment at Brightlingsea

Decorating local Arts Trust Theatre at Dovercourt

Constructing of storage, recreational and play area for local school at Clacton

Construction of pathways and picnic benches at Parkeston.

There are four current projects under way as follows:

Path laying, tree cutting, hedge clearing at Chelmsford

Path laying, tree cutting, hedge clearing at Braintree/Colchester (two projects).

All these projects are contributing both to increased employability for young people and to the Government's wider environmental objectives.

Dr. Jack Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people have had their benefits stopped for failing effectively to pursue a New Deal option, at each benefit office in Copeland; and if he will make a statement. [115069]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 20 March 2000]:* Between 1 April 1999 and 31 December 1999 (the latest date for which data are available) 1,200 young people started on New Deal and at any time there were just over 1,440 young people participating in the New Deal in the Employment Service's Cumbria Unit of Delivery. During this nine-month period, 219 sanctions were imposed for failing to attend a New Deal option in Cumbria. This figure cannot be disaggregated to constituency level. The Cumbria Unit of Delivery includes the jobcentres in Carlisle, Cleator Moor, Cockermouth, Keswick,

Maryport, Penrith, Whitehaven, Workington, Barrow in Furness, Kendal, Lancaster, Millom, Morecombe, Ulverston and Windermere.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people have taken part in the New Deal Environmental Task Force in North-Essex Employment Service area *(a)* in the first year and *(b)* in the current year to date. [115269]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 20 March 2000]:* In the North-Essex New Deal Unit of Delivery, 57 young people started on the Environment Task Force in 1998; the figure for 1999 was 78. These figures have contributed towards the national total of 25,400 young people who have benefited from the work experience opportunities that the Environmental Task Force provides.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what was the financial surplus or deficit for the New Deal Environmental Task Force in North-Essex Employment Service area *(a)* in the first year and *(b)* in the current year to date; [115270]

(2) what the cost was of the New Deal Environmental Task Force in the North-Essex employment service area *(a)* in the previous year and *(b)* in the current year to date. [115424]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 20 March 2000]:* North-Essex is a private sector-led Unit of Delivery in which the New Deal for young people is led by SEETEC. Funding is on the basis of a unit cost for each participant and a monthly fee. This information, in line with all payments to contractors, is commercially confidential and cannot be released.

Departmental Documents

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) how many *(a)* consultation documents, *(b)* regulations, *(c)* revised or corrected regulations, *(d)* guidance notes, *(e)* requests for statistical information in addition to form 618G and *(f)* letters from Ministers, have been sent to local education authorities by his Department since May 1997; [111671]

(2) how many *(a)* consultation documents, *(b)* regulations, *(c)* revised or corrected regulations, *(d)* guidance notes, *(e)* requests for statistical information in addition to form 7 and *(f)* letters from Ministers have been sent to schools by his Department since May 1997. [111672]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 28 February 2000]:* Since May 1997 this Department has sent local education authorities the following:

Topic	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*
Consultation Papers				
Employment	7	12	10	0
Early Years	1	6	3	0
Further and Higher Education	17	16	20	5
Literacy and Numeracy	1	1	3	0
Primary Schools	2	3	3	0
Secondary Schools	6	6	5	0
School Curriculum	5	1	5	1
School Discipline	4	6	3	0
School Finance	9	14	17	5
School Governance	2	5	4	0
School Health and Safety	1	3	2	0
School-Miscellaneous	4	10	8	1
School Organisation	1	3	5	0
School Premises	0	1	7	0
School Standards	6	3	4	0
Special Education	5	1	5	1
Teaching Profession	9	11	7	9
Regulations	35	132	191	29
Guidance				
Employment	0	2	5	0
Early Years	1	4	11	1
Further and Higher Education	13	12	22	10
Literacy and Numeracy	0	4	19	3
Primary Schools	2	8	11	5
Secondary Schools	9	9	17	1
School Curriculum	0	2	3	1
School Discipline	0	2	4	1
School Finance	5	15	33	8
School Governance	1	4	11	3
School Health and Safety	0	2	6	2
School-Miscellaneous	3	3	9	3
School Organisation	0	7	12	1
School Premises	5	4	8	6
School Standards	3	9	26	4
Special Education	6	3	7	1
Teaching Profession	7	17	11	10
Data Collection				
Employment	1	0	0	1
Early Years	0	2	1	3
Further and Higher Education	4	4	28	6
Literacy and Numeracy	0	0	0	0
Primary Schools	1	1	2	1
Secondary Schools	2	4	1	0
School Curriculum	0	0	0	7
School Discipline	0	0	1	5
School Finance	1	0	3	3
School-General	4	8	15	11
School Premises	0	0	0	1
School Standards	0	0	0	3
Special Education	2	2	3	1
Teaching Profession	1	4	5	2
Letters from Ministers	1	2	4	2

Teacher Training

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many persons were recruited into initial teacher training in 1999–2000 for secondary school teaching in *(a)* mathematics, *(b)* science, *(c)* languages and *(d)* technology; and what were the targets for that year for recruitment in those subjects. [112984]

Ms Estelle Morris: Figures for recruitment into initial teacher training in 1999–2000 for secondary school teaching in mathematics, science, modern foreign languages and technology in England and corresponding targets are given in the table.

	Recruitment	*Target*
Mathematics	1,307	1,680
Science	2,362	2,390
Modern Foreign Languages	1,469	2,200
Technology	1,702	2,860

Notes:

1. Figures represent head-counts; that is the total of full-time and part-time recruitment.
2. Technology includes Design and Technology, Engineering, Computer Studies, Business Studies, Commerce, Home Economics and Needlecraft.

3. Targets for 1999–2000 exclude 300 for Mathematics and 300 for Science under the MS600 Scheme.
4. Recruitment data are provisional mid-year data.
Coverage:
Universities and other HE institutions, SCITT and OU.
Sources:
Intake: TTA Survey of ITT Providers
Targets: DfEE

As a result of the introduction of "Golden Hellos", recruitment to secondary teacher training in mathematics was 17 per cent. higher than the previous year. For science the figure was 4 per cent. and recruitment was very close to target. In both these subjects, the previous trend was a decline in recruitment. "Golden Hellos" will also apply to secondary teacher training in modern foreign languages from September 2000. In the longer term, the reforms announced in the Teachers Green Paper will improve the pay, training leadership and support for teachers and encourage more of the best graduates to join the profession.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many persons recruited in each of the last 10 years for which figures are available into initial teacher training courses for secondary school teaching in each subject *(a)* left their course, *(b)* failed their examinations and *(c)* failed to enter the teaching profession. [112983]

Ms Estelle Morris: Figures for persons recruited into initial teacher training courses for secondary school teaching in each subject who left their course are not collected centrally. The table gives the available figures for final year trainees not gaining Qualified Teacher Status in England.

	1996–97			*1997–98*		
	Final year trainees	*Not gaining QTS*	*Percentage not gaining QTS*	*Final year trainees*	*Not gaining QTS*	*Percentage not gaining QTS*
Mathematics	1,672	343	21	1,371	283	21
English and Drama	2,042	267	13	2,089	271	13
Science	2,791	495	18	2,488	451	18
Modern Foreign Languages	1,792	270	15	1,730	258	15
Technology	1,959	326	17	1,805	308	17
History	973	113	12	987	118	12
Geography	842	67	8	833	70	8
Physical Education	1,467	99	7	1,440	95	7
Art	908	85	9	889	88	10
Music	532	80	15	489	74	15
Religious Education	603	86	14	605	90	15
Other	333	42	13	281	27	10
Total	15,914	2,273	13	15,007	2,133	13

Notes:
1. Figures are for undergraduate and postgraduate Initial Teacher Training combined.
2. Technical includes Design and Technology, Engineering, Computer Studies, Business Studies, Commerce, Home Economics and Needlecraft.
3. Other includes Classics, Economics, Other social sciences and Other subjects.
4. The numbers of final year trainees not gaining QTS relate to providers final examination boards at the end of the academic year. Trainees awarded QTS at a later date—for example because they had to undertake a further period of teaching in school because of illness—were not recorded.
Source:
Teacher Training Agency—Performance Profiles.

Figures available are for initial teacher trainees for secondary school teaching in each subject who trained 10 years ago and did not enter the teaching profession. These are given in the table:

Percentage of secondary trained teachers [1] qualified in 1988 who had not entered teaching [2] by 31 March 1998 by subject specialism [3]—England

Subject	*Percentage not entering teaching*
Mathematics	12
English[4]	8
Science	11
Modern Foreign Languages	7
Technology[5]	10
History	8
Geography	8
Art	13
Music	6
Religious Education	12
Physical Education	12
Other	14
All secondary	10

[1] Those whose training specialised in teaching pupils of secondary age.

[2] Those who are not recorded as entering any sector of teaching. Some teachers will be counted as not entering service because their service is not recorded. These may include teachers in the 'old' university sector, in the independent schools sector who are not members of the teachers pension scheme (TPS), in part-time service outside the maintained nursery, primary, secondary and special sector who are not members of the TPS.

[3] First subject specialism.

[4] English includes Drama.

[5] Technology includes Design and Technology, Engineering, Computer Studies, Business Studies, Commerce, Home Economics and Needlecraft.

Source:

DfEE Database of Teacher Records.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the numbers recruited into initial teacher training courses for teaching

in secondary schools for *(a)* mathematics, *(b)* science, *(c)* languages and *(d)* technology in each of the last 10 years. [112981]

Ms Estelle Morris: Figures for recruitment into initial teacher training for teaching in secondary schools for mathematics, science, modern foreign languages and technology in England over the last 10 years are given in the table.

Recruitment to initial teacher training in England over the last 10 years

	Mathematics	*Science*	*Modern Foreign Languages*	*Technology*[1]
1990–91	1,055	1,549	1,042	1,291
1991–92	1,541	2,111	1,277	1,937
1992–93	1,699	2,148	1,384	2,216
1993–94	1,790	2,397	1,550	2,160
1994–95	1,950	2,918	1,789	2,131
1995–96	1,795	2,794	1,790	1,854
1996–97	1,653	2,937	1,720	1,963
1997–98	1,464	2,789	1,799	1,982
1998–99	1,120	2,279	1,657	1,682
1999–2000	1,307	2,362	1,469	1,702

[1] Technology includes Design and Technology, Commerce, Home Economics and Needlecraft Engineering, Computer Studies, Business Studies, Commerce, Home Economics and Needlecraft.

Notes:

1. All figures before 1992–93 represent full-time equivalents. From 1992–93 onwards figures represent head-counts; that is the total of full-time and part-time recruitment.
2. Recruitment data are provisional mid year data.

Coverage:

Universities and other HE institutions, SCITT and OU.

Sources:

England: DFE Recruitment Survey, 1990–91 to 1993–94; HESES 1994–95; TTA Survey of ITT Providers 1995–96 onwards.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many applications for entry into initial teacher training courses starting in autumn 2000 for the secondary school subjects of *(a)* mathematics, *(b)* science, *(c)* languages and *(d)* technology have been made in the current academic year to date; and how many were made in 1999–2000. [112985]

Ms Estelle Morris: Applications for initial teacher training courses can be made at postgraduate and undergraduate level. Applications in England and Wales to undergraduate courses at 4 February and postgraduate courses at 19 February for courses starting in 2000–01 together with equivalent figures and end of year figures for the previous year are given in the tables.

Undergraduate applications

	As at 4 February 2000–01	*As at 5 February 1999–2000*	*End of year for 1999–2000*
Mathematics	175	247	361
Science	225	271	342
Modern Foreign Languages	35	29	54
Technology	684	726	1,063

Source:

Universities and Colleges Admissions Service

PGCE applications

	As at 19 February 2000–01	*As at 20 February 1999–2000*	*End of year for 1999–2000*
Mathematics	407	529	1,690
Science	938	1,125	3,450
Modern Foreign Languages	806	904	2,307
Technology	318	441	1,619

Notes:

1. Figures for undergraduate and postgraduate cannot be combined as applicants can make up to six applications through UCAS, but only one application through GTTR.
2. Postgraduate end of year figures exclude applications made direct to the ITT provider.
3. Undergraduate end of year figures exclude applications made at the clearing stage.
4. Technology includes Design and Technology, Engineering, Computer Studies, Business Studies, Commerce, Home Economics and Needlecraft.

Source:

Graduate Teacher Training Registry

These figures show that at the equivalent time last year, only about a third of final applications had been recorded for postgraduate subjects in Mathematics, Science and Technology and under half for courses in Modern Foreign Languages. Over the last five years there has been a trend for secondary initial teacher training postgraduate applications to be made later in the year.

Fresh Start

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of recent developments in fresh start schools; and if he will make a statement. [115289]

Ms Estelle Morris: The fresh start policy has been used to tackle schools with a long history of failure. These schools all present major challenges, and we are learning from the experiences of the first schools to identify and share the most successful strategies. The first three schools which opened in September 1998 have demonstrated improvements in examination success and reductions in truancy. We want all fresh schools to be equally successful and to change the life chances of their pupils. The alternative of continuing failure is unacceptable.

Education Services (Islington)

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the powers and functions of Islington Local Education Authority following the award of the contract for the provision of education services to Cambridge Education Associates. [115628]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 21 March 2000]:* I am placing a copy of the enabling direction from the Secretary of State for Education and Employment and a summary table in the Library. These detail the distribution of statutory functions across Islington LEA and the contractor, CEA, from 1 April 2000.

Schools (Lancaster and Wyre)

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the schools in Lancaster and Wyre which have had major capital improvements since 1 May 1997. [115636]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 21 March 2000]:* Schools in Lancaster and Wyre that have had major capital improvements since 1 May 1997 are:

Baines School
Central Lancaster County High
Hodgson High Technology College
Lancaster Ripley St. Thomas Church of England Secondary
Lancaster Royal Grammar
Lancaster Girls Grammar
Millfield High
Over Wyre St. Aiden's Church of England High
Brookfield School.

Special Needs

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to his answer of 27 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 310W, on special needs, what progress he has made with the setting up of an emotional and behavioural difficulties advisory group; and if he will publish the names and relevant expertise of its members. [115801]

Jacqui Smith: The Advisory Group on Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (EBD) met for the first time on 28 February. It will meet regularly over the next few months and work with officials dealing with EBD and Child Mental Health Issues. The members of the Advisory Group are as follows:

Bernard Allen, Headteacher, Southfield School, Wokingham
Marion Bennathan, Chair, Association of Workers for Children with Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties
Kathie Bull, HMI, EBD Specialist, Ofsted
Gerry Gamble, Chair of National Association of EBD Special Schools, head of Notton House School
Dr. Bob Jezzard, Department of Health adviser and child psychologist
Eleni Ionnides, Head of Children's Services, Swindon Council
Chris Marshall (Ofsted), Senior HMI responsible for SEN
David Moore, HMI responsible for pupil behaviour issues
Richard Rollinson, Principal Mulberry Bush School, Whitney
Allan Sigston, Assistant Principal Education Psychologist, Essex
Stephen Twigg, Behaviour Support Team, Langdon School, Newham
Trevor Williams, LEA Adviser (EBD), Lancashire LEA
Peter Wilson, Director Young Minds.

DfEE officials working in the Special Educational Needs Division (EBD Team) provide the chair and secretariat for the group.

WALES

Heart Disease

12. **Mr. Gray:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the First Secretary and the Health Secretary on treatment for heart disease in Wales. [114273]

Mr. Hanson: My right hon. Friend and I are in constant discussion with the First Secretary and the Assembly Health Secretary on various health issues affecting Wales. The Budget yesterday gave the Assembly the money needed to take the NHS in Wales to the top of the European league—an annual average real terms increase of 5.6 per cent. over the next four years.

Economic Policy

13. **Mr. Ruane:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has had with the First Secretary about the impact of Government economic policy in Wales. [114274]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave earlier to my hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Ms Lawrence).

Rural Affairs

14. **Miss McIntosh:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the First Secretary on the co-ordination of policies on rural affairs. [114275]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I meet the First Secretary on a regular weekly basis and we discuss a range of issues including the co-ordination of policies on rural affairs.

Mountain Rescue Teams

15. **Mr. Fabricant:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he will meet the Secretary of State for Defence to discuss MOD involvement in the provision of mountain rescue teams in Snowdonia, the Brecon Beacons and other Welsh mountain ranges. [114276]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I meet my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence regularly when we discuss a range of issues.

RAF St. Athan and Stafford provide a rescue service for Wales. Each team consists of about 30 volunteers and five full-time members and trains regularly with its civilian counterparts for the best possible co-operation and effectiveness.

Local Government

16. **Mr. Win Griffiths:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what representations he has received about the provisions contained in the Local Government Bill [Lords]. [114277]

Mr. Hanson: Both my right hon. Friend and I have received a number of representations about the Local Government Bill, including correspondence from interested and personal representations from representatives of the Welsh Local Government Association and of local authorities in Wales.

Dairy Industry

17. **Mr. Paterson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the First Secretary on proposals for the Welsh dairy industry. [114278]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I meet the First Secretary on a regular weekly basis and we discuss a wide range of issues including the Welsh dairy industry. I met a delegation from the National Union of Farmers on 15 March.

Child Abuse Inquiry

18. **Ms Julie Morgan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he expects to introduce legislation to implement the recommendations of the north Wales child abuse inquiry. [114279]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave earlier today to my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd, South (Mr. Jones).

National Assembly Executive

19. **Mr. Swayne:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will amend the Wales Act 1998 with respect to the appointment of members of the National Assembly Executive. [114280]

Mr. Paul Murphy: No.

Farming

20. **Mr. Simon Thomas:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he last met representatives of the farming industry in Wales to discuss farming in Wales; and if he will make a statement. [114281]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I last met representatives from the farming industry in Wales on 15 March when I received a delegation from the National Union of Farmers.

Drug Abuse

21. **Mrs. Ann Winterton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what assessment he has made of the impact of the Government's anti-drug abuse strategy on young people in Wales. [114282]

Mr. Hanson: I have met the First Secretary and the UK Anti-Drugs Co-ordinator to discuss the implications of the Government's anti-drug abuse strategy for Wales. The Assembly will be issuing a refocused strategy for Wales which will continue to place an emphasis on prevention with children and young people under 25, but will recognise the need for work with individuals of all ages.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he last met the UK Drugs Co-ordinator to discuss the prevalence of soft drugs in Wales. [114269]

Mr. Hanson: I met the UK Drugs Co-ordinator and the First Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales on Wednesday 20 October 1999 when we discussed issues relating to substance misuse in Wales.

European Structural Funds

22. **Mr. Wigley:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the First Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales concerning the Welsh Affairs Committee report on European Structural Funds, Session 1999–2000 (HC 46). [114283]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I meet the First Secretary regularly and we discuss a range of issues. In addition, our officials have been working together to respond to those recommendations which require a joint response and the UK Government will be submitting its response shortly.

Rural Post Offices (Montgomeryshire)

23. **Mr. Öpik:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will visit rural post offices in Montgomeryshire. [114284]

Mr. Hanson: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I are both very aware of the important role played by rural post offices in maintaining the social fabric of their areas and have discussed this issue with colleagues in Central Government and in the National Assembly for Wales. I would be happy to meet with representatives of Montgomeryshire either in London or in Montgomeryshire.

National Assembly Buildings

24. **Mr. Ian Bruce:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what requests he has received for the provision of extra funds from the UK central Government in relation to the existence of future National Assembly buildings; and if he will make a statement. [114285]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I have received no such requests. Future National Assembly buildings will be funded from the provision within the Welsh Block.

University Students

25. **Mr. St. Aubyn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he last discussed with the First Secretary the number of students at Welsh universities who have failed to complete their course of study. [114286]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I regularly meet the First Secretary and discuss a variety of issues, including further education.

Local Councillors (Remuneration)

26. **Mr. Flynn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will introduce measures to increase the powers of the Welsh Assembly to set a ceiling for remuneration for local councillors in Wales. [114287]

Mr. Hanson: The National Assembly for Wales already has a power under section 18 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989 to make regulations relating to councillors' allowances.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Athletics

Mr. Faber: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what was the expenditure by his Department on the sport of athletics in *(a)* 1997–98 and *(b)* 1998–99; and what are the planned levels of expenditure in (i) 1999–2000, (ii) 2000–01, and (iii) 2001–02. [113819]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* Public funding of sport is channelled through the Sports Councils. Lottery Sports Funding, under the World Class

Performance Programme, and exchequer expenditure on athletics by Sport England and UK Sport is as follows:

	£000
1997–98	3,930
1998–99	7,060
1999–2000	6,597

Note:
Sport England's figures for Lottery funding are for 11 months. End year figure may therefore be higher.

In addition, since the start of the National lottery Sport England has approved awards totalling £38,113,748 in respect of community athletics facilities.

Neither Sport England nor UK Sport is able at this stage to say what will be its total planned expenditure on athletics for 2000–01 and 2001–02.

Millennium Commission Loan

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if the proposed further £28 million loan has been allocated by the Millennium Commission to the New Millennium Experience Company. [114686]

Mr. Chris Smith: This is a matter for the Millennium Commission. I shall write to the hon. Member in my capacity as Chairman of the Commission and place copies of my reply in the Libraries of the House.

Subtitling

Miss Kirkbride: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) if his Department will publish figures for the percentage of programmes subtitled on each of the digital terrestrial television channels since their launch in November 1998; [115258]

(2) if all channels are meeting their requirements for subtitling on digital terrestrial television; and what exceptions have been made to the requirements; [115257]

(3) in what ways his Department is monitoring the levels of subtitling on digital terrestrial television. [115256]

Janet Anderson: The Independent Television Commission (ITC) are responsible for monitoring the levels of subtitling on commercial digital terrestrial programme services. The Commission has made no exceptions to the requirements to provide subtitling. The BBC has a subtitling unit which monitors the output of subtitling on BBC digital services.

I understand from the ITC that they are currently evaluating data received from commercial digital terrestrial programme service licensees for the period 15 January to 31 December 1999.

The BBC have provided the following figures on the percentage of programmes subtitled of BBC digital terrestrial channels:

Service	Period	Target Percentage	Hours per week [1]	Percentage Proportion [2]	Percentage End-year [3]
BBC Choice	Year to October 1999	5	67	31.5	37.6
	November 1999 to end February 2000	10	121	22.6	—
BBC News 24	Year to October 1999	5	5.6	3.3	9.7
	November 1999 to end February 2000	10	18	10.7	—
BBC Knowledge	June 1999 to end February 2000	5	4	8.9	—

[1] Number of hours per week of subtitling on each channel—average for the period
[2] Percentage of total output subtitled—average for the period
[3] Percentage of total output subtitled by end year—average for last four weeks of full year

Lottery Receipts

Mr. Pendry: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment he has made of the value of Lottery receipts that have not been allocated to good causes; and what plans he has to disperse them. [115486]

Kate Hoey: All National Lottery income available for good causes has been allocated to distributing bodies.

Wembley Stadium

Mr. Faber: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the representatives of Wembley National Stadium Ltd. who were present at the meeting with his Department's Ministers on 29 June 1999 described in his Department's memorandum to the Culture, Media and Sport Committee (HC 164, Session 1999–2000, p. 90); and if he will make a statement. [115229]

Kate Hoey: No representatives of Wembley National Stadium Ltd. (WNSL) were present at the meeting on 29 June 1999 as described. This was a genuine drafting error in the memorandum and in no way intended to mislead the Committee. WNSL and the English Sports Council submitted papers to my Department on 17 June 1999 and 23 June 1999 respectively, reviewing the options to increase capacity at Wembley to 80,000 for athletics events. My officials met representatives of WNSL and Sport England to discuss these in detail on June 28 1999 and the then Minister for Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham, (Mr. Banks) then met representatives from the ESC on 29 June 1999 to discuss the capacity issues. It was agreed at that meeting that increasing the capacity in football mode from the start of the project was not viable, but that the design should preserve the option to be upgraded later in line with Olympic requirements. This view was subsequently communicated to WNSL by officials from my Department.

Dome

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what proposals he is evaluating for keeping the Millennium Dome Exhibition open after 31 December. [115261]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 17 March 2000]:* There are no proposals at present to continue the Millennium Experience beyond 31 December 2000.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Firearms

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many legally-held *(a)* handguns of over .22 calibre and *(b)* rifles of over .22 calibre have been stolen from private individuals, excluding police and prison officers, in Northern Ireland, and how many such weapons were stolen from members of (i) the armed forces, (ii) the police and police reserves and (iii) prison officers, in each of the last 10 years. [106064]

Mr. Ingram: The following table shows the number of illegally held handguns stolen from private individuals, the Armed Forces, the Police and Prison Officers in each of the last 10 years.

Year	*Private individuals*	*Armed forces*	*Police officers*	*Prison officers*
1990	0	6	15	4
1991	8	5	12	2
1992	3	5	3	1
1993	7	1	5	0
1994	12	6	14	0
1995	7	2	6	0
1996	7	4	6	1
1997	11	1	2	0
1998	16	2	6	0
1999	7	1	1	1
Totals	78	33	70	9

During this period one rifle was stolen from a police officer.

The Chief Constable has advised that the information in relation to the calibres of these firearms is not easily accessible and obtaining it would incur disproportionate cost.

Prisoner Releases

Mr. MacKay: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list the perceived paramilitary affiliation of those prisoners awaiting release under the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act 1998 whose applications have been successful. [112963]

Mr. Ingram: To date, a total of 109 prisoners whose applications for early release have been successful are awaiting early release under the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act 1998. Information is held in relation to the perceived paramilitary affiliation of prisoners, where applicable, for management purposes. It should be noted, however, that with the exception of HMP Maze where links are more clearly defined, this information is based on a combination of factors including the offence, sympathies and associates. The table provides the breakdown by perceived affiliation and is taken from statistics which are current at 21 March 2000.

Perceived affiliation of prisoners whose applications for early release have been successful and who are awaiting early release under the NI (Sentences) Act 1998

	Total [1]
UDA	13
No trace	1
UFF	5
PIRA	51
UVF	14
Loyalist	1
RHC	1
LVF	9
INLA	14
Grand total	109

[1] As at 21 March 2000

Mrs. Rosemary Nelson

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what factors account for the delay between the Committee on the Administration of Justice informing him of the threats made to Mrs. Rosemary Nelson and the police seeking originals of those threats; and if he will make a statement. [113473]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 10 March 2000]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave him on 10 February 2000, *Official Report,* column 239W.

Correspondence

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when he will respond to the correspondence received from Mrs. Laura Hamill; and if he will place a copy of that correspondence in the Library. [114646]

Mr. Mandelson: The Northern Ireland Office has no record of any correspondence sent to me by Mrs. Laura Hamill. I received one letter written on behalf of Mrs. Hamill from Mr. Mark Thompson, Co-ordinator of the Relatives for Justice, on 22 February 2000. I will place a copy of my reply to Mr. Thompson in the Library.

Justices of the Peace

Mr. Peter Robinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list the members of the Lord Chancellor's Advisory Committee responsible for making appointments of justices of the peace in the County Armagh area. [115407]

Mr. Lock: I have been asked to reply.

The Lord Chancellor's directions for Advisory Committee on Justices of the Peace in Northern Ireland states that while membership may be confidential it is open to each Advisory Committee to determine whether or not it wishes to disclose its membership to current justices or to bona fide enquirers. The Chairman and the Advisory Committees for the Divisions of Craigavon, Armagh and South Down, which cover the Armagh area, have elected that the membership of these Committees remain confidential.

Portadown (Civil Disturbance)

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what support was offered by British

Army and Royal Irish Regiment units to the Royal Ulster Constabulary to assist in respect of the civil disturbance in Portadown town centre on 27 April 1997. [115279]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 21 March 2000]:* There was no military involvement.

Sexual Assaults

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in the most recent year for which records are available, how many cases of sexual assault were reported to the Royal Ulster Constabulary; in how many of these cases the identity of the alleged perpetrator was known to the police; how many cases were referred to the Director of Public Prosecutions; how many prosecutions were brought; and how many convictions were secured. [115278]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 21 March 2000]:* A total of 1,605 sexual offences[1] were recorded by the Royal Ulster Constabulary for the year 1998–99. Of these, 1,221 offences were cleared, representing an overall clearance rate of 76.1 per cent.

During the same period, 104 persons[2] were proceeded against in the Crown courts. Eighty-one were found guilty and 23 not guilty. Comparable figures for the magistrates courts are not yet available.

[1] Relates to all Class 2 offences as recorded under revised Home Office counting rules introduced from 1 April 1998.

[2] Relates to primary offences only, all of which were referred to the DPP. It is not possible to determine the number of persons proceeded against in the Crown courts with a sexual offence being a secondary offence.

Pre-school Education (Kircubbin)

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what applications there are for the provision of pre-school education at Kircubbin, County Down; what funding is available for pre-school education; and if such funding would be available if pre-school provision in Kircubbin were under the control of the *(a)* South-Eastern Education and Libraries Board and *(b)* Council for Catholic Maintained Schools [115397]

Mr. George Howarth: An application for the provision of a free-standing community nursery school in Kircubbin has been offered capital funding of £225,000 under the EU Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation by the Department of Education.

Following discussions with representatives of the South-Eastern Education and Library Board and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, the community group promoting the nursery school in Kircubbin decided that it should be managed as a Catholic maintained nursery school but with a cross-community Board of Governors. The funding would equally have been available had the community group chosen to follow the management model for a controlled school.

As the deadline for expenditure of these EU funds is 31 December 2000, the funding could not be transferred to an alternative project in the Kircubbin area at this stage.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

GM Crops

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he has received on the risks attached to the exchange between plant and animal viruses in relation to GM crops; and if he will make a statement. [115034]

Ms Quin: We are not aware of any representations on this issue.

In 1994 this Department commissioned a report to assess the risks to the agricultural environment associated with the development of virus-tolerant GM plants. This report identified the creation of new viruses as an area which should be investigated and we have funded a number of research projects in this area, at a total cost of £755,000. These projects have not found any evidence of the creation of novel viruses. Details of all completed projects are available from the MAFF library.

OTMS

Mr. Randall: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what has been the *(a)* total number of carcases and *(b)* total amount of revenue claimed from the European Union in compensation for cattle disposed of under the over-thirty-months scheme for each month since the scheme began. [114825]

Ms Quin: Full entitlement of EU reimbursement in respect of eligible over-thirty-months scheme (OTMS) animals is payable when the carcase is incinerated. In respect of animals which are rendered, reimbursement of full entitlement is payable once the equivalent amount of meat and bone-meal and tallow have been incinerated, although an 80 per cent. advance of the entitlement can be claimed once the animals have been rendered.

Reimbursement by month, and the number of carcases to which reimbursement relates, is shown in the table.

Month of claim	*Number of animals rendered/incinerated*	*Amount of claim (£)*
July 1996	5,581	1,873,670.99
August 1996	5,165	1,695,156.40
September 1996	5,916	1,933,664.20
October 1996	7,616	2,489,349.19
November 1996	435,391	115,431,499.80
December 1996	5,483	1,569,572.70
January 1997	235,588	59,427,571.28
February 1997	142,782	33,202,079.85
March 1997	19,007	4,341,057.71
April 1997	27,011	6,047,245.68
May 1997	64,464	14,419,814.34
June 1997	54,584	11,579,134.78
July 1997	55,234	12,036,824.45
August 1997	70,891	14,858,390.25
September 1997	68,682	13,014,092.30
October 1997	379,311	83,558,624.57
November 1997	71,852	12,025,811.74
December 1997	57,932	9,658,691.62
January 1998	8,067	1,642,765.95
February 1998	142,260	23,462,250.74
March 1998	77,131	12,952,651.28
April 1998	77,349	13,008,253.72
May 1998	51,417	8,691,811.79
June 1998	63,749	10,693,139.72
July 1998	51,396	8,449,852.40

Month of claim	Number of animals rendered/incinerated	Amount of claim (£)
August 1998	48,385	8,104,191.12
September 1998	61,972	10,221,809.76
October 1998	221,688	46,272,929.96
November 1998	62,756	10,272,806.75
December 1998	85,417	14,083,784.24
January 1999	147,372	24,697,959.10
February 1999	75,958	12,913,319.20
March 1999	80,933	13,807,393.47
April 1999	74,618	12,546,061.20
May 1999	74,967	12,408,382.97
June 1999	68,065	11,074,018.67
July 1999	71,167	11,384,673.89
August 1999	56,197	8,997,993.17
September 1999	58,577	9,446,835.73
October 1999	49,368	7,945,399.51
November 1999	122,340	31,192,833.45
December 1999	75,685	12,252,040.94
January 2000	133,923	22,070,192.22
February 2000	98,747	15,727,238.56
Total	3,851,994	773,482,841.36

Mr. Breed: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the location of each site currently burning meat and bone-meal produced under the over-thirty-months scheme, and the names of the companies operating each site. [115111]

Ms Quin: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given to the hon. Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall) on 24 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 10W.

Mr. Breed: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if the precautionary principle has been adopted in the decision to *(a)* allow storage of meat and bonemeal from over-thirty-months scheme cattle prior to incineration, *(b)* allow the storage of meat and bonemeal from over-thirty-months scheme cattle over a long period of time, *(c)* allow the incineration of meat and bonemeal from over-thirty-months scheme cattle that has been stored over a long period of time, *(d)* choose contracts offering rendering of over-thirty-months scheme cattle prior to incineration rather than those offering direct incineration and *(e)* allow tallow from over-thirty-months scheme cattle to be used as fuel. [115113]

Ms Quin: The Environment Agency commissioned a number of assessments on the risk to human health from BSE via environmental pathways, which included the storage and processing of over-thirty-months scheme (OTMS) material. (Cattle showing clinical signs suggestive of BSE cannot enter the OTMS). The risk assessments were produced in consultation with SEAC, and were based on the precautionary principle. These showed the risks to the most exposed individual to be negligible, endorsing SEAC's advice in 1996. Copies of the risk assessments, which were published in June 1997, were placed in the Library of the House.

Mr. Breed: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what are the total costs for transporting meat and bone meal produced under the Over-30-Months scheme from storage locations to incinerators. [115112]

Ms Quin: Transport costs range from £9.50 and £13.50 per tonne of Meat and Bone Meal (MBM) depending on the location of the storage site and the distance to the incinerator.

Fishing Zone Rights

Mr. Moss: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) what plans he has to alter the boundaries between the English fishing zones and those for *(a)* Scotland and *(b)* Wales; [114893]

(2) what reserved rights fishermen from England have to operate in United Kingdom fishing zones controlled and managed by the *(a)* Scottish Parliament and *(b)* National Assembly for Wales; [114891]

(3) if he will list the responsibilities of *(a)* his Department and *(b)* the devolved Executives in respect of the delineation of fisheries zones in United Kingdom waters; and if he will make a statement. [114892]

Mr. Morley: The licensing arrangements put in place following devolution leave unchanged the rights of all UK fishermen to fish throughout British Fishery Limits.

The Scottish Zone of British Fishery Limits was established by the Scottish Adjacent Waters Boundaries Order 1999 [SI 1999/1126] made under the provisions of Section 126(2) of the Scotland Act 1998. There is no Welsh zone, but as a result of the Government of Wales Act 1998 and the National Assembly for Wales (Transfer of Functions) Order 1999 [SI 1999/672] the National Assembly has devolved responsibility for fisheries matters in Wales out to the limit of adjoining territorial waters.

There are no plans to change these arrangements.

Liquid Condensate

Ms Walley: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to his answer of 10 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 868W, if he will make a statement on the practice of spreading of liquid condensate on land in Staffordshire; when he intends to announce new proposals; and what public consultation is proposed in relation to the Committee's recommendations. [115087]

Ms Quin: We are actively considering controls on the spreading of condensate from the rendering of ruminant animals to land. Once proposals are ready, we will consult on them.

DNA Degradation

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what advice he has been given on the conditions necessary for the degradation of DNA, particularly in food matrices; and if he will make a statement. [115499]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 20 March 2000]:* DNA is a normal part of the everyday diet. It is degraded to varying degrees during processing and cooking etc. according to the conditions applied. It is also degraded by the digestive processes of the gut once consumed.

Fishing Quotas

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to his answer of 7 March

2000, *Official Report*, column 581W, on fishing quotas, what was the nature of the United Kingdom response to the Commission opinion. [115574]

Mr. Morley: In allocating quota to producer organisations and other groups in 1992 and subsequent years adequate provision was made for the return to the UK fleet of vessels which had been previously de-registered as a result of the Merchant Shipping Act 1988.

Animal Welfare (Transport)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many times section 18(2a) of the Welfare of Animals (Transport) Order 1997 has been invoked in the last six months; and if he will make a statement. [115274]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 21 March 2000]:* To date, we have been notified of 404 notices issued under Article 18(2) of the Welfare of Animals (Transport) Order 1997 by inspectors of the Ministry or local authorities during the six months to 29 February 2000. Figures are not kept to show under which part of Article 18(2) these notices are issued.

Cap Afrique

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if his Department's officials discussed the weather and sea conditions with the Master of the Cap Afrique on the night of 2 March; and if he will make statement. [115241]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 21 March 2000]:* The weather and sea conditions on the night of 2 March were not discussed with the Master of the Cap Afrique. This is a matter for concern, given that the weather conditions were such that they ought to have triggered discussions between Ministry staff and the Master. The standing instructions to staff are being revised so as to tighten procedures on future occasions.

Tuna Licences

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to announce the arrangements and criteria for the allocation of tuna licences for the current year. [115629]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 21 March 2000]:* An announcement on the arrangements and criteria for the allocation of tuna licences for the year 2000 will be made shortly.

HEALTH

Health Authorities and Trusts

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many elected members of local authorities have been appointed *(a)* chairman and *(b)* non-executive director of (i) health authorities and (ii) trusts since 1 May 1997, indicating the party affiliation in each case. [114366]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* The information requested is given in the table.

Councillors appointed to the boards of National Health Service trusts and health authorities by political party since 1 May 1997

Political party	*National Health Service trusts*	*Health authorities*
Conservative		
Chairs	6	1
Non-Executives	3	4
Liberal		
Chairs	5	0
Non-Executives	27	8
Labour		
Chairs	35	6
Non-Executives	234	43
Other		
Chairs	0	0
Non-Executives	8	2
Total since 1 May 1997	318	64

This represents approximately 12.3 per cent. of those appointed to the boards of National Health Service trusts and health authorities since 1 May 1997.

NHS Appointments

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list *(a)* the political affiliation of non-executives appointed to NHS bodies, in each of the last three years for which figures are available, broken down by body, health authority, region and in total, *(b)* the names of those whose political affiliation has changed during this period and *(c)* the political affiliation of those who have left non-executive posts in the same period; and if he will make a statement. [114211]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* The Department does not collect information on the political affiliation of those appointed to National Health Service bodies. In accordance with guidance from the Commissioner for Public Appointments, information is collected on political activity undertaken by chairs and non-executives at the time they apply for a National Health Service appointment. Details of those board members who have undertaken political activity for different parties is published in the Department of Health Public Appointments Annual Report. Copies of the 1996, 1998 and 1999 reports are in the Library. The 2000 report will be published in May. Information on board members who have declared political activity and who have left non-executive or chair posts at National Health Service trusts or health authorities in the last three years is given in the table.

	Number
Conservative	133
Independent	10
Labour	98
Liberal Democrat	25
Other	10

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the total number of appointments to health authorities, trusts and other NHS bodies he has made in Greater London since 1 May 1997 indicating the total number who have declared a Labour Party background, their names, and Labour Party activities. [114772]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 16 March 2000]:* Information on candidates appointed to National Health Service boards and any political activity declared is recorded in the Department of Health Public Appointments Annual Report for 1999, copies of which are available in the Library. The 2000 report will be published in May.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Earnings Top-up Pilot

Mr. Etherington: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list for each year of the earnings top-up pilot, the relevant local authority area in England and Wales and the total number of individuals, indicating their *(a)* gender and *(b)* average ETU award, who participated in the pilot. [115109]

Angela Eagle: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the tables.

ETU recipients (allowed cases) by pilot area, sex and average weekly award, October 1996 to September 1997

Pilot area	Number of participants			Average weekly ETU (£)		
	Male	Female	All	Male	Female	All
All areas	11,195	12,253	23,448	26.43	23.67	24.99
Scheme A						
Newcastle upon Tyne	1,914	1,909	3,823	25.10	21.90	23.51
Barnsley, Castleford, Pontefract, Wakefield and Dewsbury	1,253	1,393	2,646	26.66	21.99	24.20
Southend	432	568	1,000	24.48	22.00	23.07
Wales	1,299	1,402	2,701	26.16	23.41	24.73
Scheme B						
Sunderland	3,136	3,235	6,371	26.79	24.35	25.55
Doncaster	1,605	1,989	3,594	27.17	24.90	25.92
Bournemouth	868	796	1,664	27.79	25.88	26.88
Scotland	688	961	1,649	26.32	24.31	25.15

ETU recipients (allowed cases) by pilot area, sex and average weekly award, October 1997 to September 1998

Pilot area	Number of participants			Average weekly ETU (£)		
	Male	Female	All	Male	Female	All
All areas	15,966	16,310	32,276	27.47	24.51	25.97
Scheme A						
Newcastle upon Tyne	2,586	2,547	5,133	26.35	22.81	24.59
Barnsley, Castleford, Pontefract, Wakefield and Dewsbury	1,684	1,717	3,401	29.35	23.61	26.45
Southend	471	679	1,150	26.94	23.02	24.63
Wales	2,218	2,027	4,245	27.91	24.50	26.28
Scheme B						
Sunderland	4,506	4,244	8,750	26.92	24.90	25.94
Doncaster	2,343	2,737	5,080	28.08	25.39	26.63
Bournemouth	1,060	1,080	2,140	28.66	26.46	27.55
Scotland	1,098	1,279	2,377	26.41	25.08	25.69

ETU recipients (allowed cases) by pilot area, sex and average weekly award, October 1998 to September 1999

Pilot area	Number of participants			Average weekly ETU (£)		
	Male	Female	All	Male	Female	All
All areas	15,579	16,400	31,979	27.44	23.98	25.66
Scheme A						
Newcastle upon Tyne	2,563	2,624	5,187	26.60	22.97	24.76
Barnsley, Castleford, Pontefract, Wakefield and Dewsbury	1,634	1,659	3,293	29.91	23.20	26.53
Southend	471	669	1,140	28.61	23.28	25.48
Wales	2,149	2,035	4,184	29.66	24.93	27.36
Scheme B						
Sunderland	4,201	4,248	8,449	26.16	23.79	24.97
Doncaster	2,459	2,682	5,141	27.18	24.21	25.63
Bournemouth	1,052	1,128	2,180	29.12	26.41	27.72
Scotland	1,050	1,355	2,405	24.57	23.87	24.17

ETU cases disallowed, October 1996 to September 1999

Year	*Number disallowed*
1996–97	5,801
1997–98	6,635
1998–99	7,485

Notes:

1. Based on 100 per cent. caseload figures.
2. Figures are unrounded.
3. Figures represent the sum of all participants in each given period. Claims are only counted once in each year, although there will be a degree of double counting between years where a participant has been receiving ETU over more than one yearly period.
4. Detailed figures for disallowed cases of ETU are not available, as gender and pilot area are not recorded.

Source:

Earnings Top-Up Statistical Enquiry, February 2000.

Mr. Etherington: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the arrangements for the evaluation of the effects of the Earnings Top-Up pilot. [115107]

Angela Eagle: A report providing a description of the programme of research to evaluate the effects of the Earnings Top-Up pilot was published in May 1996 and placed in the Library. Interim findings from the evaluation were published in the Department of Social Security Research Series in March 2000 and final results will be available in early 2001.

Winter Fuel Payments

Shona McIsaac: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will extend Winter Fuel Payments to people with disabilities who are not in receipt of Income Support. [115047]

Angela Eagle: Following the European Court of Justice ruling Winter Fuel Payments were extended to both men and women aged 60 and over and the need to be in receipt of a qualifying benefit was removed. As before, payments are restricted to people who are ordinarily resident in Great Britain. As long as they satisfy the qualifying conditions, disabled people will be eligible for a Winter Fuel Payment, like anyone else in the same position.

As well as Winter Fuel Payments, we also provide Cold Weather Payments towards additional heating costs for vulnerable groups on Income Support or income-based Jobseeker's Allowance. Disabled people, regardless of age, who are in receipt of Income Support or income-based Jobseeker's Allowance which includes a disability premium, are among those eligible for Cold Weather Payments. There are no plans to change these eligibility rules.

Family Credit (Norwich)

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people in Norwich were in receipt of *(a)* Family Credit and *(b)* the child care allowance in each of the last five years. [115096]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the tables.

Numbers of Family Credit recipients in Norwich local authority area August 1995–99

Thousand

Year	*Number*
August 1995	1.6
August 1996	1.8
August 1997	2.0
August 1998	2.1
August 1999	2.0

Notes:

1. Case load figures are taken at a point in time for which the month is August.
2. Sample size is 5 per cent. As the numbers are based on a relatively small number of sample cases the estimates are subject to a high degree of sampling error, ie for an estimate of 2,000 the true value will lie somewhere in the range 1,628 to 2,382.
3. Family Credit was replaced by Working Families Tax Credit in October 1999.
4. Local authorities are assigned by matching the postcode against the 1999 version 1 of the postcode directory.
5. Numbers are rounded to the nearest hundred and expressed in thousands.

Source:

Family Credit 5 per cent. sample of awards.

Family Credit recipients benefiting from the child care disregard, Eastern Government Office Region August 1995–99

Thousand

Year	*Number*
August 1995	1.3
August 1996	1.8
August 1997	2.0
August 1998	2.4
August 1999	3.1

Notes:

1. Case load figures are taken at a point in time for which the month is August.
2. Numbers are based on a 5 per cent. sample and are therefore subject to a degree of sampling error.
3. Family Credit was replaced by Working Families Tax Credit in October 1999.
4. Numbers are rounded to the nearest hundred and expressed in thousands.

SERPS

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of the number of contributors to SERPS and their dependants who have suffered financial or other hardship as a result of the misleading information issued between 1986 and 1996 on changes in the provision of inherited SERPS. [115369]

Mr. Rooker: No one should have suffered financial loss as a result of the information issued as the change was not due to come into effect until April 2000 and is now intended to be postponed for two and a half years until 6 October 2002. The inherited SERPS scheme will provide redress for those people who were wrongly informed and who, had they known the true position, would have made different arrangements.

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what was the nature of the evidence referred to in the NAO report on SERPS (HC320) about the noting by his Department of the absence of information about changes to inherited SERPS in a draft leaflet on the changes to retirement pensions; and if the investigations

referred to in his oral statement of 15 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 307, established whether Ministers' attention was drawn to this fact; [115368]

(2) if the investigations referred to in his oral statement of 15 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 307, established whether Ministers had *(a)* sight of or *(b)* responsibility for the 1987 revision of the DSS leaflet, "Your Retirement Pension" (NP32), concerning the 50 per cent. reduction in inherited SERPS. [115371]

Mr. Rooker: The failure to include the correct information about SERPS inheritance provisions in leaflets was an extended failure over a period of time. The National Audit Office and the Ombudsman have reviewed the available evidence and concluded that there is no documentary evidence that enables them to conclude one way or the other about the cause of the omission. All Ministers must inevitably bear a measure of responsibility for the leaflets issued by the Departments in which they hold office.

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what will be the average weekly change, as a result of the changes to SERPS in the Social Security Act 1986, in inherited pension received by a surviving spouse whose partner dies after 5 April 2000 rather than before. [115373]

Mr. Rooker: The changes referred to are to be postponed by two and a half years until 6 October 2002. There will therefore be no average weekly change in inherited pension for people whose spouse dies after 5 April 2000 rather than before.

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if the investigations referred to in his oral statement of 15 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 307, established whether Ministers had *(a)* sight of and *(b)* responsibility for the leaflet contained in the DSS briefing pack publicising the 1986 reforms that mentioned the 50 per cent. reduction in inherited SERPS. [115372]

Mr. Rooker: The National Audit Office reviewed the available evidence and has published its report. This particular leaflet had a signed foreword from the then Secretary of State. All Ministers must inevitably bear a measure of responsibility for the leaflets issued by the Departments in which they hold office.

My hon. Friend is aware that Ministers in the current Administration do not have available to them papers from the previous Administration, although both the NAO and the PCA had access to all the papers on which to base their reports.

Benefit Payments

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the difference in the cost of benefit payments is between an automatic credit transfer transaction and payment by giro; and if he will break down the cost difference between payments to the agencies concerned. [115483]

Mr. Rooker: Payment by girocheque is over 130 times more expensive than payment by automated credit transfer (ACT).

The overall average total unit costs to the Benefits Agency are in the order of £1.36 for each girocheque and 1p for each ACT transaction. These figures include the production processing and distribution costs as well as the transaction charges paid to paying agents.

A breakdown of the costs to the individual components cannot be disclosed as some of this information is commercial in confidence.

Pensions Indexation

Jean Corston: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment he has made of the responses received during the recent consultation exercise on pensions indexation and investment-linked annuities. [116204]

Mr. Rooker: We asked for views from the pensions industry, employers and the public on whether it would be right to relax the current indexation rules for money purchase pension schemes, to allow schemes to offer investment-linked annuities to any members who might wish to choose this option as an alternative to a traditional indexed annuity. Investment-linked annuities enable the annuitant to benefit from growth in a range of underlying investments after retirement, though this goes hand in hand with a risk of possible falls in pension income if investment performance is poor.

The principle of introducing this greater flexibility for occupational scheme members was widely welcomed. The balance of opinion was against the introduction of mandatory guarantees to protect the level of pension paid by investment-linked annuities, because this would hamper product design and could have a significant effect on the potential growth in the annuitant's future income. A mixed response was received to the question of whether investment-linked annuities should also be allowed to be bought from "protected rights" elements of funds (that is, any part of the fund which has accrued in place of rights in SERPS).

We have tabled an amendment to the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill which will have the effect of allowing funds in occupational schemes subject to the "Limited Price Indexation" requirement to be used to purchase an investment-linked annuity. Protected rights will not be covered by the amendment, however. We intend to give further detailed consideration to the issues that arise for protected rights before deciding whether to make any changes to the indexation rules which apply to them. We shall also give careful consideration to the comments which many respondents made on the wider question of the application of indexation requirements to occupational money purchase pension schemes.

I am arranging for copies of the responses received in the consultation exercise to be placed in the Library.

Housing Benefit

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what assessment he has made of the performance of contractors operating housing benefit administration; and if he will make a statement; [115650]

(2) what assessment he has made of the quality of service for housing benefit claimants resident in Hackney and Islington since IT Net was contracted to provide the service; and if he will make a statement. [115651]

Angela Eagle: Local authorities have a statutory duty to administer the Housing Benefit scheme. We are aware that a small minority of authorities has chosen to contract out support functions for their benefit services and that some have experienced difficulties as a result. It is a matter for the local authorities concerned to draw up and manage robust contracts with their suppliers and to take appropriate steps where contractors are failing to meet their obligations.

From this April, Best Value performance indicators will be the main yardstick against which local authorities' performance will be judged. The indicators we have set for Housing Benefit delivery are designed to ensure that authorities provide their communities with a faster, more accurate service which is more secure against fraud, and which provides value for money and takes account of the views and needs of clients. Local authorities will be required to set challenging targets for improved performance against these indicators year on year.

We are committed to working with local government to modernise and improve public services so as to ensure they are efficient and of high quality and are responsive to the needs of local people. However, we will not hesitate to act where necessary to protect the interests of local people. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has recently announced that where the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate identifies persistent failings in the Housing Benefit service that is being provided he will use his statutory powers to direct the authority concerned on the standards it is to meet and the timescales for achieving them.

The Benefit Fraud Inspectorate is due to conduct inspections of the benefit services provided by the London boroughs of Hackney and Islington during the summer.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what advice he has given to housing benefit administrators concerning the processing of applications *(a)* that are more than six months late and *(b)* that have been lost by the processing agent. [115649]

Angela Eagle: Local authorities have an independent statutory duty to administer the Housing Benefit scheme in accordance with the legal framework set by Parliament. The Department issues general guidance to all authorities on the law governing the scheme through the Housing Benefit Guidance Manual and supplementary circulars. Where Housing Benefit claims are delayed or lost it is for the local authority concerned to decide what action to take in the light of the circumstances of each individual case.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will state *(a)* the total cost of housing benefit administration, *(b)* the subsidy provided by his Department and *(c)* the net cost to each London borough for (i) 1997–98 and (ii) 1998–99; and what is his estimate for the current year to date. [115648]

Angela Eagle: Information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

Housing benefit administration

	1997–98		*1998–99*	
Local Authority	*LA estimated costs* [1]	*DSS specific grant* [2]	*LA estimated costs*	*DSS specific grant*
Barking and Dagenham	496	307	654	329
Barnet	1,869	507	2,086	520
Bexley	506	300	457	313
Brent	3,670	862	3,820	872
Bromley	1,778	473	1,680	490
Camden	3,291	846	3,169	851
City of London	232	30	263	33
Croydon	1,998	646	2,050	627
Ealing	3,745	676	4,177	692
Enfield	2,571	451	2,382	499
Greenwich	4,739	609	3,881	660
Hackney	5,600	1,036	4,529	1,114
Hammersmith and Fulham	2,935	604	2,832	623
Haringey	5,428	954	5,634	913
Harrow	985	291	1,191	298
Havering	915	268	1,021	250
Hillingdon	1,538	336	1,143	343
Hounslow	1,104	417	1,235	416
Islington	3,814	747	3,050	783
Kensington and Chelsea	3,690	523	3,090	525
Kingston upon Thames	485	160	484	154
Lambeth	5,052	1,009	3,679	1,050
Lewisham	6,167	919	7,227	942
Merton	664	300	684	296
Newham	7,363	997	7,691	1,023
Redbridge	1,932	386	2,538	414
Richmond upon Thames	976	225	853	223
Southwark	3,915	936	5,447	962
Sutton	1,209	225	1,190	233

Housing benefit administration

Local Authority	*1997–98*		*1998–99*	
	LA estimated costs [1]	*DSS specific grant* [2]	*LA estimated costs*	*DSS specific grant*
Tower Hamlets	2,275	680	2,658	725
Waltham Forest	1,639	624	1,897	663
Wandsworth	2,096	782	2,101	756
Westminster	4,886	723	4,986	712

[1] The total expenditure on administration costs used in the calculations are those reported by the authorities to the Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) on the RO4 form. Costs reported by Local Authorities can vary widely. The reasons for the differences include the different mix of caseload, their relative complexities to administer, and also the different components included in the total costs expenditure, for example, the treatment of overheads.

[2] DSS specific grant only, calculated using a grant allocation formula agreed with the Local Authority Associations. These figures do not include additional funding made available to authorities for anti-fraud work. DETR also pay subsidy for Housing Benefit administration as part of the Revenue Support Grant arrangements.

Notes:

1. Information is not yet available for Local Authorities' reported costs for 1999–2000.
2. It is not possible to show the net cost for each London borough as the DETR also make provision for Housing Benefit administration costs within the Revenue Support Grant arrangements.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security on (1) what date he expects local authority verification of the validity of housing benefit applications to commence; [115646]

(2) what estimate he has made of the cost of verification of the validity of housing benefit applications to local authorities; and what additional resources they will receive to accommodate this. [115647]

Angela Eagle: Local authorities have a statutory duty to administer the Housing Benefit scheme and we are committed to working with local authorities so as to ensure that local services are efficient and of high quality and are responsive to the needs of local people.

We have provided local authorities with the Verification Framework (VF) which is a good practice guide about the secure and accurate administration of Housing Benefit. It sets out the information which must be verified before benefit is paid, specifies what is acceptable as evidence and what checks must be made during the life of a claim. An additional £100 million was made available over three years to help all local authorities implement the VF.

Additionally, from this April, Best Value performance indicators will set challenging targets for local authorities. The indicators we have set for Housing Benefit delivery include new measures of the average time taken to process new claims and notifications of changes of circumstance, and the percentage of renewal claims processed on time.

Disability Benefits Unit

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many complaints about the conduct of medical examinations have been received by the Disability Benefits Unit in the past 12 months. [115654]

Angela Eagle: The Disability Benefits Unit has received a total of 190 complaints concerning medical examinations.

Child Support Agency

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will investigate the time taken by the Child Support Agency to deal with the case of Mrs. Janet Potter, a constituent, whose details have been supplied to him; and if he will make a statement. [115652]

Angela Eagle: The administration of the Child Support Agency is a matter for the Chief Executive, Mrs. Faith Boardman. She will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Faith Boardman to Helen Jones, dated 23 March 2000:

I am replying to your Parliamentary Question to the Secretary of State for Social Security about your constituent, Mrs Janet Potter, and the way the Child Support Agency has handled her case.

As individual cases are a confidential matter I have written to you privately.

Pensioners

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to amend the rules with regard to downrating of the state retirement pension for pensioners who go into hospital for six weeks or more. [115808]

Mr. Rooker: Rules about the payment of benefits to people in NHS hospitals have been part of the Social Security system for over 50 years. We have no plans at present to revise the rules regarding the payment of Retirement Pension to people who remain in NHS hospitals for longer than six weeks. We continue to keep these rules under review.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Kosovo

Mrs. Mahon: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many members of the Kosovo Protection Corps have been arrested for committing human rights abuses; and when they will be prosecuted. [115525]

Mr. Vaz: We are aware of recent reports about alleged misdeed involving some of the 18,000 applicants to join the Kosovo Protection Corps (KPC), who had previously been members of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). The UN Mission (UNMIK) has overall responsibility for

the KPC, including recruitment and dismissal procedures. UNMIK takes measures, including dismissal, against misdeeds committed by KPC members.

"Your Britain, Your Europe"

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will add to the websites listed in "Your Britain, Your Europe" literature details of those groups opposed to the organisation's whose sites are listed. [115566]

Mr. Vaz: The "Your Britain, Your Europe" roadshow leaflet included details only of the official websites of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the EU institutions. We did not include details of any non-governmental organisations or pressure groups.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is the purpose of the "Your Britain, Your Europe" questionnaire; how many have been printed; how many have been distributed to date *(a)* in total and *(b)* to persons not of voting age; and if he will make a statement. [115573]

Mr. Vaz: The "Your Britain, Your Europe" leaflet included a questionnaire designed to gauge public interest in Europe. During the "Your Britain, Your Europe" roadshow we distributed almost 7,000 copies of the leaflet to members of the public, companies and educational institutions.

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what mechanisms exist for the promotion of public awareness in the United Kingdom of the institutions of the European Union; and if he will make a statement. [115828]

Mr. Vaz: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office will publish a "UK in Europe" millennium brochure later this year, tracing Britain's involvement in Europe since the 1950s. Late last year, I visited 10 English cities in five days as part of a "Your Britain, Your Europe" roadshow to promote public awareness about the benefits of our membership of the EU. A variety of websites, including those of the FCO, the European Commission and the European Parliament offer information about the EU institutions. The UK Network of European Relays also offers information through various regional centres across the country. From 1 September 2000, the national curriculum will include an element on Europe and the European Union for secondary school pupils.

Human Rights

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list those former *(a)* Ministers, *(b)* senior armed forces personnel and *(c)* heads of state, who have visited the United Kingdom since 1 May 1997, about whose human rights records he received representations prior to their visits. [115545]

Mr. Battle: The FCO does not hold information on the entry of all people into the UK. Therefore, the FCO might not be aware of, for example, a private visit by a former Minister to the UK. To then find out whether the FCO received any representation on human rights grounds over any such visit would also demand a considerable amount of research at disproportionate cost.

Investments

Mr. Colman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which countries have entered into agreement with Her Majesty's Government for the protection and promotion of investments; and when each agreement came into force. [115711]

Mr. Hain: Her Majesty's Government have entered into 93 Investment Promotion and Protection Agreements. Of these, 84 are in force and nine are awaiting entry into force. There are 22 OECD member states with which an Investment Promotion and Protection Agreement is not required. Protection of investments is generally considered to be satisfactory under the domestic legislation of OECD member states.

The countries which have signed an Investment Promotion and Protection Agreement with the UK and which are in force are (date of entry into force in parenthesis):

Albania (30 August 1995)
Antigua and Barbuda (12 June 1987)
Argentina (19 February 1993)
Armenia (11 July 1996)
Azerbaijan (11 December 1996)
Bahrain (30 October 1991)
Bangladesh (19 June 1980)
Barbados (7 April 1993)
Belarus (28 December 1994)
Belize (30 April 1982)
Benin (28 November 1987)
Bolivia (16 February 1990)
Bulgaria (24 June 1997)
Burundi (13 September 1990)
Cameroon (7 June 1985)
Chile (21 April 1997)
China (15 May 1986)
Congo (9 November 1990)
Cote d'Ivoire (9 October 1997)
Croatia (16 April 1998)
Cuba (11 May 1995)
Czech and Slovak Republics (24 October 1991, amended 26 October 1992)
Dominica (23 January 1987)
Ecuador (24 August 1995)
Egypt (24 February 1976)
Estonia (16 December 1994)
Georgia (15 February 1995)
Ghana (25 October 1991)
Grenada (25 February 1998)
Guyana (11 April 1990)
Haiti (27 March 1995)
Honduras (8 March 1995)
Hong Kong (12 April 1999)
Hungary (28 August 1987)
India (6 January 1995)
Indonesia (24 March 1977)
Jamaica (14 May 1987)
Jordan (24 April 1980)
Kazakhstan (23 November 1995)
Kenya (13 September 1999)
Korea (4 March 1976)
Kyrgyzstan (18 May 1998)

Laos (1 May 1995)
Latvia (15 February 1995)
Lesotho (18 February 1981)
Lithuania (21 September 1993)
Malaysia (21 October 1988)
Malta (4 October 1986)
Mauritius (13 October 1986)
Moldova (30 June 1998)
Mongolia (4 October 1991)
Nepal (2 March 1993)
Nigeria (11 December 1990)
Oman (21 May 1996)
Pakistan (30 November 1994)
Panama (7 November 1985)
Papua New Guinea (22 December 1981)
Paraguay (23 April 1992, amended 13 June 1997)
Peru (21 April 1994)
Philippines (21 February 1981)
Poland (14 April 1988)
Romania (10 January 1996)
Senegal (9 February 1984)
Singapore (22 June 1975)
Slovenia (12 May 1999)
South Africa (27 May 1998)
Soviet Union (3 July 1991, now applies to Russian Federation)
Sri Lanka (18 December 1980)
St. Lucia (18 January 1983)
Swaziland (5 May 1995)
Tanzania (2 August 1996)
Thailand (11 August 1979)
Tonga (22 October 1997)
Trinidad and Tobago (8 October 1993)
Tunisia (4 January 1990)
Turkey (22 October 1996)
Turkmenistan (9 February 1995)
Uganda (24 April 1998)
Ukraine (10 February 1993)
UAE (15 December 1993)
Uruguay (1 August 1997)
Uzbekistan (24 November 1993)
Venezuela (1 August 1996)
Yemen (11 November 1983).

The nine countries which have signed Investment Promotion and Protection Agreements with the UK, which have yet to enter into force are:

Brazil
Colombia
Costa Rica
El Salvador
Lebanon
Morocco
Nicaragua
Sierra Leone
Zimbabwe.

The 22 OECD member states with whom an Investment Promotion and Protection Agreement is not required are:

Australia
Austria
Belgium
Canada
Denmark
Finland
France
Germany
Greece
Iceland
Ireland
Italy
Japan
Luxembourg
Netherlands
New Zealand
Norway
Portugal
Spain
Sweden
Switzerland
USA.

Sudan

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with the Canadian Foreign Minister regarding exports to Sudan; and if he will make a statement. [115720]

Mr. Hain: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has not had the opportunity to meet recently with his Canadian counterpart.

We have studied the Canadian report on Sudan and are discussing the issues it raises with the Government of Sudan.

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Chinese and Sudanese Governments concerning reports that Chinese personnel have been involved in the displacement of Dinka and Nuer peoples from Heglig and Bentin areas; and if he will make a statement. [115723]

Mr. Hain: We are deeply concerned about the reports of human rights violations in Western Upper Nile. The recently published Harker report (available on the internet at http://www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca\foreignp\3110168-e.pdf) addressed many issues including displacement. We have already taken this up with the Government of Sudan bilaterally and through the EU.

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the *(a)* Government of Sudan, *(b)* European Commission and *(c)* United Nations, regarding the recent bombings in Sudan. [115714]

Mr. Hain: We are aware of several reports of aerial bombing in the Sudan. We have raised specific cases and the more general issue with the Government of Sudan

bilaterally and through the EU. At last year's UN Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR), an EU co-sponsored resolution on Sudan was agreed by consensus which calls on the Government of Sudan to

> stop immediately the indiscriminate bombardment of civilian and humanitarian centres which runs counter to the fundamental principles on human rights and humanitarian law.

We expect the EU to co-sponsor a resolution at this year's UNCHR.

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps he plans to take to develop special economic measures to tighten export controls to Sudan; and if he will make a statement. [115712]

Mr. Hain: There is an EU arms embargo which we rigorously implement and expect to remain for as long as the civil war continues. There is no policy to halt commercial interests in the Sudan and we give full and frank advice to interested companies.

Banana Dispute

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) what assessment he has made of when the banana dispute between the European Union and United States of America will be concluded; [115564]

(2) what meetings have taken place between Her Majesty's Government and the European Commission as part of efforts to resolve the banana dispute; [115562]

(3) what meetings are planned by his Department to resolve the banana dispute between the European Union and the United States of America; [115561]

(4) what recent meetings have been held between Her Majesty's Government and the EU Commission in connection with the banana dispute with the United States. [116000]

Mr. Vaz: Throughout the banana dispute numerous meetings have taken place with the European Commission, other EU member states, the US, Caribbean governments and Latin American banana producing countries. We will remain in close touch with all the parties and continue to press for a rapid solution to this dispute which also addresses the needs of vulnerable Caribbean banana producers.

Most parties have indicated they could accept the basic framework for a solution set out in the Commission, with differences outstanding on the details. On 20 March the EU Agriculture Council noted latest developments and encouraged the Commission to continue its discussions on these details with third countries in an effort to find agreement as quickly as possible. The exact date by which a solution to the dispute can be found will depend on when those details can be resolved.

Federal Republic of Yugoslavia

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Gedling (Mr. Coaker) of 14 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 142W, if the new case by case approach to consideration of export licences for dual use goods would allow the import into Montenegro of dual use goods which might benefit the internal security forces of the Montenegrin authorities. [115592]

Mr. Vaz: We will not approve any applications to export dual use goods to the FRY where those goods could benefit the armed forces, security forces or similar entities of the government in Belgrade. All other applications, including those where the goods in question could benefit the Montenegrin internal security authorities, will be considered consistent with the national export licensing criteria announced in July 1997 and those in the EU Code of Conduct on Arms Exports.

Austria

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will seek to establish on whose behalf the Portuguese presidency of the EU was speaking on 13 March when it rejected Austria's request for the normalisation of relations within the Council of Ministers. [115496]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 20 March 2000]:* In confirming the position of the other EU member states on 13 March in relation to their measures against Austria, the Portuguese Prime Minister was speaking in an informal capacity as a coordinator for the 14 member states.

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what consultation took place between the Portuguese presidency of the EU and other EU Governments prior to their statement on 13 March rejecting Austria's request for the normalisation of relations within the Council of Ministers; and if Her Majesty's Government agreed the wording in advance. [115497]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 20 March 2000]:* In addressing the press on 13 March, the Portuguese Prime Minister was speaking in an informal capacity as co-ordinator for the 14 member states and reflecting the view of HMG that the measures of the 14 EU member states against Austria should continue to be implemented.

Flag Cars

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs for what reason a Grand Marquis has been bought for use as a flag car in Caracas; who has use of this car; what was the cost of this car; and if he will make a statement. [115737]

Mr. Battle: The Embassy in Caracas first explored the purchaser of a Rover 75, which is used as a flag car at several other overseas posts. However, this model was only able to take lead-free petrol which was not available at the time in Venezuela. A decision was then taken to purchase a Grand Marquis at a cost of £18,422.

The flag car is reserved for official use by the Head of Mission. He is expected to use his private car for non-official (i.e. private use) purposes. The flag car may be used by the Charge when Head of Mission is not at post.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many flag cars have been purchased for the official use of ambassadors and high commissioners since 1 May 1997; how many of each model have been purchased; and at what total cost. [115736]

Mr. Battle: The following table shows how many flags cars have been purchased for the official use of Ambassadors and High Commissioners since 1 May 1997, how many of each model and the total cost.

In addition the FCO purchased one Rolls-Royce on special concessionary terms.

Model	*Number*	*Cost (£)*
Cadillac	1	19,835.28
Daimler	1	34,500.00
Land Rover Discovery	23	541,244.94
Ford Mondeo	1	14,350.72
Ford Grand Marquis	1	18,422.36
Jaguar S Type	4	88,269.65
Jaguar Sovereign	10	502,409.51
Jaguar XJ6	2	47,302.00
Jaguar XJ8	15	481,071.99
Opel Omega	1	21,232.36
Range Rover	30	966,938.68
Rover 620	1	13,862.17
Rover 75	6	88,591.97
Rover 820	2	26,211.22
Rover 825/Sterling	13	1,126,372.67
Toyota L/c Vx	1	20,557.41
Volvo S80 F	1	19,253.40
Volvo V70	1	21,200.00
Total number/cost of flag cars purchased since 1 May 1997	114	4,051,626.33

Friends of Europe Conference

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the official representatives from the Government who attended the Friends of Europe Conference on 9 March in Brussels. [115585]

Mr. Vaz: The Ambassador and an official from our bilateral Embassy in Brussels attended the Friends of Europe conference on 9 March.

Caribiner PR Company

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list those *(a)* Government projects and *(b)* projects organised in the UK by agencies of the European Community, which have used the services of Caribiner PR Company. [115567]

Mr. Vaz: Since its foundation in 1997, Caribiner has co-organised 34 events (including Summits, conferences, visits by Heads of State and press conferences) with Government Departments. With regard to events organised for the EU institutions, I refer the hon. Gentlemen to the offices of the European Commission and the European Parliament.

PRIME MINISTER

Visits

Q16. **Mr. Baker:** To ask the Prime Minister when he last visited the Lewes constituency. [114303]

The Prime Minister: Regrettably I have been unable to do so, but I hope to be able to visit the hon. Member's constituency at some point in the future.

Engagements

Sir Peter Tapsell: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 22 March. [115384]

The Prime Minister: This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House I will have further such meetings later today.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Synchrotron

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what assessment he has made of the impact on *(a)* the North West economy, *(b)* science in North West universities and *(c)* science and technology in the North West of the decision to place the diamond synchrotron investment at the Rutherford Appleton Laboratory in Oxfordshire; [115042]

(2) what account he took in coming to his decision on placing diamond synchrotron investment of the impact on joint science and technology projects between Daresbury and North West universities. [115105]

Mr. Byers: The synchrotron is a national facility that hosts scientists from across the country. I had to consider a wide range of issues before announcing this important decision and this included the implications in the long-term for the Daresbury laboratory and the North West. That is why I announced a number of steps to ensure the science base in the North West remains strong. We shall continue to work with partners in the region to bring forward a package of measures.

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many representations he has received in favour of placing the diamond synchrotron investment at Daresbury; and from whom. [115040]

Mr. Byers: Our records to date show that we have received approximately 500 letters from individuals in favour of placing the new synchrotron project at the Daresbury Laboratory in Cheshire.

Ms Southworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he has had from French scientists who are synchrotron users in support of Daresbury as the site for Diamond. [115134]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 17 March 2000]:* Records to date show 10 cases of ministerial correspondence from scientists with addresses in France in favour of placing the new synchrotron project at the Daresbury Laboratory in Cheshire. Most of these are not French scientists, but scientists of a different nationality who are currently living in France. It is not possible from our records to obtain the nationality of individuals.

Ms Southworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he has had from scientists with an international reputation in support of Daresbury as the site for Diamond. [115135]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 17 March 2000]:* Records to date show about 200 letters from individuals at academic institutions in favour of placing the new synchrotron

project at the Daresbury Laboratory in Cheshire. Of these letters about 70 were sent from scientific institutions outside of the UK. Of the letters that were sent from UK institutions about 50 were sent by Professors.

Ms Southworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what discussions he and his Ministers have had with the French Government in relation to the siting of the Diamond synchrotron project; and if he will publish the papers associated with the meetings. [115132]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 17 March 2000]:* My noble Friend Lord Sainsbury has met with the French Science Minister, Mr. Claude Allegre, on a number of occasions on which issues relating to the synchrotron project have been discussed.

Ms Southworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what discussions he and his Ministers have had with the Wellcome Trust in relation to the siting of the Diamond synchrotron project. [115131]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 17 March 2000]:* I met representatives from the Wellcome Trust on 27 October 1999 and 10 February 2000 to discuss the synchrotron. My noble Friend Lord Sainsbury also discussed the synchrotron at a meeting with the Wellcome Trust on 27 October 1998, 23 September 1999 and 1 March 2000.

The Wellcome Trust and I exchanged written correspondence on this issue on:

24 September 1999
4 October 1999
7 October 1999
11 October 1999
15 October 1999
1 November 1999
2 November 1999
11 November 1999
22 November 1999
23 November 1999
17 January 2000.

My noble Friend Lord Sainsbury received correspondence from the Wellcome Trust on the 21 January 2000.

In recent months, my noble Friend Lord Sainsbury has had a number of telephone conversations with the Wellcome Trust, during which the synchrotron was discussed.

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what discussions he has had with the Wellcome Trust concerning the location of the diamond synchrotron investment. [115041]

Mr. Byers: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given today to my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington, South (Ms Southworth).

MedicAlert

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he has received about the effect of the second change to London telephone numbers on the charity MedicAlert; and if he will make a statement. [115119]

Ms Hewitt: Numbering is a matter for the Office of Telecommunications (Oftel). The first change to London telephone numbers in the past five years was in April 1995, PhOneday, on which all geographic codes were changed to begin 01. The second change to London numbers, due on 22 April, will mean that local numbers in London begin with a 7 or an 8, preceded by the new code 020. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has received 12 representations about the effect of the second change to London telephone numbers on the charity MedicAlert, and the Department as a whole has received about 60. Oftel has put in place parallel running for old and new numbers, and "changed number announcements", as well as ensuring that the current change has been publicised sufficiently to minimise the costs to charities such as MedicAlert.

Signals Broadcasts

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what is the combined power output of all the signals broadcast from the telecommunication masts at *(a)* the north site and *(b)* the south site on Old Blandford Road at Harnham Hill, Salisbury; and what assessment he has made of the potential risk to human health. [114804]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 16 March 2000]:* The responsibility for monitoring the level of power densities produced by telecommunications masts rests not with the Government but with the operators of the masts in accordance with their duties under their Health and Safety Work etc. Act 1974. The Health and Safety Executive expects operators to prevent access by members of the public to areas, usually within a couple of metres of the antennas, where power densities may exceed guidelines for restricting human exposure to electromagnetic fields issued by the National Radiological Protection Board.

The Government are aware of public concerns with regard to reports of possible adverse health effects associated with telecommunications masts. It has initiated an Independent Experts Group on Mobile Phones, chaired by Sir William Stewart, to look at the issue. The Group is due to report in the spring.

Power Lines

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what are the implications for British energy policies of power lines proposed to be built from Lakenby to Shipton by Bellingborough; what impact they will have *(a)* on the local industry and *(b)* on the future of power stations; and if he will make a statement. [115538]

Mrs. Liddell: Each case for an overhead line is considered on its merits. The need for this particular overhead line was spelt out in the reply given to my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, South (Mr. Taylor) on 26 March 1998, *Official Report*, columns 220–21W, and in the referred to departmental letter. Systems need to be planned to meet robust standards in order to provide reliable supplies of electricity to homes and businesses.

European Spallation Source

Ms Southworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what discussions have been held

within Government about the siting of the European Spallation Source which will replace the ISIS neutron machine at Rutherford Appleton Laboratory. [115133]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 17 March 2000]:* The European Spallation Source (ESS) is not a replacement for ISIS; ISIS will continue to operate independent of the site selected for the ESS.

The Council for the Central Laboratory of the Research Councils (CCLRC), which operates the ISIS facility at RAL, is the UK partner in a 10-nation consortium that is developing plans for the ESS.

Astra Case

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the contents of file bundles 120, 121, 140 and 141 in the Astra case. [115410]

Dr. Howells: The references refer to file bundles created by the Companies Act inspectors and contain the inspectors' own copies of Astra company documents and their own working papers. The inspectors' work on these files and other matters is contained in their report published in June 1993.

Electricity Transmission

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what estimate he has made of *(a)* the extra electricity transmission losses and *(b)* their cost, which will result from new build homes in the South East. [115406]

Mrs. Liddell: No such estimates have been made.

Post Offices (Gloucestershire)

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what estimate he has made of the impact on the number of post offices in Gloucestershire of the provisions of the Postal Services Bill. [115701]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The Postal Services Bill is primarily about the letters and parcels market and is not itself expected to have an effect on the number of post offices in Gloucestershire or elsewhere.

The Government are committed to ensuring that post offices are equipped and re-designed to face the future, and that they are thereby able to continue to play their role as an essential part of the country's social fabric. The Bill, therefore, has a requirement (at Clause 31) for the new regulator, the Postal Services Commission, to provide (in consultation with the new Consumer Council) advice and information to the Secretary of State about the number and location of public post offices and their accessibility to users of postal and other services. There is also provision (at clause 32) for the Secretary of State to issue statutory guidance to the Commission on social and environmental matters. It is envisaged that these will include access criteria for public post offices.

The PIU in the Cabinet Office is carrying out a study on the post office network to identify the contribution made by post offices to the vitality of local communities; to consider how the post office network can best contribute to the Government's objectives for the future; and in the process to formulate objectives for the post office network, including recommendations on access criteria. Conclusions are expected in the spring.

Gas and Electricity Consumers

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what is the Government's policy on gas and electricity consumers' advocacy, complaints and representation in each region. [115500]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 21 March 2000]:* The Utilities Bill would establish a statutory Gas and Electricity Consumer Council in place of the existing Gas Consumers Council and Electricity Consumers' Committees. The Council would have access to information in its own right; assist consumers, provide advice and information to regulatory authorities, Government and others whose activities may affect the interests of consumers; and be the chief access point for complaints about energy companies. It would have the function of keeping itself informed of consumer matters and the views of consumers throughout Great Britain.

The Bill recognises the changed circumstances of energy supply since the existing arrangements were put in place. In February, a consultation document seeking views of interested parties on two possible models for the new Council was issued by the Gas and Electricity Consumers Council Task Force. The first provided for regional offices in each of Wales, Scotland and England; the second for five regional offices, one each in Scotland and Wales and three in England. Both models could support regional panels to provide advice and mediate in cases referred by regional offices. The consultation period ends on 29 March 2000 and recommendations will then be made for Government to consider.

Automated Teller Machines

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will provide a regional breakdown of the 3,000 new automated teller machines to be installed in post offices which were announced by the Prime Minister. [115855]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I understand from the Post Office that contractual and commercial arrangements with potential partners for the provision and installation of new automated teller machines have yet to be finalised. Consequently, no decisions have yet been taken on the locations of the new machines.

TREASURY

State Aid to Industry

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what recent communications he has received from the European Commission concerning the breach, or potential breach, of the terms of any EU legislation concerning state aids or taxation benefits for *(a)* firms in Northern Ireland, *(b)* shipbuilding and *(c)* motor

manufacture or assembly, stating the topic and purpose of each communication. [115251]

Mr. Caborn: I have been asked to reply.

Under their general powers to monitor state aid, in June 1999, the Commission requested information on a Selective Financial Assistance grant to a company in Northern Ireland. The UK supplied the required information, demonstrating that the grant had complied with the terms of state aid approval of Selective Financial Assistance.

The UK has not received any recent correspondence from the Commission concerning the breach of the state aid rules as they apply to shipbuilding.

In December 1999, the Commission opened a formal investigation procedure into part of the proposed aid package for the BMW/Rover plant at Longbridge, Birmingham. This procedure is a normal part of the state aid notification process where the Commission requires all information including from third parties in order to assess the case.

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 23 March 2000

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Internet

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what incentives his Department plans to introduce to encourage less expensive methods of access to the Internet for *(a)* small businesses and *(b)* home users; and if he will make a statement. [116049]

Ms Hewitt: The Government believe that the best way to encourage the provision of low-cost Internet access is by encouraging competition. The success of this policy was shown recently with the announcement by several companies of free or nearly free Internet access packages (including no per minute call charges).

Longbridge

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what estimate he has made following his meeting with Alchemy of the number of jobs expected to be lost at Longbridge. [115836]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 22 March 2000]:* Alchemy were unable to give an indication of employment levels.

CABINET OFFICE

National Training Organisation

Mr. Neil Turner: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what progress has been made towards establishing the central Government national training organisation; and if she will make a statement. [116120]

Mr. Stringer: The Central Government National Training Organisation was launched today. The Government made a commitment to establish a National Training Organisation for the civil service in the Modernising Government White Paper.

The CGNTO aims to:

Make a reality of the civil services's commitment to lifelong learning and employability;

identifying training, development and learning needs for the majority of civil servants;

develop a strategy to address those needs, ensuring that this reflects the Modernising Government Agenda;

raise standards of training, development and learning across Central Government;

provide a means of learning from and with other sectors, through NTO network.

Civil Service

Ms Rosie Winterton: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what research the Cabinet Office has undertaken into equality proofing of performance management in the civil service. [116121]

Mr. Stringer: I have today published a research report by the Institute for Employment Studies on Equality Proofing of Performance Review in the civil service.

The research was commissioned across 13 representative civil service Departments and Agencies last autumn following concerns about imbalances in performance markings between different groups of staff. This study, and the action to be taken as a result, further underlines the commitment of the civil service to make real progress on diversity.

I have placed copies of the IES report in the Libraries of the House.

DEFENCE

BAe Systems

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if the BAe Systems contract for an urgent operational requirement in-theatre communications system is intended to replace the current system; what impact it will have on the security of communications of UK forces' security in Kosovo; what is the estimated cost of the system; and if he will make a statement. [113909]

Mr. Spellar: The contract with BAe Systems will provide for wide area communications in support of the UK's contribution to the NATO Multi Divisions in Bosnia and Kosovo. The contract is specific to the Balkans and does not affect the Army's other general and much larger and technically more complex communications requirements, such as Project BOWMAN. It will replace the current wide area systems in the Balkans, including Project PTARMIGAN, and allow them to be redistributed for use in other theatres of operations. In addition, the Army's commitment to operations in the Balkans will be reduced by some 260 Royal Signals soldiers by the end of this year. Of these, around 150 will return and others who were preparing for deployment will not go. Both the soldiers and current wide area systems, which will become available for future tasking, are in high demand by Army commanders.

The contract will provide the backbone of a communications network, including voice, data and facsimile links within the Balkans and back to the UK. The system will maintain the level of security of the communications of UK forces by segregating secure UK traffic from secure NATO traffic and unclassified UK traffic. The contract with BAe Systems is worth up to £23 million and the estimated cost of the entire system is some £25 million (exclusive of VAT).

RN Vessels

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the status of HMS Kent; when she will be ready for service; what are the causes and cost of the delays; and if he will make a statement. [114764]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Sir Robert Walmsley to Mr. Mike Hancock, dated 23 March 2000:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about the status of HMS KENT; when she will be ready for service; what are the causes and costs of the delays; and if he will make a statement. This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

HMS KENT is currently undergoing post-build weapons trials and safety training. The ship will become operational on 13 December 2000. There has been no delay to this date which has been the basis for planning since construction began.

During the build of such a complex ship it is not unusual for minor changes to requirements and timings to be made. HMS KENT was built with a new bridge layout, but during Contractor's Sea Trials, options to improve the functionality of the bridge were identified and subsequently contracted for at a cost of £715K. Despite this extra work, HMS KENT was delivered to the Royal Navy by the contractor (now BAE SYSTEMS) on 9 February 2000, ahead of the scheduled Contract Acceptance Date of 8 March 2000.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the cost was of producing the RV 'Trinton'; when she will begin sea trials; when she will be put into service; what her mission will be; and if he will make a statement. [115745]

Dr. Moonie: RV 'Triton' is currently being built by Vosper Thorneycroft at Southampton. The cost of the ship is approximately £13.5 million, which is being funded by the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency (DERA).

RV 'Triton' will start contractor sea trials in July of this year and will be delivered later in the autumn to begin two years of sea trials to evaluate the hullform as a contender for future warship designs. On completion of the first two years' trials, the ship's role will be as a trials facility to test and evaluate at sea many different equipments and systems, either commercial or military. As a trials platform, RV 'Triton' will be owned by DERA and will not 'enter service' with the Royal Navy in the military use of the phase.

Sea Eagle Missiles

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what his Department plans to do with its stock of Sea Eagle missiles after they have been removed from service; and if he will make a statement. [115752]

Dr. Moonie: Sea Eagle missiles were removed from Royal Navy and Royal Air Force service in April 1999. The missile systems are currently being collected in central locations prior to disposal action being initiated. No final decisions have yet been made about the disposal of the weapons.

M-1 Submarine

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if permission has been given to dive to the shipwreck of the experimental submarine M-1. [115704]

Dr. Moonie: No permission is required to undertake diving on the wreck of the experimental submarine M-1.

War Graves

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what *(a)* steps he has taken and *(b)* plans he has to tighten control of (i) unlicensed diving on war graves and (ii) pillaging of naval wrecks. [115705]

Dr. Moonie: My Department, together with others and Diving Associations, has been assisting with the development of a Code of Practice for diving on wrecks. It is hoped that this code will be introduced shortly. Following its introduction, the impact of this code will be assessed. I am able to report that the Ministry of Defence Police have recently charged a man with theft from a war grave and this case is proceeding through the courts. We will take action through the courts wherever appropriate.

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the *(a)* name and *(b)* location of the shipwreck war graves on which permission has been given to dive in the past 12 months. [115703]

Dr. Moonie: It is not necessary for divers to obtain permission from my Department in order to dive on wrecks.

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many *(a)* applications have been made to and *(b)* permissions have been given in the last 12 months by his Department to dive on undersea war graves (i) in the Dardanelles, (ii) off Singapore and (iii) elsewhere. [115702]

Dr. Moonie: It is not necessary for divers to obtain permission from my Department to dive on undersea war graves.

Annual Leave Review

Mr. DuncanSmith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when his Department's review of the rules relating to annual leave for non-industrial civil servants will report; what the terms of reference of the review are; and if he will publish the results of the review. [115922]

Dr. Moonie: The Ministry of Defence is not undertaking a formal review of annual leave arrangements for its civilian staff. All conditions of service are kept under regular scrutiny and changes made as appropriate to meet statutory and Departmental requirements. We are currently looking at the provisions for various forms of special leave (paid and unpaid) to see if any changes are necessary.

Submarine Research (Goats)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) how many goats have had to be killed on humane grounds after being used in the submarine escape and rescue research programme in the last six months; and if he will make a statement; [115812]

(2) if goats that fail to respond to training for the submarine escape and rescue research programme are culled; and if he will make a statement. [115811]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 22 March 2000]:* This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Sir John Chisholm to Mr. Norman Baker, dated 23 March 2000:

I have been asked to reply to your two questions on the use of goats in DERA's submarine escape and rescue research programme. I will answer both questions in this letter.

You asked whether goats that fail to respond to training for the research programme are culled. In fact, the training for the animals is very effective and no animal has ever failed to respond. Training consists of familiarising the animals with the environment where they will be used. This not only minimises the stress to the animals but also improves the quality of the research by ensuring that the research results are unaffected by additional factors such as the animals being handled by people not known to them.

Your second question asked how many goats have been killed on humane grounds in the last six months. The numbers are as follows:

Date	*Number of goats*
1999	
September	3
October	0
November	12
December	0
2000	
January	8
February	7
March	0

Specialists advise that any experimental use is likely to cause some stress to animals and it is, therefore, preferable in most cases that the animals be killed humanely on completion of the experiment. This action is included in the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986. Laboratories can, however, request to re-use animals or to retire stock to the 'field'. This is usually only permitted where the laboratory can demonstrate, with verification by a veterinary surgeon, to the Home Office that the animals have not suffered any lasting harm.

Prior to re-use in the submarine escape and rescue programme the animals are all inspected by a veterinary surgeon. If an animal is found to be unfit it is humanely killed. Additionally, the veterinary surgeon, the scientists conducting the research and the Home Office have agreed limits to the experiments, based on signs of distress in the animals. If these limits are approached during the experiment the animal will be humanely killed at that point. The veterinary surgeon and the named animal care and welfare officer have unrestricted access to the experiments and can instruct the termination of an experiment at any time.

I hope this is helpful.

RAF Halton

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is his policy for effecting the disposal of the families quarters at RAF Halton which are surplus. [115980]

Dr. Moonie: A number of surplus Families' Quarters at RAF Halton were sold to Annington Homes Ltd. (AHL) in November 1996 with the bulk of the Married Quarters Estate in England and Wales. Under the terms of the sale agreement MOD is committed to releasing a number of surplus properties to AHL for disposal. Any further surplus properties at RAF Halton will also be released to AHL, and 82 properties have been identified for disposal in this way over the coming months.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will state the locations of the families' quarters at RAF Halton which are surplus. [115988]

Dr. Moonie: The surplus properties at RAF Halton are in the area known as the Hospital Site. The road names are:

Hospital Circular Road
Longcroft Avenue
Lambe Road
Babington Road
Trenchard Avenue.

Eighty of these properties are already void and will go back to Annington Homes Ltd. (AHL) for disposal under the terms of the contract agreed with the Ministry of Defence at the time of the sale of the Families' Quarters Estate. Two further properties are currently used for purposes other than housing and will also be offered to Annington Homes for disposal in due course.

Land Assets

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what land and property his Department owns in Torquay. [116198]

Dr. Moonie: There is only one property owned by the Ministry of Defence in Torquay. This is the Army Careers Information Office, 180 Union Street, Torquay.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

Unification of Europe (Commemoration)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, if he will make a statement on the Commissioners' policy in respect of making use of resources in combination with other churches to commemorate the unification of Europe. [115563]

Mr. Stuart Bell: The Church Commissioners are required by statute to use their income for the stipends, pensions and housing of clergy of the Church of England. Their funds are therefore fully committed and are not generally available for other purposes.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Humber Bridge

Shona McIsaac: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on imposing VAT on tolls, with particular reference to the Humber Bridge. [114899]

Mr. Hill: VAT is a matter for my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer. The Government have opposed the imposition of VAT on all tolled crossings, not just the Humber Bridge. Whether or not VAT applies to tolls is to be subject of a judgment of the European Court expected this summer.

Shona McIsaac: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the level of debt on the Humber Bridge at the end of April 1997; and how much of the debt has been *(a)* written off and *(b)* rescheduled since that date. [114900]

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Mr. Hill: Of the debt of £359,307,192 at the end of April 1997, some £62 million owed by the Humber Bridge Board to the Public Works Loan Board was written off in July 1998. Of the balance, some £240 million owed to the Secretary of State was rescheduled and, on the remainder, interest charges were reduced.

Shona McIsaac: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much revenue was received by the Treasury from tolls on the Humber Bridge for each of the last five years. [114898]

Mr. Hill: The Humber Bridge Board have made the following payments into the consolidated fund as recorded in the Appropriation Accounts:

Year	*£*
1994–95	41,473,000
1995–96	41,473,000
1996–97	41,473,000
1997–98	41,473,000
1998–99	14,149,000

The figures for the first four years mainly include grant payments to cover interest that would not otherwise have been met since the bulk of the operating surplus was used to meet interest charges and capital repayments of debts owed to the Public Works Loans Board. Net of grant payments the above receipts were as follows:

Year	*£*
1994–95	3,231,000
1995–96	2,846,000
1996–97	1,600,000
1997–98	1,800,000

Disabled Parking

Shona McIsaac: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to prevent able-bodied drivers from using parking bays designated for people with disabilities. [115046]

Mr. Hill: As I announced on 18 November 1999, the Orange Badge Scheme is to be reviewed this year, and one of the areas we will look at is the enforcement of the Scheme.

However, it is already an offence under section 47 of the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984 to park a vehicle which is not displaying an Orange Badge in an on-street designated disabled persons' parking bay.

The Orange Badge Scheme does not, however, apply to off-street car parks, whether local authority or privately owned, and enforcement of those disabled persons' parking bays is a matter for the car park operator concerned. In the case of local authority off-street car parks, normally their off-street parking place orders either make it an offence for someone not displaying a valid Orange Badge to park in a disabled persons' parking bay or make it subject to the payment of an "excess charge". In private car parks, we understand it is possible in law for the owners to agree with the local authority that a parking place order be made in respect of that car park. Conditions of use can then be enforced as if it were a local authority car park, with penalties or excess charges levied on offenders.

Press Office

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what are the total running costs of his Department's Press Office, including staff salaries, for the year 1999–2000; and what is the estimated cost for the next two years; [115761]

(2) how many press officers, at what civil service grades, are employed in his Department's Press Office; [115762]

(3) how many of his Department's press officers have been replaced in each of the last three years. [115763]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 21 March 2000]:* The running costs are:

Year	*£ million*
1999–2000	[1]3.1
2000–01	[2]3.3
2001–02	[3]3.3

[1] Forecast outturn
[2] Provision
[3] Estimate provision

These include the staff salaries, overtime, travel and subsistence, training and other administrative costs including regional media activity and press cuttings.

The number of press officers (full-time equivalent) currently employed by DETR(C) grade is:

Press officers	*Number*
Senior Civil Service	1
Band 7	[1]0.8
Band 6	5
Band 5	11
Band 4	18
Band 3	5

[1] Part-time

The number of press officers who have joined or left the Media Centre since April 1999 is:

Left—14

Joined—17.

Figures are not available in this format for earlier years.

Marine Pollution

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to introduce a marine environment Bill to protect the United Kingdom's marine environment from oil spills. [115784]

Mr. Mullin: None at present. Shipping is an internationally regulated business and accordingly my Department is in discussion with counterparts in the International Maritime Organisation and with the European Union to determine practical measures for enhanced protection against maritime pollution.

On 10 February my Department also published a consultants' report as the first stage in a consultative process which could lead to the setting up of Marine

Environmental High Risk Areas (MEHRAs) to help protect sensitive marine and coastal environments at particular risk from pollution from shipping.

Departmental Contracts

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list for the financial year 1998–99 the number and total value of contracts let by his Department with external consultants and advisers that *(a)* have been put out to competitive tender, *(b)* have not been put out to competitive tender and *(c)* have been let on a non-commercial basis, stating in each case the names of the individuals or organisations that have carried out the work. [115809]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 22 March 2000]:* The information that has been requested as parts *(a)* and *(b)* of the question is not held centrally and cannot be provided without incurring disproportionate cost. All contracts are awarded using competition unless there are compelling reasons for using single tender action.

As for part *(c)*, it is a requirement that all my Department's contracts are awarded on a commercial basis in accordance with Government Accounting, Departmental Procurement Guidance, and the UK and EU Regulatory Framework.

Local Government Bill

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions for what reasons the Local Government Bill [Lords] is not compatible with the European Convention on Human Rights; and if he will make a statement. [115655]

Ms Armstrong: There are considerable doubts whether section 2A of the Local Government Act 1986 is compatible with the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). Clause 91 of the Local Government Bill amends, but also reaffirms, the provisions of section 2A. It is for this reason that it is doubtful whether the Bill is compatible with the ECHR.

This Government have already said that they intend to remove clause 91 of the Bill and, in its place, provide for the repeal of section 2A of the 1986 Act. The Bill will then be compatible with the ECHR.

Second Homes

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what change there was in the number of second homes owned between January 1995 and January 2000; and if he will make a statement; [115940]

(2) what estimate he has made of the change in the prevalence of second home ownership England and Wales over the next *(a)* five and *(b)* 10 years. [115939]

Mr. Mullin: The following table shows estimates from the DETR Survey of English Housing of the number of second homes in England. Like all estimates from sample surveys, they are subject to a certain amount of random variation and are not precise to the level of detail shown. The change between one year and the next should not be regarded as a reliable estimate of longer term trends. Statistics on the number of second homes in Wales are incomplete. No projections of the number of second homes are made.

Second homes in England: 1994–95 to 1998–99

	Thousand
1994–95	215
1995–96	185
1996–97	203
1997–98	224
1998–99	248

Note:
The table shows second homes in England owned or rented by households with their main residence also in England. It excludes second homes which are the main residence of another household, and those which the owners are intending to sell. Second homes may be either owned or rented.
Source:
1994–95 onwards—DETR Survey of English Housing

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Millennium Dome

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the design consultants contracted to undertake work on each of the zones in the dome. [109722]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 11 February 2000]:* The companies involved in the design and content of each exhibit zone are set out as follows. The contractual terms of each vary, reflecting the different nature and type of exhibit—both in terms of structure and content.

Zone	*Design consultants*
(1) Home Planet	
Zone design and build	Park Avenue
Flying creatures, airframe and engineering	Skyships
External design of flying creatures	FiT
Soundtrack	David A. Stewart and Steve McLaughlin
Film	Hugh Hudson
(2) Living Island	
Designer	At Work Ltd.
Remarkable Pencil Machine	Edward Miller
(3) Shared Ground	
Architectural design	Philip Gurmuchdjian and Shigeru Ban
Architect	Stephen Spence Associates
Initial design	HP:ICM

Zone	*Design consultants*
Exhibition designer	At Work Ltd.
Construction	Mivan
Website	Common Purpose
(4) Play	
Design of zone, exhibits and fit-out	Land Design Studio
Games suppliers are subcontracted to Land Design Studio	
(5) Body	
Initial concept design	HP:ICM
Design and build of zone and exhibits in Explore	HP:ICM
Architect and designer of Body structure	Branson Coates Architects
Body Show design	Sting Ltd.
Exhibition fit-out	Mice and BNW
Production designer	Andrew MacAlpine
Production team	The Production Office
Special effects	Asylum
Sound	M62
Film (Explore)	Produced by HP:ICM
(6) Work and Learning	
Designer	At Work Ltd.
Film (Old Work)	CIC
Film (Learning)	BBC and Tesco
Visuals and computer software (Learning)	StudioFish Ltd.
Schoolnet2000 access and equipment	Tesco
(7) Money	
Design of zone and exhibits and fit out	Caribiner
(The Bank of England provided the £50 notes on display; and the data feed is provided by Reuters)	
(8) Rest	
Design	Richard Rogers Partnership
Soundtrack	ArtAngel
(9) Mind	
Design and selection of exhibits	Office of Zaha Hadid (OZH)
Design of Engineering our Future	Johnnie Ball
Art installations	Activmedia, Andrew Stevenson, Butterworth and Storm, Debut de Siecle/Big Projects, Escape, Simon Pope, Gavin Turk, GEC Marconi, Helen Chadwick, Hussein Chalayan, Langlands and Bell, Nancy Burson, Neville Brody, New Renaissance, Oven Digital, Richard Brown, Richard Deacon, Ron Muerck, Ryoji Ikeda, Smart Fibres, University of West England, Urs B. Roth
(10) Faith	
Architectural Design	Eva Jiricna Architects
Design of exhibits	Jasper Jacob Associates
Film	BBC
Sculpture	David Begbie
Lighting installation	James Turrell
Photographs	Zo-oid and others commissioned by NMEC
(11) Timekeepers	
Foam factory equipment	SRS Interactive
Construction and assembly	Mice
Character creation	Foundation and Cosgrove Hall
(12) Self Portrait	
Design, exhibits and fit out	Caribiner
The National Portrait	David Mach
Sculpture design	Gerald Scarfe
(13) Journey	
The sponsor of this zone, Ford, has been responsible for its design, build and fit-out	
(14) Talk	
The sponsor of this zone, BT, has been responsible for its design, build and fit-out	
(15) Our Town story	
Design	Richard Rogers Partnership
Content	Communities across the UK developing performances for their day in the dome

UK Sport

Mr. Faber: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will place in the Library minutes of his meeting with UK Sport on 30 November 1999. [115233]

Mr. Chris Smith: Minutes of discussions between Ministers, civil servants, and third parties who have been invited on a confidential basis, are taken for internal use and record and it is not possible to make them public. I can however confirm that the conclusion of the meeting on 30 November 1999 was that relocating athletics would provide better value for public money than proceeding with the platform design.

Science Museum

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) when his Department will announce the Government grant to the Science Museum for 2000–01; [115325]

(2) how much funding his Department gave to the Science Museum in the years *(a)* 1998–99 and *(b)* 1999–2000; and how much his Department will grant to the Science Museum in 2000–01. [115326]

Mr. Alan Howarth: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State wrote to the Chairman of the Science Museum with details of the Museum's funding allocation for the years 1999–2001 on 14 December 1998. The amounts are as follows:

£

	1999–2000	*2000–01*
Grant-in-aid	20,759,000	20,855,000
Free entry—for children (1999) and over 60s (2000)	997,000	1,424,000
Extra funds	1,000,000	1,400,000
Purchase and refurbishment of RNAY Wroughton	Up to 1,000,000	400,000
Total	23,756,000	24,079,000

For 1998–99, the Science Museum was allocated £20,281,000.

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what was the increase in funding last requested by the Science Museum in order to fund free admission for adults. [115327]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The increase in funding last requested by the Science Museum was for £5.83 million to implement free adult admission from 28 June 2000 to 31 March 2001. Of this, £2 million relates to loss of adult admission income, £1.91 million in compensation for loss of recoverable VAT input tax on operating income and £1.92 million for VAT on capital activity. Similar figures for the National Railway Museum are £1.11 million, of which £700,000 relates to lost adult admission income, £210,000 for VAT on operating income, and £200,000 for VAT on capital activity.

NORTHERN IRELAND

RUC (Crest)

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what are the dimensions of the RUC crest on police cars in Northern Ireland. [114896]

Mr. Ingram: When applied, the size of the crest is normally 284mm x 166mm on a white panel of 305mm x 186mm.

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the reasons for the RUC crest being removed from police cars in Northern Ireland. [114897]

Mr. Ingram: The decision to adopt a new livery was taken after the Royal Ulster Constabulary considered the future livery and the visibility of police vehicles at the scenes of incidents, especially on busy main roads. This work was commissioned by the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) from the Police Scientific Development Branch (PSDB) which recommended the adoption of a livery, commonly known as Battenburg, based on highly reflective large blue and yellow checks which cover the sides of the vehicle and red and yellow chevrons on the rear. It was a specific recommendation of the PSDB that, for safety reasons,

> no other materials, logos or symbols be placed over the blocks of colour on the sides of the vehicle.

Having considered the Health and Safety implications of this report and the desire to create a clear, consistent and highly visible image for police vehicles, the Chief Constable decided that the Royal Ulster Constabulary crest would not in future be displayed on the sides of liveried police vehicles. The change does not affect existing non-Battenburg liveried vehicles, many of which carry an RUC crest.

Mrs. Rosemary Nelson

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what has been the cost of the police investigations into the death of Mrs. Rosemary Nelson; how much of this is in respect of the costs of RUC officers; and how much is in respect of police officers from Great Britain. [114895]

Mr. Ingram: I would refer the hon. Gentleman to the reply I gave the hon. and learned Member for North Down (Mr. McCartney) on 22 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 96W.

Consultants

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many *(a)* clinical and *(b)* medical oncology consultants there are per 100,000 population for each health authority in Northern Ireland; and if he will make a statement. [115189]

Mr. George Howarth: In Northern Ireland, clinical and medical oncology services are provided by Eastern Health and Social Services Board.

Currently there are 0.65 clinical oncology consultants per 100,000 population, and 0.12 medical oncology consultants per 100,000 population.

The Campbell report on the reorganisation of cancer services in Northern Ireland set a target of 13 oncology consultants by 2005. This target has already been reached.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Assault

Mr. Rammell: To ask the Solicitor-General what is the average time from police referral to *(a)* decision to prosecute and *(b)* decision not to prosecute in the case of accusations of assault, in each of the last three years. [115597]

The Solicitor-General: The Crown Prosecution Service holds no central records on the time required to complete particular stages of the prosecution process in respect of particular offences, nor does it hold such records in respect of offences generally.

Judicial Reviews

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Solicitor-General what is his policy on the employment of Queen's Counsel in applications for judicial review. [115969]

The Solicitor-General: Whenever a Government Department in England and Wales wishes to brief counsel to appear in court on a civil matter, including judicial review proceedings, they must first consider whether it is appropriate to use one of the junior barristers included on the Panels of approved counsel. The procedure for selecting counsel to be included in these panels has recently been revised to make sure that the selection process is fair and transparent. Government Departments are therefore required to use the approved junior counsel in all but the most exceptional cases. If the lawyer handling the case believes that the hearing merits the instruction of a Queen's Counsel then they must seek a nomination of a particular Queen's Counsel with the appropriate expertise. Each such nomination has to be approved personally by the Law Officers before instructions can be sent. In considering whether the use of Queen's Counsel is necessary in a particular case factors such as the importance of the case, the complexity of the legal issues involved, whether the case will decide a point of principle of general application and the amount of money at stake are taken into account.

Crown Prosecutors

Dr. George Turner: To ask the Solicitor-General if he will make a statement regarding the Code for Crown Prosecutors. [115906]

The Solicitor-General: On 24 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 105W, I announced that the Code for Crown Prosecutors would be reviewed to take account of the Human Rights Act 1998. The aim of the review is to ensure that the Code for Crown Prosecutors is relevant, clear and accessible, properly considers the rights and interests of victims, and reflects the exercise of the statutory functions of Crown Prosecutors. The review will take into account legislative changes since 1994, particularly the Human Rights Act, changes to the structure of the CPS, and procedural changes to the criminal justice system.

The review team has now been established, and will be writing to organisations and individuals with an interest in the Code, asking for comments. The review team also invite views from the general public, who may write to their local Chief Crown Prosecutors, or write to, or e-mail CPS Headquarters. Information on the Code and the review can be found on the CPS website at *www.cps.gov.uk*.

It is important that the Code supports the CPS' commitment to excellence of decision making, improving victims' and witnesses' experiences of the criminal justice system, and pursuing a partnership approach within the criminal justice system while maintaining its independence in decisions on casework.

The Attorney-General and I welcome this review, and will be taking a close interest both in its progress and any major issues that may arise.

HEALTH

Medical Technical Staff

Mr. Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to increase the pay of medical technical staff in the NHS. [112444]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 1 March 2000]:* We have offered medical technical staff above inflation pay rises not just for one year but for three years. The details of the offer are as follows:

For year 1 (1999–2000) an increase of 3 per cent. or £250, whichever is the higher;

For year 2 (2000–01) an increase of 3.25 per cent. or £300 whichever is the higher;

For year 3 (2001–02) in the context of agreement on the negotiations on Agenda for Change (including the principle of pay linkage as set out in paragraph 7.4 of the Joint Framework of Principles and Agreed Statement on the Way Forward issued on 8 October 1999) and the joint commitment to lifelong learning, a minimum RPI(X) at December 2000 reported in January 2001, plus 0.5 per cent.

Myodil

Sir Nicholas Lyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people have suffered injury as a result of having been injected with myodil. [112478]

Ms Stuart: It is not possible to estimate the number of people who have suffered injury, such as arachnoiditis, as a result of being injected with Myodil, as no data are held centrally.

GPs (Indemnity)

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 7 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 625W, on indemnity cover for general practitioners, if the criteria for approval of medical liability indemnities under section 9 of the Health Act

1999 will include the maintenance of a solvency margin no lower than that applicable to other injuries under the Insurance Companies Act 1982; and if he will make a statement. [115413]

Mr. Denham: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave on 7 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 625W. Criteria for the approval of professional indemnity cover, including the ability to meet the anticipated levels of claims, are currently the subject of consultation with interested organisations.

Children's Services (North-west London)

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proposals he has for the redevelopment of children's services in north-west London, with specific reference to *(a)* Northwick Park hospital's new paediatric ambulatory care unit and *(b)* matched funding from north Thames region for the £2.5 million raised from public subscription. [114570]

Mr. Denham: The Paediatric Ambulatory Care Unit at Northwick Park was completed and opened some 14 months ago. It was funded through a Children's Appeal which met the majority of the costs with the hospital itself making a smaller contribution from their annual block capital allocation. The foundation stone was laid by the Princess of Wales two weeks before her death and the unit is known as the "Princess Diana Ambulatory Care Unit". This improvement further enhances children's services in north-west London.

No funding for the unit was sought from the Regional Capital Programme.

Crohn's Disease

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what provision his Department has made for research into and treatment of Crohn's disease. [114951]

Mr. Denham: We fund health and medical research in different ways. The Medical Research Council spent around £0.5 million on Crohn's disease in 1998–99. In addition we are currently commissioning, via the Health Technology Assessment Programme, a research project relevant to Crohn's disease, which will assess the impact of patient-centred disease management of inflammatory bowel disease.

Funding for the treatment of specific diseases is not separately identified in Health Authority or Primary Care Group allocations. Those commissioning healthcare will do so on the basis of local needs, in the context of priorities set nationally.

The treatment of patients with Crohn's disease is increasingly shared between gastroenterologists and General Practitioners. It may include following a special diet, dietary supplements, drug treatment with anti-inflammatory drugs, antibiotics and immunosuppressive drugs; and, in severe cases, surgery. Chronic inflammatory bowel disease is a risk factor for malignancy, and regular assessment is important.

NHS Regional Structures

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was *(a)* the annual cost of and *(b)* the number of people employed in each NHS regional structure in each of the last three years. [114902]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is in the tables. The regional offices were organised in April 1999. The cash allocations have been mapped from the old to the new structure. The staffing figures are not available in this format.

Cash allocations

NHS executive regional offices	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*
Eastern	6,716,419	6,910,092	6,992,847
London	9,187,167	9,170,161	9,558,307
North and Western	6,983,894	6,999,392	7,397,361
Northern and Yorkshire	6,814,419	6,906,315	7,279,300
South Eastern	8,416,949	8,442,609	9,205,567
South and West	6,907,419	6,935,717	7,048,229
Trent	6,947,425	6,972,425	7,189,736
West Midlands	6,966,889	7,030,291	7,246,700
Total	58,940,581	59,367,002	61,918,047

Staff numbers

NHS executive regional offices	*April 1998*	*April 1999*	*January 2000*
Anglia and Oxford	111	—	—
Eastern	—	110	94
North Thames	105	—	—
South Thames	114	—	—
London	—	122	130
North and Western	117	116	109
Northern and Yorkshire	109	109	105
South Eastern	—	113	123
South and West	107	112	104
Trent	129	138	116
West Midlands	109	102	109
Total	901	922	890

Ryhope General Hospital, Sunderland

Mr. Etherington: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many beds were occupied at the Ryhope General Hospital, Sunderland, on the first day of each month since 1 January 1999. [115080]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is given in the table.

Month	*Beds occupied*
January 1999	121
February 1999	141
March 1999	133
April 1999	113
May 1999	105
June 1999	114
July 1999	118
August 1999	108
September 1999	110
October 1999	119
November 1999	117
December 1999	109
January 2000	121
February 2000	149

Source:
Sunderland Health Authority

Speech and Language Therapists

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent representations he has received about including Speech and Language Therapists within the remit of the Pay Review Body; and if he will make a statement. [115083]

Mr. Denham: We have received several representations from Trade Union Organisations, hon. Members and individuals about whether other professional groups, including Speech and Language Therapists, should be permitted to come under the remit of the nurses and professions allied to medicine Pay Review Body (NPRB).

Our proposals for modernising National Health Service pay which were published in February 1999 in "Agenda for Change", include bringing some smaller groups of highly qualified staff within the scope of the NPRB, without changing its fundamentally professional character.

Initial discussions with NHS trade unions on pay modernisation resulted in a joint Framework of Principles and Agreed Statement on the Way forward which was published on 8 October 1999. Paragraph 7.2 of the Joint Framework sets out as a starting point for more detailed discussions with trade unions the qualifying criteria for groups to come within the scope of the NPRB.

The criteria are:

Professions with a minimum entry requirement of three years' educational study (or equivalent) to diploma level or higher, in a health specific area (other than medicine or dentistry) and which are state registered and have a substantial majority of members employed in healthcare.

The Joint Framework also goes on to say that:

staff groups which support professions added to the NPRB remit, and who have a direct connection with the transferred groups similar to that between nursing auxiliaries and registered nurses would also need to be considered for transfer.

I am sure my hon. Friend will appreciate that as this is part of continuing confidential discussions with NHS Unions aimed at reaching agreement by summer 2000, I am unable to comment further at this stage.

Mixed-sex Wards

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many mixed-sex wards exist in the North and Yorkshire region; where they are; and when they are due to be phased out. [115482]

Mr. Denham: Health authorities are monitored centrally on their commitment to eliminate mixed-sex hospital accommodation. Data from the latest monitoring exercise were published by the National Health Service Executive in "Health Authority Target Dates for meeting the Objectives to Eliminate Mixed Sex Hospital Accommodation: Position at 30 September 1998", copies of which are available in the Library.

North Staffordshire Hospital Trust

Mr. Stevenson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list for each year since 1994 the number of *(a)* nurses, *(b)* doctors, *(c)* consultants, *(d)* midwives and *(e)* health visitors employed by the North Staffordshire Hospital Trust; and if he will make a statement. [115627]

Mr. Denham: The table illustrates that the number of nursing and midwifery staff employed by the North Staffordshire Hospital National Health Service Trust declined between the years 1994 and 1997. However, nursing staff numbers have increased in 1998 and the numbers of hospital medical doctors employed within the Trust steadily increased since 1994, demonstrating our commitment to increase the number of doctors and nurses working within the NHS. It should be noted that inflated figures for nursing staff in 1994 are not comparable with later years, due to a new classification system introduced in 1995.

NHS hospital and community health services: staff within North Staffordshire Hospital NHS Trust, as at 30 September each year

	Nursing, midwifery and health visiting staff (numbers (headcount)) [1]			*Hospital medical staff and consultants*	
	Nursing staff	*Midwifery staff*	*Health visiting staff*	*Numbers (headcount)*	*Of which medical consultants*
1994	2,080	260	[2]—	340	120
1995	1,830	0	0	350	130
1996	1,620	230	0	390	140
1997	1,670	220	0	450	150
1998	1,720	220	0	460	150

[1] A new classification of the non-medical workforce was introduced in 1995, therefore information based on this classification is not comparable with earlier years.
[2] Five or less and greater than zero.
Notes:
1. Figures exclude learners and agency staff
2. Figures are rounded to the nearest 10
Sources:
Department of Health Non Medical Workforce Census.
Department of Health Medical and Dental Workforce Census.

Residential Properties

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will list by region *(a)* the number of residential properties owned by health authorities and NHS trusts that were empty on 1 April 1999, *(b)* the number of such properties empty for one year or more and *(c)*(*a*) and *(b)* as a percentage of the total number of residential properties owned by health authorities and NHS trusts; [115613]

(2) if empty residential properties owned by the NHS trusts and health authorities are counted by *(a)* number of vacant buildings and *(b)* the number of unoccupied

bed spaces when notified to the Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions for inclusion in the published figures for empty properties in England. [115619]

Mr. Denham: Information as of 1 April 1999 is not available centrally since the last survey was carried out as at September 1998. This showed that out of a total of 2,336 houses, and 5,388 flats owned by National Health Service trusts, 290 houses and 605 flats were vacant. This represented an average of 11.6 per cent. vacant of the total (approximately 2 each per NHS trust).

Information is not available on the number of properties empty for one year or more.

The regional totals are as follows:

	Houses	*Flats*	*Total vacant*
Anglia and Oxford	282	541	128
Northern and Yorkshire	301	744	108
South and West	239	677	98
North Thames	332	712	135
North West	272	868	97
South Thames	340	526	74
West Midlands	183	889	87
Trent	331	643	170

Note:
Regional boundaries changed in April 1999

The survey of the NHS residential estate, carried out last in September 1998, counted the number of houses and flats, not the number of bed spaces in those properties.

Domiciliary Oxygen Service

Mr. Ivan Henderson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he intends to review the Domiciliary Oxygen Service in England following the Royal College of Physicians' guidance, "Domiciliary Oxygen Therapy Services". [116304]

Ms Stuart: Following the publication of the Royal College of Physicians' guidance "Domiciliary oxygen therapy services", we will be reviewing a number of aspects of the Domiciliary Oxygen Service under the following terms of reference.

To review the scope and organisation of the Domiciliary Oxygen Service in England in the light of the 1999 guidance of the Royal College of Physicians, including:

whether, and if so to what extent, patient access to the service should continue to be via general practitioner prescribing or otherwise,

the availability of alternative forms of oxygen delivery (cylinder, concentrator, and liquid) and associated equipment, and the circumstances in which one form might be preferable to another,

whether the current supply arrangements, including the arrangements for setting prices should be maintained or altered,

the cost effectiveness and affordability of any changes,

other relevant matters.

I am placing in the Library a copy of a letter to interested companies and organisations inviting them to let us have their views as a first step in the review.

NHS Spending (Hampshire)

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was the total NHS spending per head of population *(a)* nationally and *(b)* in Hampshire, including the unitary authorities of Southampton and Portsmouth and *(c)* in each health authority in Hampshire, including the unitary authorities of Southampton and Portsmouth, in each year since 1979 for which figures are available. [116020]

Mr. Denham: Health authorities have existed in their current form since 1 April 1996.

The table shows spending levels on health per weighted head of population for Hampshire health authorities.

Expenditure figures are from health authority audited accounts and are not total National Health Service funding. For 1997–98 and 1998–99 the Prescription Pricing Authority rather than individual health authorities have accounted for the majority of drugs expenditure. Health authorities do not account for the majority of General Dental Service expenditure.

Expenditure estimates for 1999–2000 are not available.

Expenditure per weighted head of population

£

Health authority	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*
North and Mid Hampshire	538.86	518.81	541.54
Portsmouth and South East Hampshire	561.65	521.45	586.91
Southampton and South West Hampshire	574.88	577.56	621.60
England total	625.56	607.85	659.76

NHS Prescriptions (Appeals)

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what target times his Department set for appeal of new *(a)* products and *(b)* pharmaceuticals to be available on NHS prescription. [R] [115959]

Ms Stuart: Drugs, including pharmaceuticals, may be prescribed on the National Health Service by general practitioners unless and until they are listed in Schedule 10 to the National Health Service (General Medical Services) Regulations 1992 (the "blacklist"). Appliances must be listed in Part IX of the Drug Tariff in order to be prescribed on the NHS by GPs. Representations against proposals to list drugs in Schedule 10, or against the rejection of an application for listing of an appliance in Part IX, may be made but no timescale for the consideration of such representations has been set and will vary depending on the complexity and difficulty of the issues in question.

Private Finance Initiative

Jane Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what amount of public funds was spent *(a)* on fees and *(b)* otherwise in respect of the private finance initiative proposals for the Royal Berkshire and Battle hospitals. [106698]

Mr. Denham: The Royal Berkshire and Battle Hospitals Trust has been involved in three private finance initiative schemes to date:

Consolidation Project: a new build consolidating services on the Royal Berkshire Hospital site;

Haemodialysis Unit: moving renal services from Dellwood Hospital to the Royal Berks site; and

Information Management and Technology (IM and T) Project: a partnership to develop various interlinked IM and T systems.

The amount of public funds spent on fees and other PFI related costs to date are set out in the table.

Public expenditure on each project to March 2000

£000

To March 2000	*Consolidation*	*Haemodialysis*	*IM and T*
Fees			
Legal Advice	26	30	35
Financial Advice	10	19	48
Other Advice	[1]517	12	13
Sub-total Fees	553	61	96
Other Costs			
PFI Partner Exit Costs	[2]304	—	—
Internal Project Costs[3]	284	20	—
Associated Estate Works	—	84	—
Sub-total Other Costs	588	104	0
Total	1,141	165	96

[1] A significant proportion of the cost for 'Other Advice' arose from seeking planning permissions for the project, some benefits from which have been passed on to the publicly funded project.

[2] The trust board agreed to pay Proteam 2 (the private sector partner) this amount under an abortive cost agreement.

[3] 'Internal Project Costs' covers the additional cost of project management and staff working on the project. The IM and T project is very new and material internal project costs to date are very low. The estimate is that final fees will be £238,000 and internal project costs £265,000, including the figures in the table.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Agriculture Council

Mr. Hood: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what was the outcome of the Agriculture Council held in Brussels on 20 and 21 March; and if he will make a statement. [115958]

Mr. Nick Brown: I represented the UK at the EU Agriculture Council meeting in Brussels on 20 March 2000. Mr. Ross Finnie, Minister for Rural Affairs at the Scottish Executive, and Ms Christine Gwyther, Secretary for Agriculture and the Rural Economy at the National Assembly for Wales, were also present.

The Council had an exchange of views on the Commission White Paper on food safety, focusing particularly on the case for horizontal legislation providing for controls across the whole food chain, the need for transparency in the operation of controls, and procedures for the effective handling of the results of inspection visits. Similar debates on the Commission's White Paper are being held in other instances of the Council in order to inform the Commission's eventual report to Heads of Government.

The Council agreed on conclusions to guide the Commission in its strategy for accommodating budgetary and WTO pressures in the fixing of export refunds on processed goods. I emphasised to the Council the importance of export refunds to the cereals-based spirit drinks sector, notably Scotch Whisky, and urged the Commission to recognise this concern in its implementation of export refund reductions. A statement to this effect was recorded in the minutes of the Council.

The Council also had a first discussion of a proposal to maintain the EU subsidised school milk scheme, but on a basis of a reduced EU budget contribution and compulsory co-financing by member states. I stressed the importance to the UK of continuing the scheme for the benefit of school children, and requested the Commission to examine other possibilities for savings in the EU milk regime before co-financing had to be considered.

Among other issues discussed in the Council were the present state of negotiations on the EU banana regime and the impact on agriculture of the EU nitrates directive. The Council also agreed a request from Italy for authorisation for payment of a state aid in the sugar sector, with Finland, Denmark and the Netherlands abstaining.

Ministerial Visits

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the agricultural shows that he and each of the ministers in his Department have accepted invitations to attend in 2000. [114757]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 15 March 2000]:* Ministers have received a number of invitations to attend agricultural shows in 2000. These are currently being considered.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the agricultural shows that he and each of the ministers in his Department attended in 1999 and the dates of each such visit. [114756]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 15 March 2000]:* The table details the agricultural shows attended by Ministers during 1999.

Show	*Date*	*Minister*
MUCK 99 Agricultural Show	28 April 1999	Elliot Morley
Devon County Show	21 May 1999	Lord Donoughue
Royal Bath and West Show	24 May 1999	Nick Brown
Beef 99 Show	3 June 1999	Nick Brown
Staffordshire County Show	3 June 1999	Jeff Rooker
East of England Show	18 June 1999	Nick Brown
Three Counties Show	19 June 1999	Jeff Rooker
Lincolnshire Agricultural Show	23 June 1999	Elliot Morley
Highland Show	25 June 1999	Nick Brown
Royal Show	5 July 1999	Nick Brown
Royal Show	6 July 1999	Lord Donoughue
Kent County Show	15 July 1999	Elliot Morley
Welsh Show	20 July 1999	Nick Brown
Ryedale Agricultural Show	27 July 1999	Elliot Morley
New Forest Show	28 July 1999	Elliot Morley

Press Office

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the *(a)* Civil Service grade and *(b)* areas of responsibility of each of the staff employed in the MAFF Press Office. [114754]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 15 March 2000]:* The MAFF Press Office is headed by the Chief Press Officer (Grade 7). The staff reporting to him and their areas of responsibility are as follows:

Senior Information Officer

Information Officer

Animal welfare, fisheries, countryside matters, flood and coastal defence.

Senior Information Officer

Information Officer

Assistant Information Officer

Food safety, food standards, meat hygiene, animal health (including BSE), pesticide safety, veterinary medicines, plant health and research, quarantine.

Senior Information Officer

Information Officer

Assistant Information Officer

Europe, CAP, regions, food and drink industry, marketing and competition, export promotion, administration, horticulture, pigs and poultry.

There are five administrative support staff, one Executive Officer, two part-time Administrative Officers, one Administrative Assistant and one Personal Secretary.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what was the budget for running the MAFF Press Office in each of the last 10 financial years. [114755]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 15 March 2000]:* Pay and non-pay running costs, attributable to the MAFF Press Office, for each of the last 10 financial years are as follows:

Year	*£*
1999–2000	[1]382,000
1998–99	556,000
1997–98	460,000
1996–97	442,000
1995–96	417,000
1994–95	539,000
1993–94	532,000
1992–93	490,000
1991–92	519,000
1990–91	[2]n/a

[1] Expenditure up to the end of January 2000
[2] Comparable figures are not available for 1990–91

Beef Ban

Mr. Burnett: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on progress made in the case of the European Union *v.* Government of France relating to the ban on UK beef. [113399]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 16 March 2000]:* On 4 January the European Commission brought before the European Court of Justice its infringement action against the French Republic over France's failure to lift its import ban on British beef. Notification of these proceedings (Case C-1/00) was published in the *Official Journal of the European Communities* on 4 March. The French Government has now to prepare its defence.

Local Authority Farmland

Mr. Paice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many acres of farmland are owned by local authorities. [113880]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 10 March 2000]:* Information available relates to land let by English local authorities as statutory smallholdings. The most recent figures, covering the period 1 April 1996–31 March 1997, were published in the "Forty-seventh Annual Report to Parliament on Smallholdings in England". A total area of 119,977 hectares, equivalent to 296,463 acres, was held for smallholdings purposes.

Meetings

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, (1) pursuant to his answer of 28 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 16W, concerning the number of hon. Members he has met or refused to meet to discuss farming issues, for what reasons he did not provide the numbers requested; [114536]

(2) pursuant to his answer of 28 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 16W, concerning his meetings with hon. Members, if he will list the individual hon. Members he has *(a)* agreed to meet and *(b)* refused to meet to discuss farming issues since his appointment. [114537]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 14 March 2000]:* I meet individual hon. Members and representatives of farming and other organisations frequently to discuss farming issues in both ministerial and party political contexts. The detailed information requested is not held centrally.

Bass Fishing

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what discussions he has had with his counterparts in other EC fishing nations regarding sport angling and offshore trawling for bass in the English Channel. [115738]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 22 March 2000]:* My fisheries science advisers at the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science are working with their opposite numbers in IFREMER, the French Institute for the Exploitation of the Sea, on studies on the movement of sea bass offshore. If this work indicates that there are threats to the long-term sustainability of the bass stock, I shall seek to persuade the other countries with an interest in the bass fishery and the European Commission of the need to act to protect the stock.

Promotion of sport angling rests with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport.

Flood Defences

Mr. Steen: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how much Government funding is available to match local authority funding in Somerset, Devon and Cornwall for flood defences; how much has been available in each of the last three years; and how much has been taken up by each local authority in Devon. [115772]

Mr. Morley: Government funding is provided by way of Revenue Support Grant and MAFF grants on capital works.

The flood defence Standing Spending Assessments (for Revenue Support Grant) reflect a range of flood defence

costs falling on different classes of local authority, ie levies paid to the Environment Agency, special levies to internal drainage boards and local authorities own expenditure as a flood defence operating authority.

The flood defence SSAs for all of those authorities which contribute to the South West Regional Flood Defence Committee and/or the Somerset Local Flood Defence Committee, are as follows:

£000

Local authority[1]	1996–97	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000
Cornwall CC	2,275	2,252	2,228	2,278
Devon CC[2]	4,973	4,955	3,388	3,447
Plymouth	—	—	953	960
Torbay	—	—	577	586
Dorset CC[3]	2,711	1,672	1,706	1,773
Somerset CC	3,200	3,563	3,617	3,646
Bath and North East Somerset	412	388	602	415
North Somerset	1,414	1,547	1,595	1,627

[1] Some of the above local authorities pay levies to Flood Defence Committees other than Somerset and South West.
[2] Devon's SSA was reduced following creation of Plymouth and Torbay Unitary Authorities in 1998–99.
[3] Dorset's SSA was reduced following creation of Bournemouth and Poole Unitary Authorities in 1997–98.

MAFF grant is allocated to the Environment Agency by means of Grant Earnings Ceilings (GECs), which represent the total of approved capital expenditure in respect of which grant can be claimed, and not in terms of the grant available. The amount of grant paid is dependent on the mix of (a) fluvial and (b) tidal/sea defence expenditure, for which different grant rates apply. Information is therefore unavailable in the form requested but a comparison of (i) the original GECs (which can be revised in-year) and (ii) the actual outturn of approved capital expenditure is as follows:

£ million

	Somerset		South West (Devon and Cornwall)	
	(i)	(ii)	(i)	(ii)
1996–97	4.0	4.0	4.5	5.1
1997–98	3.2	4.8	3.0	2.9
1998–99	2.7	4.5	2.2	2.1

MAFF grants to local authorities are available for schemes on the forward capital programme that meet certain criteria and achieve an appropriate priority score. The timing of expenditure is largely a matter for the authorities. Information is therefore unavailable in the form requested, but the amount of grant paid to local authorities, including a more detailed breakdown for Devon, is as follows:

£000

				Devon	
	Somerset	Cornwall	South Hams	Torbay	North Devon
1996–97	46	—	—	51	—
1997–98	27	—	51	—	—
1998–99	69	—	—	2	3

HOUSE OF COMMONS

HoC Commission Meeting

Angela Smith: To ask the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, representing the House of Commons Commission, what matters were discussed at the meeting of the House of Commons Commission on 6 March; and how long the meeting lasted. [115925]

Mr. Kirkwood: It is not the practice of the Commission to report on its deliberative sessions which are held in private, but the Commission is considering ways of improving the distribution of information about relevant decisions to Members.

The Commission reports on all matters that come before it in its Annual Report, published during July. The hon. Member may wish to consult the last Annual Report, the Twenty First, for 1998–99 (HC721) for details of the Commission activities during that financial year.

TREASURY

IR35

Mr. St. Aubyn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer in what ways the fashion modelling industry will benefit from the changes proposed under IR35. [115640]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 22 March 2000]:* All sectors of industry will benefit from the changes we propose. IR35 will ensure that measures designed to support small businesses are properly targeted, and do not go to people who are really the same as employees.

Mr. St. Aubyn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the impact of IR35 proposals on the avoidance of tax and national insurance payments in the fashion modelling industry. [115641]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 22 March 2000]:* The legislation will stop the use of personal service companies and similar intermediaries to avoid PAYE tax and National Insurance Contributions in all industries.

House Prices

Mr. Austin: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what action he is taking to slow the rise in house prices; and if he will make a statement; [115840]

(2) what assessment he has made of the impact on the economy of the recent rise in house prices; and if he will make a statement. [115841]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I refer my hon. Friend to Box B4 of the "Financial Statement and Budget Report 2000", published on Tuesday 21 March.

Average Wage

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what, for each of the three most recent financial years, was the average wage of male workers in *(a)* the United Kingdom and *(b)* Wales. [115366]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Denzil Davies, dated 23 March 2000:

As the Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your recent question regarding earnings of male employees.

The New Earnings Survey (NES) is based on a one per cent sample of employees in the PAYE system and is therefore likely to under-represent relatively low paid staff earning below the tax threshold and in particular those who work part-time. Listed below is information from the NES for the years 1997–1999.

New Earnings Survey, April of each year—male employees on adult rates, whose pay for the survey period was unaffected by absence

£

	Average gross weekly earnings		
	1997	*1998*	*1999*
United Kingdom			
Full-time	407.3	425.6	440.7
Part-time	132.7	150.8	154.3
All	388.5	405.1	418.7
Wales			
Full-time	363.5	376.4	384.0
Part-time	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—
All	347.3	360.1	366.5

[1] Reliable estimate unavailable

Aviation Fuel Taxation

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the cost of administering the taxing of aviation fuel. [115301]

Mr. Timms: No such estimate has been made.

Manufacturing (Wales)

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many persons were employed in the manufacturing sector in Wales in each of the years to 31 December 1999, 1998 and 1997, respectively. [115586]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from John Pullinger to Mr. Denzil Davies, dated 23 March 2000:

The Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) has been asked to reply to your recent parliamentary question on the number of people employed in the manufacturing sector in Wales. I am replying in Dr Holt's absence.

There are two sources for this type of information. The first of the two tables attached shows the Labour Force Survey (LFS) estimates, which are the number of people employed in the manufacturing sector in Wales. This measure includes Self-employed and those with second jobs in manufacturing. The LFS figures are shown for the autumn quarter (September to November) as the winter quarter (December to February) is not available until April. The second table is from the Short-term Turnover and Employment Survey which shows the number of Employee Jobs in the manufacturing sector in Wales. These figures are given for September for the years requested as the December 1999 results are also not available until April.

All jobs [1] in manufacturing, Wales

At Autumn	*Thousand*
1997	255
1998	251
1999	246

[1] Total of people whose main job is in the manufacturing sector, and those with second jobs in manufacturing (whose main job is elsewhere), government-supported trainees and unpaid family workers. The 'second jobs' definition includes employees, self-employed and those people who did not specify their status.

Source:
Labour Force Survey, ONS

Employee jobs in manufacturing, Wales

At September	*Thousand*
1997	214
1998	219
1999	208

Source:
Short-term Turnover and Employment Survey, ONS

Income Statistics (Mothers)

Ms Harman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the income distribution is in deciles of *(a)* lone mothers and *(b)* women in two-parent families who are in work when they give birth and who are eligible for Statutory Maternity Pay. [114791]

Angela Eagle: I have been asked to reply.

The information is not available in the format requested as past eligibility to Statutory Maternity Pay is not collected in the sample survey used to derive income data. Further, the sample is not large enough to identify sufficient numbers of women in receipt of Statutory Maternity Pay at the time of the interview for an analysis by decile.

Such information that is available is in the table.

Proportions of women in receipt of Statutory Maternity Pay in each half of the equivalised household income distribution, 1996–97 and 1997–98 combined (including the self-employed)

Percentage

Proportion of women in receipt of SMP	*Bottom half of income distribution*	*Top half of income distribution*
Before Housing Costs	30	70
After Housing Costs	36	64

Notes:
1. The information comes from the 'Households Below Average Income' (HBAI) series and relates to Great Britain. The estimates are presented on household income both Before Housing Costs and After Housing Costs in line with HBAI conventions. All the estimates in the table relate to women who were, at the time of the survey interview, in receipt of Statutory Maternity Pay.
2. Estimates are subject to sampling error.
3. Estimates were based on two survey years combined, and should be treated with caution as the sample sizes are small.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Standard Spending Assessments

15. **Mr. Randall:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what recent representations he has received on the levels of standard spending assessments for education. [114612]

Ms Estelle Morris: My right hon. Friend has received a number of representations on the area cost adjustment element of the standard spending assessment. We have already acknowledged that there are valid objections to the current SSA formula. The Government, in partnership with local government, have set up a review to see whether there is a better way of determining the distribution of funds which is simpler, more stable, more robust and fairer than the present arrangements.

Low Pay Commission (Therapeutic Activity)

16. **Mr. St. Aubyn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what discussions his Department plans to hold with the DTI on the recommendation in the second report of the Low Pay Commission that Departments should work together to produce clear guidance on the worker status of individuals undertaking therapeutic activity. [114613]

Ms Hodge: The Government support the recommendation made by the Commission and welcome their endorsement of the view that disabled people should benefit fully from the National Minimum Wage. As the Commission recognises, the worker status of those undertaking therapeutic activities is a complex issue. We are already working with DSS and DTI, and providers and users of therapeutic activities, on revised guidance.

Information and Communications Technology

17. **Mr. Clapham:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what support has been given to teachers to ensure that they are able to utilise information and communications technology to raise standards. [114614]

Mr. Wills: The New Opportunities Fund is making available £230 million to support the training of serving teachers and school library staff in the maintained sector in the effective use of information and communication technology (ICT). The training is available to all teachers in maintained schools and is specifically targeted at using ICT in the classroom to support the National Curriculum. The Government are supporting this programme by providing £20 million in 2000–01 to help teachers purchase their own computers.

Schools (Special Measures)

18. **Barbara Follett:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many schools are currently on special measures. [114615]

Ms Estelle Morris: The number of schools in special measures rose to 515 at the end of the academic year 1997–98 which was the year in which the first round of inspections was completed. Since then the number of schools in special measures has fallen to 424 at the end of the autumn term 1999.

Further Education Funding

19. **Mr. Chaytor:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the funding of further education. [114616]

Mr. Wicks: I refer my hon. Friend to the oral reply I gave to our hon. Friend the hon. Member for Conwy (Mrs. Williams) earlier today, *Official Report*, column 1095.

Lytham St. Anne's High Technology School

20. **Mr. Jack:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will instruct an official from his Department to visit the Lytham St. Anne's high technology school to assess the school's future infrastructure requirements. [114618]

Jacqui Smith: The right hon. Member may be aware that a key element of the Government's schools' capital strategy is the requirement for local education authorities to produce Asset Management Plans. In drawing up AMPs, LEAs are required to assess the condition, sufficiency and suitability of school buildings, and to set clear priorities for building work. The Asset Management Plan is a local document drawn up in close consultation with schools and other partners; an official visiting at this stage is unlikely to enhance that process.

Secondary School Funding

21. **Mr. Paterson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on secondary school funding. [114619]

Ms Estelle Morris: In 2000–01 Education Standard Spending has increased by £1.1 billion or 5.4 per cent. An extra £64 million is being made available to local authorities of which £14 million will be used to provide additional support to LEAs in Excellence in Cities areas and £50 million will go to support school budgets generally. In addition, schools will benefit from £500 million extra in Standards Fund grant, and through the New Deal for Schools they will receive an additional £1 billion for school repairs and adaptations. All schools will also benefit from the rescheduling of most of the increase in teachers' pension contributions from April 2000.

Secondary schools will all benefit from these increases in funding.

Departmental Jobs (Regional Policy)

22. **Mr. Campbell-Savours:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the policy of his Department is on the dispersal of jobs in his Department to the regions. [114620]

Mr. Wills: The Department has headquarters sites in Runcorn, Sheffield and Darlington in addition to its London buildings. It also has staff located in each of the nine Government Offices for the Regions. Our policy is to locate jobs away from London, especially in the more cost-effective northern offices, wherever it makes operational sense to do so. The Employment Service maintains a network of Jobcentres across England, Scotland and Wales, with a main headquarters presence in Sheffield.

Long-term Unemployment (Information Technology)

23. **Ms Rosie Winterton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what action he is taking to help the long-term unemployed back into work through information technology. [114621]

Ms Jowell: As part of a major modernisation programme we shall be putting all the Employment Service vacancies and jobs from the private sector and other European countries in a new national job bank. They will be available on the Internet and by jobseekers on touch screen kiosks in Jobcentres which will give a wider choice of jobs than on the current vacancy display boards. All ES advisers and the national telephone helpline, ES Direct, will have access to the new jobs database. Jobseekers will be able to search for jobs and information about learning opportunities and careers through public access terminals in libraries, community centres and training centres, and in a number of Programme Centres.

Pupil Deprivation Levels

24. **Mr. Blizzard:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what methodology is used to measure deprivation levels of pupils in schools. [114622]

Ms Estelle Morris: A number of different indicators are used to measure pupil deprivation levels for funding purposes. The education standard spending assessment methodology takes account of the additional educational needs of deprived pupils through indicators for the proportion of children of lone parents; and the proportion of children eligible for free school meals. The Standards Fund uses eligibility of children for free school meals as one factor to distribute grants for programmes such as family literacy and numeracy, social inclusion and study support. Common indicators used by local education authorities to distribute funding for additional educational needs to their schools are: eligibility for free school meals; unemployment rates; and English as a second language.

Class Sizes

25. **Mr. Baldry:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on average class sizes since May 1997. [114624]

Ms Estelle Morris: January 1999 saw the first fall in overall average class size for 10 years, from 24.9 in January 1998 to 24.8. Between January 1998 and January 1999 the size of the average primary school class in England fell from 27.7 to 27.4.

The Government are well on course to deliver their class size pledge of reducing infant class sizes to 30 or below by September 2001, at the latest. The most recent available figures show that in September 1999, 171,000 (11 per cent.) infants were being taught in classes of over 30, compared with 485,000 (29 per cent.) in January 1998.

32. **Miss McIntosh:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to reduce primary school class sizes in North Yorkshire. [114632]

Ms Estelle Morris: Our pledge is to ensure that there are no pupils in infant classes of over 30 pupils with one teacher by September 2001 at the latest. North Yorkshire's Class Size Plan aims to secure full implementation of the pledge early, by September 2000. We are supporting this plan with almost £5.8 million over 1999–2001, funding 33 new classrooms and 80 additional teachers. Between September 1998 and 1999 the number of pupils in infant classes over 30 in North Yorkshire fell by 60 per cent., from 3,271 to 1,317.

January 1999 saw a fall of 1,036 pupils in primary classes over 30 in North Yorkshire, and a drop in the average primary class size of 0.2, compared with January 1998.

Science and Engineering Courses

26. **Mr. Quinn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what action he is taking to encourage applications for science and engineering courses in further and higher education institutions. [114625]

Mr. Wicks: Universities and Colleges are autonomous organisations and the DfEE regard curricula and promotion of subjects as primarily matters for individual institutions. Recent research in the HE sector found that the overall supply and demand of graduates is adequate and that any mismatches are due to the capabilities rather than quantity of graduates.

Nursery and Early Years Education

27. **Helen Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what progress has been made in providing nursery education for three-year-olds; and if he will make a statement. [114626]

Ms Hodge: The sum of £390 million is being made available, over a three year period, to create 190,000 new free early education places for three year olds. By March 2002, 66 per cent. of all eligible three-year-olds in England will be able to access a free place.

In 1999–2000 up to £40 million, enough to provide places for up to 48,000 children, was available across 64 local authorities with the highest level of social deprivation .

30. **Dr. Lynne Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps have been taken to integrate care and education for the under-fives. [114630]

Ms Hodge: From the start of the National Childcare Strategy we have been keen to bring together early years and child care and we are successfully achieving this objective.

We have established Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships in each of the 150 local education authority areas. The partnerships are required to set out policies for developing the vital links between care and education, especially in the early years and include them in their plans. We are currently assessing this year's Plans and will be working with Partnerships throughout the year to encourage integration.

Under provisions in the Care Standards Bill we are also seeking to integrate the regulation of child care and early education under new National Standards regulated by Ofsted's new Early Years Directorate.

Additionally, the 29 Early Excellence Centres are piloting seamless integration of services in a variety of settings. I have placed in the Library a copy of our report

on First Findings from EECs showing, among other things, that for every £1 spent on family support, £8 is saved on alternative services.

The New Opportunities Fund is also providing up to £15 million to fund integrated out of school childcare and learning activities. This is for children across the range from three to 16 with no specific amount for under-fives. We are setting up 250 Sure Start programmes in areas of disadvantage to promote the physical, intellectual, social and emotional development of young children under four. Each programme will work in partnership with local parents to improve access to health services. family support, advice on nurturing, child care and early learning.

Temporary Classrooms (Colchester)

28. **Mr. Bob Russell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will provide additional funding to Essex county council to enable all temporary classrooms in the Colchester constituency to be replaced with permanent accommodation. [114628]

Jacqui Smith: Applications for funding to replace temporary classrooms with permanent accommodation are considered against our published criteria. Currently, Essex county council has applied for the replacement of temporary accommodation at Colchester High School for Girls under the fourth phase of the New Deal for Schools. We hope to announce the outcome of this next month.

Parental Choice (Greater London)

29. **Mr. Wilkinson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the percentage of parents in Greater London who secured the secondary school of their first choice for their children in each of the last three years. [114629]

Ms Estelle Morris: This information is not collected centrally. Parents have a right to express a preference for the school they would like their child to attend, but it has never been guaranteed that they will gain a place in their preferred school. Where a school has more applications than places available, it is inevitable that some parents will be disappointed.

School Administration

31. **Mr. Truswell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to review the policy, administrative and managerial requirements placed on schools. [114631]

Jacqui Smith: My Department keeps policy, administrative and managerial requirements on schools under continuous review. Since the Working Group on Reducing the Bureaucratic Burdens on Teachers reported in January 1998, we have reviewed the National Curriculum to introduce more flexibility, introduced the "light touch" Ofsted inspection regime for effective schools, and reduced the proportion of Standards Fund grants distributed by bidding. Further work under way includes the review of the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice and a major exercise to rationalise data collection. We have also recently increased the support available to help head teachers introduce the new performance management arrangements and carry out the assessments for performance-related pay, and made the timetable for this more flexible.

We will continue to seek every opportunity to streamline requirements on schools and ensure a clear focus on what is essential for raising standards. Future activity will be informed by the outcome of the Better Regulation Taskforce Review of Regulatory Impact on Head Teachers.

Learning and Skills Council, Derbyshire

33. **Mr. Barnes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what representations he has received following his proposal to place the local Derbyshire Learning and Skills centre in Derby; and if he will make a statement. [114633]

Mr. Wicks: To date, three representations have been received. One was in support of the decision to locate the local arm of the Learning and Skills Council in Derby and two were petitioning for the local arm of the Learning and Skills Council to be located in Chesterfield.

In reaching a decision on the location of the offices of the local Council for Derbyshire, I have taken account of the need to get best value for public money, by using premises currently occupied by the Southern Derbyshire Chamber of Commerce, Training and Enterprise, and of the need for a location that will facilitate effective operation of the Learning and Skills Council.

Youth Support Services

34. **Mr. Nigel Griffiths:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what measures he is taking to improve the quality of youth support services. [114634]

Mr. Wicks: We set out our strategy for supporting young people in our document "Connexions: The best start in life for every young person" on 3 February. At the heart of our strategy is a new Connexions service which will provide a radical new approach to guiding and supporting all young people through their teenage years. We also intend involving young people and a wide range of partners in developing and implementing the service which will be phased in over two to three years. The new service will build on the best practice of multi-agency working and will have a quality framework which will have two main elements: target setting and benchmarking; and audit and inspection.

Redditch Schools

Miss Kirkbride: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the number of surplus places in each school in Redditch for *(a)* the current year and *(b)* the next five years, taking account of school mergers as a result of decisions in the Redditch review. [115414]

Ms Estelle Morris: The number of surplus places in each school in Redditch for the current year and the forecasts for September 2000 and 2001 are set out in the following table. My Department does not collect information on the levels of surplus places at individual schools for the next five years, and LEAs are not required to produce it. Information provided by Worcestershire in connection with proposals for reorganisation of schools in Redditch, which were approved by the Secretary of State in January, included information about the number of places to be removed at each school. The Secretary of State was satisfied that, while the proposals would remove

over 2,000 of the 3,000 current surplus places in schools in the area, there would be sufficient places available to allow for parental and denominational choice.

Surplus places

	As at September		
	1999	*2000* [1]	*2001* [1]
First Schools			
Arrowcrest First	0	3	0
Ipsley First	120	131	0
New First School	0	0	0
Claybrook First	96	109	0
Icknield First	23	25	0
New First School	0	0	75
St. John Fisher Catholic First	96	98	0
Astwood Bank First	0	0	5
Batchley First	14	3	50
Beoley First	4	0	0
Feckenham First	5	0	0
The Harry Taylor First	10	24	25
Holyoakes Field First	1	7	15
Marlfield Farm First	174	181	45
Moon's Moat First	76	69	70
Ravens Bank First	26	45	50
Roman Way First	67	65	70
St. George's First	63	85	10
St. Lukes First	7	10	0
St. Stephen's First	22	14	5
Tardebigge First	7	9	10
Tenacres First	227	229	25
The Vaynor First	47	85	10
Webheath First	43	40	15
Woodrow First	95	85	110
St. Thomas More Catholic First	7	10	10
Mount Carmel Catholic First	6	5	5
Total First Schools	1,236	1,332	560
Middle Schools			
Lodge Farm Middle	63	24	0
St. Stephen's Middle	245	261	0
New Middle	0	0	0
Moatfield Middle	133	122	0
St. Peter's CE Middle	192	208	0
New CE VC Middle	0	0	0
Birchensale Middle	49	30	200
Church Hill Middle	159	160	180
Dingleside Middle	103	91	168
Ridgeway Middle	72	65	0
Walkwood CE Middle	0	0	20
St. Bede's Catholic Middle	0	0	0
Total Middle Schools	1,016	961	398
High Schools			
Bridley Moor High	73	279	0
The Abbey High	566	239	0
The Ley's High	383	80	0
New North High	0	0	40
New South High	0	0	20
Arrow Vale Community High	91	70	145
St. Augustine's Catholic High	0	0	5
Total High Schools	1,113	1,118	210

[1] Forecast

Websites

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the expenditure incurred by his Department, agencies and non-departmental public bodies on *(a)* the setting up and *(b)* the operation of websites, indicating the cases in which the expenditure has been above that budgeted; and if he will list for each website (i) the topics which have been covered, (ii) the current average number of hits per months and (iii) the estimated expenditure on each website for each of the next three years. [115803]

Mr. Wills: The central DfEE website covers a very wide range of education and employment information for many key audiences including teachers, head teachers, school governors, students, parents and employers. It has a core programme budget of £160,000 in 1999–2000, and £200,000 in each of the following three years, plus running costs for seven staff.

Total activity for the site is around 400,000 'page impressions' per month.

In addition, we have a number of important projects aimed at bringing on-line a wider range of web based services. The most significant are: development of the National Grid for Learning; the National Childcare Information Service; the Learning and Work Bank project to put vacancy, careers advice and learning opportunities for jobseekers and job changers on the web; the Electronic Communication with Schools project and websites specifically aimed at Standards in schools, Lifelong Learning, the New Deal and the Employment Service.

The number of these projects and non-departmental public bodies' websites coupled with the costs associated with the many people across the Department involved in providing material for websites mean that detailed expenditure figures are not easily obtainable without incurring disproportionate costs.

Special Needs

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) how many and what percentage of *(a)* primary and *(b)* secondary pupils have statements of special educational needs in each education authority in London and the South East; [115785]

(2) how many and what percentage of *(a)* primary and *(b)* secondary pupils who have statements of special needs have statements which are not being fully met in each education authority in London and the South East. [115792]

Jacqui Smith: The following table lists the number and percentage of pupils with statements of special educational needs, on the roll of primary and secondary schools maintained by each local education authority in London and the South East, as at January 1999.

Information about levels of provision is not collected centrally. It is the responsibility of local education authorities to ensure that the special educational provision specified in a statement is arranged for those children for whom they are responsible. Where a child's parents consider that an LEA is failing to meet this duty, it is open to them to complain to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, who will investigate the complaint.

Pupils with statements of special educational needs (SEN) in maintained primary and secondary schools, by local education authority area in England

Position at January 1999

	Primary			Secondary		
	Total pupils	*Pupils with statements*	*Percentage*	*Total pupils*	*Pupils with statements*	*Percentage*
London	637,928	9,961	1.6	387,504	9,899	2.6
Inner London	230,648	3,894	1.7	122,165	3,913	3.2
City of London	216	3	1.4	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—
Camden	11,585	192	1.7	10,802	369	3.4
Hackney	18,019	292	1.6	7,642	230	3.0
Hammersmith and Fulham	9,569	243	2.5	6,492	142	2.2
Haringey	21,869	255	1.2	10,718	241	2.2
Islington	16,000	381	2.4	7,467	309	4.1
Kensington and Chelsea	6,730	92	1.4	3,500	83	2.4
Lambeth	19,893	353	1.8	6,980	186	2.7
Lewisham	22,913	266	1.2	11,261	376	3.3
Newham	30,505	577	1.9	16,593	688	4.1
Southwark	23,682	416	1.8	9,572	306	3.2
Tower Hamlets	21,975	421	1.9	13,717	534	3.9
Wandsworth	17,831	228	1.3	9,617	224	2.3
Westminster	9,861	175	1.8	7,804	225	2.9
Outer London	407,280	6,067	1.5	265,339	5,986	2.3
Barking and Dagenham	18,433	310	1.7	10,427	301	2.9
Barnet	26,441	331	1.3	20,437	427	2.1
Bexley	22,874	318	1.4	16,044	287	1.8
Brent	22,712	411	1.8	13,984	395	2.8
Bromley	25,027	668	2.7	19,662	531	2.7
Croydon	31,534	321	1.0	16,152	195	1.2
Ealing	27,361	284	1.0	14,487	223	1.5
Enfield	26,639	287	1.1	19,568	333	1.7
Greenwich	21,702	434	2.0	13,561	375	2.8
Harrow	20,100	397	2.0	8,318	260	3.1
Havering	21,247	354	1.7	14,886	470	3.2
Hillingdon	23,185	293	1.3	15,265	413	2.7
Hounslow	19,924	296	1.5	15,700	357	2.3
Kingston-upon-Thames	11,763	150	1.3	8,287	158	1.9
Merton	16,048	257	1.6	7,735	256	3.3
Redbridge	22,979	128	0.6	17,731	205	1.2
Richmond-upon-Thames	12,318	200	1.6	7,548	231	3.1
Sutton	14,941	322	2.2	13,170	245	1.9
Waltham Forest	22,352	306	1.4	12,377	324	2.6
South East	664,702	10,360	1.6	471,304	10,458	2.2
Bracknell Forest	9,489	157	1.7	6,096	161	2.6
Windsor and Maidenhead	8,686	149	1.7	9,945	224	2.3
Newbury	12,527	232	1.9	11,127	233	2.1
Reading	11,115	232	2.1	6,180	124	2.0
Slough	11,121	182	1.6	7,412	191	2.6
Wokingham	13,082	241	1.8	10,460	223	2.1
Milton Keynes	22,415	447	2.0	11,526	396	3.4
Buckinghamshire	43,009	700	1.6	30,758	501	1.6
Brighton and Hove	18,335	339	1.8	11,191	255	2.3
East Sussex	38,536	545	1.4	26,358	482	1.8
Portsmouth	16,444	155	0.9	9,593	135	1.4
Southampton	18,497	163	0.9	11,790	212	1.8
Hampshire	105,282	943	0.9	67,504	1,080	1.6
Isle of Wight	7,422	157	2.1	11,435	318	2.8
Medway	25,570	567	2.2	18,856	539	2.9
Kent	115,004	1,961	1.7	88,966	2,178	2.4
Oxfordshire	45,468	577	1.3	37,247	865	2.3
Surrey	80,752	1,591	2.0	53,859	1,236	2.3
West Sussex	61,948	1,022	1.6	41,001	1,105	2.7

[1] Not applicable (no schools of this type)

Source:

Annual Schools' Census

Nautical Studies GCSE

Mr. Bruce George: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the future of the GCSE in nautical studies; and what consultation his Department has held on proposed changes. [115861]

Mr. Wicks: The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) is working with the awarding bodies to develop advice on the list of GCSE titles to be offered from 2001. No decisions have been reached at this stage. If proposals are made to remove titles from the approved list, QCA will seek the views of interested organisations before submitting final recommendations. We shall consider QCA's advice very carefully before decisions are made.

ERASMUS

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many full-time higher education students took an ERASMUS year of study in another European country *(a)* outwards from the UK and *(b)* inwards to the United Kingdom in each of the last five years. [116016]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 22 March 2000]:* The latest available information on numbers of full-time higher education students in the ERASMUS programme is given in the following table.

Year	*Outward mobility from UK*	*Inward mobility to UK*
1994–95	11,988	18,315
1995–96	11,735	21,808
1996–97	10,537	19,602
1997–98	10,592	20,759
1998–99	9,994	'21,240

' Provisional

Literacy

Mr. Patrick Hall: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to tackle literacy problems among secondary school pupils. [114604]

Mr. Wills: I refer my hon. Friend to the oral reply given to our hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, North (Ms Ryan) earlier today, *Official Report*, column 1102.

Teachers (Development)

Mr. Ernie Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on continuing professional development for teachers. [114617]

Ms Estelle Morris: We are committed to supporting high-quality professional development to become an entitlement for every teacher. We are consulting on a draft framework for continuing professional development to provide the opportunity, support and recognition that teaching needs to become a learning profession.

Schools (Sheffield, Heeley)

Mr. Bill Michie: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what representations he has received in respect of *(a)* school closures, *(b)* school mergers and *(c)* changes in schools' catchment areas affecting the constituency of Sheffield, Heeley. [114623]

Ms Estelle Morris: No representations have been received by my Department about school organisation matters in Sheffield, Heeley.

Apprenticeships

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women were in an apprenticeship scheme in England and Wales on 1 March. [114594]

Mr. Wicks: The latest date for which information is available on those participating in Modern Apprenticeships and National Traineeships is 26 December 1999, when there were 143,300 in Modern Apprenticeships, 47 per cent. of which were women, and 72,700 in National Traineeships, 56 per cent. of which were women.

Modern Apprenticeships are a key part of the Government's response to the need to prepare young people for an economy based on high-level skills. We have recently announced a consultation on reforms to drive forward improvements to Modern Apprenticeships to enhance work based training opportunities enabling all young people to reach their potential and ensure economic success.

As part of this National Traineeships and Modern Apprenticeships have been renamed as Foundation Modern Apprenticeships and Advanced Modern Apprenticeships.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Nuclear Warheads

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans the United Kingdom has to decommission nuclear warheads prior to the Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference in April. [115356]

Mr. Hoon: I have been asked to reply.

The Government are committed to the goal of global nuclear disarmament and take their responsibilities as a signatory of the Non-Proliferation Treaty very seriously. We have already given up our maritime tactical and air-launched nuclear capability and all these weapons have been dismantled. The Chevaline warheads from our previous strategic nuclear deterrent force, Polaris, are currently being dismantled. Trident is now our only nuclear system. We announced in the Strategic Defence Review that we will mainain fewer than 200 operationally available warheads for Trident. We now have significantly fewer nuclear weapons than any other Nuclear Weapon State. We have no plans to make any further reductions to our nuclear deterrent prior to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference.

Kosovo

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many bodies of Kosovar Albanians known to have been killed by Kosovan Serbs and Yugoslav police and armed forces since June 1998 have been found. [115333]

Mr. Vaz: The International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) has said that over 2,000 bodies have so far been exhumed from 195 grave sites by investigators working on behalf of The Tribunal. This is out of a total of 529 reported grave sites, most of which are still to be investigated. Work on remaining sites will resume in Spring this year. Besides known grave sites, other sites may come to light as work progresses, but a high proportion of bodies may never be recovered given the degree to which Serb forces attempted to destroy evidence.

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is his estimate of the number of Kosovar Albanians forced out of Kosovo prior to the start of NATO's bombing campaign. [115332]

Mr. Vaz: Before the airstrikes began there were over 210,000 people internally displaced within Kosovo and 70,000 refugees outside Kosovo. The vast majority of the Internally Displaced Persons and 50,000 of the refugees were Kosovo Albanians.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Benefit Errors

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what was the amount of *(a)* erroneous underpayment and *(b)* erroneous overpayment arising as a result of error by (i) officials and (ii) customers, for each benefit administered by his Department for each of the last three years. [114669]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 14 March 2000]:* The administration of benefits is a matter for Peter Mathison, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to my right hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Frank Field, dated 22 March 2000:

The Secretary of State has asked me to respond to your recent Parliamentary Question asking what was the amount of (i) erroneous underpayment and (ii) erroneous overpayment arising as a result of error by (a) officials and (b) customers, for each benefit administered by his Department for each of the last three years.

The figures for overpayments represent the value of debt which has to be recorded. For most benefits (or grouping of benefits) I can provide the information you have asked for in full and this is set out in table A. Where I can provide you with partial data this is explained in the note to table A.

From the figures in table A you will note that the value of overpayments is increasing. This increase in the value of debt reflects an increase in the identification and processing of overpayments which, in turn, results from increased activity on programme protection initiatives to drive down the levels of fraud and error. The number of overpayment cases processed (for all benefits) has increased from 0.9 million cases in 1996/97 to 1.2 million cases in 1998/99.

When an underpayment is found the payment is corrected straight away and noted on the individual file. However, the information is not collated centrally. The information I can provide you with is therefore limited, and confined to those benefits where the Agency conducts checking regimes which provide a statistically valid estimate of underpayments. This information is set out in table B which also carries explanatory notes.

I hope this is helpful.

Table A: Overpayments

£

Benefit	*Value of official error*			*Value of customer error*		
	1996–97	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*
Contributory Benefits[1]	17,218,844	22,382,564	14,800,517	21,282,055	28,484,420	33,869,503
Income Support	67,923,629	94,419,967	71,461,623	170,419,299	198,510,053	220,643,950
Unemployment Benefit[2]	50,235	159,781	7,804	947,214	909,263	263,872
Jobseekers Allowance	739,134	10,071,179	9,530,671	702,776	19,057,220	31,933,785
Attendance Allowance	2,003,042	2,158,956	2,109,577	1,485,358	4,080,296	5,116,223
Disability Living Allowance	5,392,505	11,078,403	11,238,154	3,666,447	7,231,337	8,273,408
Invalid Care Allowance	1,981,510	4,553,788	6,140,968	8,090,321	25,026,090	21,726,441
Child Benefit Directorate[3]	—	—	9,599,275	—	—	13,927,975
Disability Working Allowance	61,671	102,279	65,006	62,183	87,597	126,510
Family Credit	1,704,039	910,535	881,523	2,677,865	5,093,301	6,918,817
Pensions Directorate[4]	9,509,276	11,544,820	12,332,892	1,639,642	2,656,646	8,328,301
Earnings Top Up[5]	—	10,010	4,543	—	12,560	39,557

[1] Includes contributory benefits processed in District offices: Sickness Benefit, Invalidity Benefit, Retirement Pension, Widows Benefit, Attendance Allowance, Severe Disablement Allowance, Mobility Allowance, Family Credit, Invalid Care Allowance, Disability Living Allowance, Disability Working Allowance, Child Benefit, Industrial Injuries Death Benefit, Maternity Allowance, Incapacity Benefit, Industrial Injuries Death Benefit, Earnings Top Up, Reduced Earnings Allowance, Guardians Allowance.

[2] Unemployment Benefit ceased to be paid on the introduction of JSA in 1996 although some retrospective overpayments are still identified.

[3] Includes Child Benefit, One Parent Benefit and Guardians Allowance—records not kept in 1996–97 or 1997–98.

[4] Includes Retirement Pensions, Widows Benefit, Attendance Allowance and Overseas Benefits.

[5] Introduced in October 1996 but no overpayments recorded until 1997–98.

Note:

Figures include non-recoverable overpayments written-off under an Easements Package agreed with Treasury

Table B: Underpayments

£ million

Benefit	*Benefit of official error*			*Value of customer error*		
	1996–97	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*
Income Support	192.8	165.4	210.9	n/a	n/a	40.0
Jobseekers Allowance	[1]—	20.1	22.2	n/a	n/a	4.0
Incapacity Benefit	106.4	64.8	77.6	n/a	n/a	[2]—

[1] Jobseekers Allowance was introduced during 1996–97.
[2] Incapacity Benefit is not subject to Area Benefit Reviews.
Notes:
1. These figures are estimates of the monetary value of underpayments based on a statistical sample of each benefit which is checked for customer error or official error.
2. The estimate of customer error is obtained from Area Benefit Reviews. 1998–99 is the first full year of these reviews.
3. The estimate of official error is obtained from Quality Support checks.
4. The values are estimated to 0.1 per cent. of £ million.

War Veterans' Widows

Ms Squire: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what financial assistance is available to the widow of a war veteran to cover funeral costs. [115937]

Angela Eagle: Under the War Pensions Scheme[1] the Secretary of State has the discretion to meet any reasonable expenses relating to the funeral of a former member of the Armed Forces provided

the death was due to service; or

at the time of death the person was provided with National Health Service accommodation or hospital in-patient treatment for their war pensioned disablement.

The Social Fund Funeral Payment scheme[2] provides help with funeral expenses where someone has died and there are insufficient funds available. The person seeking help must have been awarded a qualifying income-related benefit or tax credit and have good reason for taking responsibility for the funeral arrangements. The qualifying benefits/tax credits are: Income Support, income-based Jobseeker's Allowance, Working Families' Tax Credit, Disabled Persons' Tax Credit, Housing Benefit or Council Tax Benefit.

Any award from the Social Fund would be deducted from the amount payable under the War Pensions Scheme.

Notes:

[1] The Naval, Military and Air Forces Etc. (Disablement and Death) Service Pensions Order 1983.

[2] Social Fund, Maternity and Funeral Expenses (General) Regulations 1987.

Departmental Programme Protection Fund

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 9 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 811W, on the Departmental Programme Protection Fund, if he will disaggregate the budget by type of expenditure. [116057]

Mr. Rooker: The budget for 1999–2000 has been split as follows:

	£ million
DSS administration costs	370.7
Non DSS administration costs	93.5
Total	464.2

Pensioners (Hampshire)

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners there are in *(a)* Hampshire and *(b)* each local authority in Hampshire, including the unitary authorities of Southampton and Portsmouth, indicating the age distribution, broken down by the number aged (i) 75 to 79 and (ii) 80 and older in each area. [116022]

Mr. Rooker: The information requested is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

Estimated resident population of persons of pensionable age in Hampshire, Hampshire Local Authorities, Southampton UA and Portsmouth UA, mid-1998

Thousand

Area	*75–79*	*80+*
Hampshire County[1]	41.0	48.6
Basingstoke and Deane	3.8	4.0
East Hampshire	3.4	4.5
Eastleigh	3.3	3.7
Fareham	3.6	4.5
Gosport	2.5	2.9
Hart	2.1	2.5
Havant	4.7	4.8
New Forest	8.2	10.1
Rushmoor	2.1	2.7
Test Valley	3.4	4.0
Winchester	3.9	5.1
Portsmouth UA	6.8	8.3
Southampton UA	7.3	8.6

Notes:
1. Hampshire County does not include Southampton UA and Portsmouth UA
2. Estimates supplied by the Office for National Statistics

National Benefits Intelligence Unit

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what grade of civil servant will head the National Benefits Intelligence Unit; [116024]

(2) how many years of experience in counter-fraud work the head of the new National Benefits Intelligence Unit is required to have. [116026]

Mr. Rooker: The head of the National Benefits Intelligence Unit will be appointed to the senior civil service at Grade 5 level as will the head of the Central Organised Fraud Investigation Unit.

Both posts will be advertised in the national press, and will be open to candidates with a broad range of backgrounds and experience.

While a specific number of years served will not be a requirement, previous experience will be an important factor in the selection process along with other factors necessary in making an appointment at senior civil service level.

Fraud

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 9 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 810W, on fraudulent housing benefit claims, if he will list the new powers given to local authorities to *(a)* control direct payments of housing benefit more tightly, *(b)* to recover overpayments more easily and *(c)* to require landlords to provide information. [116058]

Angela Eagle: Powers enabling local authorities (LAs) to control direct payments of benefit more tightly were introduced by the Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit (General) Amendment (No.2) Regulations 1997. (SI 1997 No.2434).

The Housing Benefit (Recovery of Overpayments) Regulations 1997, gave LAs the power to recover overpayments more easily. (SI 1997 No.2435).

The Housing Benefit (Information from Landlords and Agents) Regulations 1997 provide for LAs to require information from landlords and agents. (SI 1997 No. 2436).

Benefit Ceilings

Mr. Alan Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when the income and capital ceilings of each relevant benefit were established; and if he will calculate the value when set at current prices of each ceiling. [115905]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the table.

£

Benefit	*Rate when introduced*	*Date of introduction*	*Current rate*	*Value at April 2000 if increased in line with prices since date introduced*
Income Support (IS)				
Lower Capital Limit	3,000	April 1988	3,000	4,701.40
Upper Capital Limit	6,000	April 1988	8,000	9,402.65
	8,000	April 1990	8,000	11,382.15
Housing Benefit (HB) Capital Limits	3,000	April 1988	3,000	4,701.40
	6,000	April 1988	16,000	9,402.65
	8,000	May 1988	16,000	12,536.85
	16,000	April 1990	16,000	22,764.45
Community Charge Benefit/Council Tax Benefit Capital Limits	16,000	April 1990	16,000	22,764.45
Child's Capital Limits	3,000	April 1988	3,000	4,701.40
IS/HB for Residential Care and Nursing Homes Capital Limits				
Upper	16,000	April 1996	16,000	17,437.60
Lower	10,000	April 1996	10,000	10,898.55
Social Fund Capital Limits				
All ages	500	April 1988	500	783.55
Aged 60 and over	1,000	April 1990	1,000	1,422.75

Notes:

1. The figures are rounded to the nearest 5 pence at each uprating date.
2. For income-related benefits the ROSSI index (Retail Price Index less rent, local taxes and mortgage interest payments), as published by the Official for National Statistics, is used.

Pensioners (Income)

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the proportion and number of *(a)* single pensioners who receive a total income below £90 per week after housing costs and *(b)* pensioner couples who receive a total income below £135 per week after housing costs. [115744]

Mr. Rooker: The information is in the table.

	Single pensioners with total net income after housing costs less than £90	*Pensioner couples with total net income after housing costs less than £135*
Number	2,190,000	630,000
Proportion (percentage)	52	24

Notes:

1. Estimates are for Great Britain.

2. Single pensioners are defined as single (non-cohabiting) people over state pension age (65 for men, 60 for women); pensioner couples are defined as couples (married or cohabiting) where the man is over state pension age.

3. Total net income is defined as net income after housing costs, and is based on September 1999 prices, uprated from 1997–98 data using the Retail Prices Index all items excluding housing costs. Therefore, this analysis assumes that the real value of pensioners' net incomes after housing costs is the same in September 1999 as in 1997–98, whereas in practice they would have tended to have risen.

4. Estimates are given to the nearest 10,000 or 1 per cent., but are not necessarily accurate to that degree.

Source:

Family Resources Survey 1997–98.

State Pension

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the *(a)* gross and *(b)* net cost, after taking account of increased taxation receipts and means-tested benefits savings, of raising the basic state pension to £90 per week for a single person and £135 for a pensioner couple; and what increase in National Insurance contribution rates would be required from (i) employers and (ii) employees to meet this cost. [115743]

Mr. Rooker: The information is in the table:

Cost of increasing the basic state pension to £90 and £135 per week, 2000–01

	£ million
Gross cost	11,790
Cost net of means-tested benefits	9,210
Costs net of means-tested benefits and income tax	8,160

Notes:

1. Costs are rounded to the nearest £10 million and are in 2000–01 benefit rates.
2. Costs include benefits whose rates are statutorily linked to the basic state pension rate, such as Widow's Benefits and Incapacity Benefit.
3. Gross costs and changes in National Insurance contribution rates have been supplied by the Government Actuary's Department.
4. Offsetting means-tested benefit savings have been calculated using the Department's 2000–01 Policy Simulation Model.
5. Income tax savings have been estimated by the Inland Revenue.

In order to meet the gross cost from the National Insurance Fund, either employers' National Insurance contribution rates would have to rise by 3.9 percentage points, or employees' National Insurance rates would have to rise by 4.5 percentage points.

Means-tested Benefits

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the *(a)* gross and *(b)* net cost, after taking account of increased taxation receipts and means-tested benefits savings, of raising (i) the Minimum Income Guarantee and (ii) Income Support for people aged 60 years and over to £90 per week for single pensioners and £135 for pensioner couples; and how many more pensioners would be eligible for Income Support at these levels. [115742]

Mr. Rooker: The Minimum Income Guarantee is payable through Income Support to people aged 60 and over. Means-tested benefits are calculated net of tax and do not affect tax revenue. The information is in the tables.

An estimate of the effects on caseload and expenditure of an increase of £90 a week for single pensioners and £135 a week for couples in the Minimum Income guarantee levels, and the consequential increases to Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit

	Floaters-on	*Gainers*	*Total*
Caseload (Thousand)			
Income Support	123	1,433	1,557
Housing Benefit	22	709	731
Council Tax Benefit	33	1,004	1,037
Expenditure (£ million)			
Income Support	40	460	500
Housing Benefit	5	175	180
Council Tax Benefit	[1]—	80	80

[1] Denotes negligible expenditure of less than £2.5 million

A modelled estimate of the numbers of people eligible for Income Support following the change

Thousand

	Newly entitled pensioners
Income Support	220
Housing Benefit	45
Council Tax Benefit	115

Notes:

1. Caseloads are rounded to the nearest 1,000, and expenditure to the nearest £5 million.
2. Costs net of means-tested benefits have been calculated using the Policy Simulation Model based on the 1997–98 Family Resources Survey uprated to 2000–01, and calibrated to November 1999 PBR forecasts.
3. Floaters-on are by number of claims rather than total numbers of people affected, but an indication rounded to the nearest 5,000 has been given of how many pensioners would become entitled, based on the 1997–98 FRS survey.
4. Caseload figures exclude Residential Care and Nursing Home cases.
5. Totals may differ due to rounding.

Winter Fuel Payments

Mr. Stevenson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the status is of Winter Fuel Payments following the European Court judgment of 16 December 1999; and when he expects to complete the payments to those who are eligible. [115618]

Angela Eagle: Following the judgment in the case of Taylor, the age at which Winter Fuel Payments can be made will be equalised at 60, and the need to be in receipt of a qualifying benefit will be removed. As before, these payments are intended to people who are ordinarily resident in Great Britain.

Payments to those newly eligible will be made as soon as possible. To ensure that these payments are made correctly, it is necessary to determine names and addresses. Some people will be identified through current Departmental records, but the majority may have had no contact with the Department for a long period, and information held may not be up to date. Therefore, there is a need to introduce a claims process to determine precise entitlement.

The process needed to be developed carefully. The Benefits Agency have been working on this and other operational issues to determine the best way to deliver the payments. Details of delivery arrangements will be announced shortly.

In-work Support

Mr. Etherington: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the sources of in-work support for people without dependent children; and if he will make a statement. [115108]

Angela Eagle: We are committed to providing a better deal for all working people including those without dependent children. In the longer term we are attracted to the idea of extending the principle of tax credits to all low-income households through an Employment Tax Credit. The new Employment Credit for over 50s is one of the first steps in this process.

The New Deal 50 plus is being introduced nationally at the beginning of April. This is aimed at people aged 50 or over who have been claiming benefits for at least six months and their dependent partners. It can provide an Employment Credit of £60 a week for up to 52 weeks for those taking up full-time work and £40 a week for part-time work and this is available to people without dependent children.

The Disabled Persons Tax Credit replaced the Disability Working Allowance. It has higher income thresholds and a lower taper and is available to disabled workers without dependent children. It currently provides a guaranteed income of at least £155 a week for a single person and £230 a week for a couple and from April it will be paid through the wage packet.

People without dependent children can claim Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit to help with housing costs while working. They can also claim the four-week Housing Benefit extended payment and owner-occupiers without dependent children will be able to benefit from the new four week run-on of mortgage interest support when this is introduced in April 2001.

In-work help with prescriptions and NHS charges under the NHS low-income scheme is available to people without dependent children.

People without dependent children can receive a Jobmatch allowance of £50 a week for six months to encourage them to take up part-time jobs.

Other sources of support such as Invalid Care Allowance, providing the earnings do not exceed £50 a week after allowable expenses, Disability Living Allowance, Widow's Pension and Retirement Pension are also available to people without children irrespective of whether or not they are working.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Police (Sick Leave)

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the average number of days taken on sick leave per police officer for each police force in England for the latest year for which figures are available. [116055]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The average number of days taken on sick leave per police officer in each force in England in 1998–99 is shown in the table, which also includes data on the four forces in Wales.

	Police days lost through sickness	*Average police strength*	*Average days sick per officer*
Avon and Somerset	31,470	3,012	10.4
Bedfordshire	14,572	1,041	14.0
Cambridgeshire	15,393	1,295	11.9
Cheshire	28,452	2,111	13.5
City of London	10,449	790	13.2
Cleveland	17,486	1,471	11.9
Cumbria	11,732	1,160	10.1
Derbyshire	21,753	1,777	12.2
Devon and Cornwall	31,228	2,946	10.6
Dorset	12,967	1,303	10.0
Durham	15,974	1,552	10.3
Dyfed-Powys	9,966	1,044	9.5
Essex	38,748	2,936	13.2
Gloucestershire	12,964	1,113	11.6
Greater Manchester	97,682	6,913	14.1
Gwent	14,674	1,250	11.7
Hampshire	33,221	3,470	9.6
Hertfordshire	18,952	1,752	10.8
Humberside	17,142	2,021	8.5
Kent	36,500	3,269	11.2
Lancashire	39,188	3,331	11.8
Leicestershire	24,235	2,037	11.9
Lincolnshire	15,609	1,171	13.3
Merseyside	49,525	4,373	11.3
Metropolitan Police	289,791	26,566	10.9
Norfolk	16,333	1,426	11.5
North Wales	16,759	1,416	11.8
North Yorkshire	16,381	1,360	12.0
Northamptonshire	12,530	1,167	10.7
Northumbria	44,145	3,854	11.5
Nottinghamshire	31,128	2,248	13.8
South Wales	48,958	2,989	16.4
South Yorkshire	38,349	3,165	12.1
Staffordshire	28,418	2,279	12.5
Suffolk	11,668	1,195	9.8
Surrey	17,332	16,80	10.3
Sussex	31,918	2,962	10.8
Thames Valley	49,894	3,822	13.1
Warwickshire	12,495	925	13.5
West Mercia	22,796	2,033	11.2
West Midlands	88,341	7,250	12.2
West Yorkshire	59,911	5,053	11.9
Wiltshire	11,111	1,169	9.5
England and Wales Total	1,468,140	125,695	11.7

Criminal Record Checks

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many representations he has received from *(a)* individuals and *(b)* organisations expressing concern about the £10 levy for the criminal record checks; what plans he has to lower this charge in respect of inquiries by charities and voluntary organisations; and if he will make a statement. [115923]

Mr. Charles Clarke: We have received a substantial number of letters from individuals and organisations on this matter. When the Criminal Records Bureau comes into operation, it will be expected to recover its costs through charges for the certificates that it will issue, on application, to individuals. It will be for employers and organisations to decide whether to reimburse the cost. Until the Bureau's operating costs have been determined, it will not be possible to fix the charges, but the cost has previously been estimated at between £5 and £10, depending upon the type of certificate. We have no plans to lower the charge in respect of those applying from the voluntary sector. This presents substantial problems of principle and would inevitably increase costs for the public purse or for other applicants for certificates. We have made clear our determination to keep the cost as low as possible.

Referendum Campaigns

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the total cost to public funds of material issued by Her Majesty's Government during the recent referendum campaigns in *(a)* Wales, *(b)* Scotland, *(c)* Northern Ireland and *(d)* London. [115826]

Mr. Mike O'Brien *[holding answer 22 March 2000]:* The total amount spent by the Government on publicity in connection with each of the four referendum campaigns in 1997–98 is given in the table:

	£
Scotland	1,274,706
Wales	608,774
London	1,600,000
Northern Ireland	569,600

Campsfield House

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proportion of detainees held at Campsfield House had been detained for longer than six months in each quarter since June 1996. [115374]

Mrs. Roche: The information requested is not collected but the following table, extracted from records at Campsfield House, shows the length of detention at that centre. The table does not take account of time that may have been spent in detention before arrival at Campsfield House.

	6 to 9 months	*9 to 12 months*	*Over 12 months*	*Number of detainees*
1996				
June	15	7	4	192
July	15	8	3	195
August	22	4	5	197
September	25	4	5	198
October	25	8	7	197
November	21	9	5	196
December	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—
1997				
January	25	8	2	191
February	25	6	1	195
March	25	8	2	196
April	18	8	4	198
May	15	6	1	193
June	5	6	3	195
July	12	6	2	195
August	7	4	1	190
September	6	0	2	108
October	5	1	2	105
November	7	2	1	109
December	3	2	1	110
1998				
January	2	1	0	109
February	5	0	0	108
March	6	1	0	109
April	7	0	0	110
May	6	1	0	110
June	7	2	0	109
July	6	3	0	110
August	4	2	1	121
September	4	2	2	162
October	3	2	2	184
November	6	1	2	183
December	4	1	3	181
1999				
January	6	0	2	181
February	6	2	2	183
March	7	2	1	184
April	6	1	0	184
May	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—
June	5	3	0	184
July	6	0	0	175
August	8	1	0	181
September	10	2	0	180
October	8	3	0	184
November	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—
December	8	4	1	181
2000				
January	7	5	1	184

[1] Not available

Immigration and Nationality Directorate

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) for how many weeks the dedicated team in IND dealing with the backlog of general and settlement casework has been operating; and how many cases have been determined in each of these weeks; [115404]

(2) how many staff have been allocated to the dedicated team tackling the backlog of general and settlement casework within IND. [115405]

Mrs. Roche: A dedicated team, The After-Entry Clearance Team (AECT), was set up in April 1999 specifically to tackle the backlog of general and settlement casework and consists of 12 staff. The available information on output is set out in the table which shows that since they were established they have completed over 17,650 cases.

Monthly output of AECT 1999–2000

Month	*Output*
1999	
April	541
May	1,996
June	1,662
July	1,526
August	1,459
September	2,198
October	1,841
November	1,784
December	1,404
2000	
January	1,722
February	1,523

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many cases are currently in the backlog of general and settlement casework; and what is the target date for clearing them. [115380]

Mrs. Roche: The backlog of general and settlement cases, which are in the Case Allocation Unit and the Work in Progress store awaiting action by caseworkers, is currently 29,000. We aim to clear this to fractional levels by the summer.

Angola

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people have been

(a) removed and *(b)* deported to Angola in each of the last five years; and if it is his policy to return people to that country. [115350]

Mrs. Roche: The only information available relates to the number of Angolans removed from the United Kingdom. To the nearest five, 130 Angolan nationals were removed in 1995, 140 in 1996, 180 in 1997 and 95 in 1998. Regrettably data for 1999 are not yet available. In addition, these removal figures may not include all dependants. Unfortunately, it is not possible to provide an accurate breakdown between the number of people removed and the number deported; similarly it is not possible to confirm how many of the people removed from the United Kingdom were returned to Angola. This information could be obtained only by examining individual case files.

Returns to Angola are considered on a case-by-case basis after a careful assessment of the risk to the individual, taking account of the information and advice about conditions in Angola which has been made available by a range of international and non-governmental organisations. No one is returned unless it is clear that it is safe to do so.

Elderly People (Fear of Crime)

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will set out *(a)* baseline data for 1997 and *(b)* data for subsequent years for his Department's measurement of fear of crime among the elderly as included in the poverty audit, "Opportunity for All". [116025]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The First Annual Report, "Opportunity for All: Tackling Poverty and Social Exclusion", was published in September 1999. The indicator for fear of crime and the elderly is the proportion of those aged 60 years or over whose lives are greatly affected by fear of crime. The 1998 British Crime Survey reported that 10 per cent. of people in that age group said that their own quality of life was greatly affected by fear of crime.

This estimate is based on a sample of adults within the age group living in private households in England and Wales. The responses are on a scale of one to 10, where one is no effect and 10 is total effect on the quality of their lives. The definition of "greatly affected" are those who give scores of eight, nine or 10 on the scale. The question is being repeated in the 2000 British Crime Survey.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many failed asylum seekers had *(a)* deportation and *(b)* enforcement action initiated against them in each of the last five years for which figures are available; and, of those, how many left the United Kingdom. [115972]

Mrs. Roche: Information on enforcement action initiated, comprising action taken under illegal entry and deportation procedures, including figures showing the number of cases initiated against persons who had applied for asylum at some stage, can be found in the Command Paper, "Control of Immigration: Statistics, United Kingdom, 1998" (Table 7.1) for 1995 and Home Office Statistical Bulletin, "Control of Immigration: Statistics, United Kingdom, First Half 1999" (Table 5.1) for 1996 to first half 1999. Copies of those publications are in the Library. It should be noted that the relevant figures therein are presented by the date that enforcement action was initiated. This date may be prior to, after, or the same as, the date of the asylum decision, where such a decision has been taken. Enforcement statistics do not include removal action initiated against failed port asylum applicants under port procedures.

Comprehensive data are not available on persons removed or departing voluntarily following the initiation of enforcement action against them by the date that such action was initiated. Additionally, it is not known how many persons have left the country voluntarily without notifying the Immigration and Nationality Directorate. Figures are not, therefore, available on the numbers of failed asylum seekers leaving the United Kingdom who had enforcement action initiated against them in the last five years.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many failed asylum seekers are unlawfully at large in the United Kingdom. [115975]

Mrs. Roche: It is not known how many asylum applicants, in total, leave the country and it is not, therefore, possible to state how many failed asylum applicants remain unlawfully in the United Kingdom.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list, for each of the last five years for which figures are available, the criminal offences committed by *(a)* asylum seekers whose applications had not been determined and *(b)* failed asylum seekers, indicating the (i) maximum and (ii) average sentence passed in respect of each type of offence. [115987]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information is not available centrally.

The Home Office Court Proceedings Database does not hold information about the characteristics of individual cases apart from those that are evident from the description of the offence with which the defendant has been charged.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department which local authorities have applied to his Department to be placed on the list of authorities which will not be required to accept further asylum seekers; which of those local authorities have had their applications accepted; and if he will make a statement. [115979]

Mrs. Roche: There is no list of local authorities that will not be required to accept further asylum seekers. Some months ago local authorities were invited to inform the National Asylum Support Service if they felt they should be considered for exemption from accepting any further asylum seekers under the statutory interim arrangements should the Government decide to make regulations or make Directions specifying the maximum number of asylum seekers that any given local authority would need to support.

In reply the following local authorities listed expressed the view that supporting further asylum seekers would cause them great difficulties.

Bedfordshire County Council

Bedford Borough Council

Blackpool Borough Council

Borough of Broxbourne

Canterbury City Council

Caradon District Council

Carrick District Council

Crawley Borough Council

London Borough of Hillingdon

Isle of Wight Council

The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea

Lambeth Social Services

New Forest District Council

Norfolk County Council Social Services

Northampton Borough Council and other Districts in the Country of Northamptonshire

Oxford City Council

Oxfordshire County Council

London Borough of Richmond Upon Thames

Shepway District Council

Slough Borough Council

South Cambridgeshire District Council

Thurrock Council

City of Westminster

West Sussex County Council

Wycombe District Council.

The Government have noted the views of these Councils but have reached no conclusion about whether, were they to exercise the relevant powers, they should be exempted from accepting further asylum seekers.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what was the average waiting time for an initial decision in respect of claims for political asylum in *(a)* 1996, *(b)* 1997, *(c)* 1998, *(d)* 1999 and *(e)* 2000 to date; [116023]

(2) what was the average time taken, in each of the last three years, to determine *(a)* an initial application for asylum and *(b)* an appeal from asylum seekers to whom the special appeals procedure in paragraph 5 of Schedule 2 to the Asylum and Immigration Appeals Act 1993 was applied. [115985]

Mrs. Roche: The available information is given in the table. The figures were calculated by taking the mean length of time between the date that the asylum application was lodged and the date of the initial decision. The figures relate to asylum applications lodged by principal applicants only.

The information on appeals is not available in this format for the time period. The estimated waiting time for an appeal to be determined by an adjudicator was around 12 weeks at the end of February 2000 (this figure is based on an imputed calculation).

Average time to initial decision, in months, 1996–99 [1,2,3]

Year	*All applications*	*Applications lodged pre July 1993*	*Applications lodged post July 1993*
1996	17	52	11
1997	22	64	14
1998	17	78	12
1999[4]	35	91	16

[1] Excluding dependants

[2] Figures are estimates based on cases for which information is recorded

[3] The average length of time (in months) is calculated for date application is lodged to the date of initial decision, and relates to the year in which the decisions were made

[4] As at December 1999, excludes cases awaiting an initial decision.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the amount *(a)* spent, *(b)* claimed and *(c)* allocated to each council in the United Kingdom in respect of expenditure on asylum seekers in (i) 1998–99 and (ii) 1999–2000. [115977]

Mrs. Roche: Payments to local authorities for the support of asylum seekers for the year 1998–99 were the responsibility of the Department of Health. Three grants were payable—one for supporting adults, one for supporting families and one for supporting unaccompanied asylum seeking children. The Department of Health is currently reconciling, in the light of the audit certificates now being provided, the amount claimed by authorities and the payments made to authorities. It is, therefore, not possible at the moment to give the full information requested as the amounts may be increased or reduced as a result of audit. I will write to the hon. Member with the fullest information as soon as possible.

Since 1 April 1999, the Home Office has been responsible for reimbursing local authorities for the costs of supporting asylum seekers. Costs for the period 1 April–5 December are on the basis of a Special Grant Report. The table shows the amount of gross expenditure identified by local authorities for that period and the amount they have claimed in accordance with the grant rules. All claims will be met in full. These payments will be subject to audit by District Auditors and may be subject to variation in light of the findings of the auditors. Full information for the period 6 December 1999–31 March 2000 is not yet available.

Asylum support 1 April 1999 to 5 December 1999

Local authority	*Gross expenditure*	*Claim*
Barking and Dagenham	7,262,776	7,002,166
Barnet	4,504,399	3,895,802
Barnsley	48,103	49,590
Bath and North East Somerset	18,025	18,025
Bedford	694,866	668,890
Birmingham	1,530,552	1,530,552
Blackburn with Darwen	7,555	7,555
Blackpool	5,776	5,222
Bexley	693,927	612,519
Bolton Metro	44,884	44,884
Bournemouth	111,125	111,125
Bracknell Forest	11,484	11,484
Bradford	123,974	121,670
Brent	5,785,782	5,273,406
Brighton and Hove	453,109	447,379
Bristol City	581,165	581,165
Bromley	1,697,878	1,530,850
Buckinghamshire	80,601	77,280
Bury	11,784	9,921
Calderdale	34,616	34,616

Asylum support 1 April 1999 to 5 December 1999

Local authority	*Gross expenditure*	*Claim*
Cambridgeshire	477,531	477,531
Camden	7,802,684	5,871,860
Cheshire	144,444	134,503
Cornwall	760	760
Corporation of London	757,500	505,000
Coventry	203,990	134,830
Croydon	2,129,687	2,090,070
Cumbria	—	—
Darlington	2,561	2,561
Derby	68,571	68,571
Derbyshire	44,760	44,760
Devon	8,768	8,768
Doncaster	41,166	41,166
Dorset	6,271	5,880
Dudley	49,057	49,057
Durham	6,396	6,396
Ealing	3,469,338	3,268,448
East Riding of Yorkshire	33,526	31,091
East Sussex	249,979	252,289
Enfield	5,426,810	4,955,507
Essex	577,911	560,931
Gateshead	39,845	39,845
Gloucestershire	157,868	157,868
Greenwich	2,910,299	2,910,299
Hackney	6,474,129	6,348,793
Halton	—	—
Hammersmith and Fulham	8,286,810	6,553,030
Hampshire	187,760	173,057
Haringey	5,447,187	4,423,740
Harrow	2,560,297	2,076,459
Hartlepool	—	—
Havering	1,314,517	987,840
Herefordshire	10,058	10,058
Hertfordshire	1,128,989	1,128,989
Hillingdon	4,675,112	4,240,593
Hounslow	3,358,880	3,007,750
Islington	12,709,181	11,186,794
Isle of Wight	—	—
Kensington and Chelsea	6,540,918	4,906,980
Kent	7,994,035	7,995,905
Kingston upon Hull	254,321	192,640
Kingston upon Thames	1,124,800	767,520
Kirklees	155,742	151,200
Knowsley	—	—
Lambeth	8,743,665	8,856,975
Lancashire	80,376	73,458
Leeds	170,701	170,701
Leicester	651,888	605,463
Leicestershire	339,357	303,042
Lewisham	4,885,567	4,928,599
Lincolnshire	189,264	189,264
Liverpool	227,703	227,703
Luton	678,245	678,245
Manchester	1,330,023	1,298,648
Medway	153,841	139,011
Merton	2,799,559	2,491,867
Middlesbrough	101,241	101,241
Milton Keynes	600,771	548,045
City of Newcastle	335,340	335,340
Newham	14,174,851	14,174,851
Norfolk	266,820	266,820
North East Lincolnshire	189,909	151,740
North Lincolnshire	8,890	8,890
North Somerset	31,081	29,680
North Tyneside	22,661	21,892
North Yorkshire	11,160	11,160
Northamptonshie	5,109,145	5,109,145
Northumberland	4,315	4,315
Nottingham	137,918	95,356
Nottinghamshire	118,884	111,907
Oldham	8,165	8,165
Oxfordshire	2,257,421	2,227,141
Peterborough	104,290	104,290

Asylum support 1 April 1999 to 5 December 1999

Local authority	*Gross expenditure*	*Claim*
Plymouth	52,660	52,228
Poole	60,198	28,393
Portsmouth	244,646	211,460
Reading	645,848	642,235
Redbridge	3,853,419	3,832,621
Redcar and Cleveland	86,139	84,978
Richmond upon Thames	4,110,282	1,688,699
Rochdale	36,555	28,941
Rotherham	52,383	44,160
Rutland	30,312	30,312
Salford	99,717	99,717
Sandwell	246,707	225,770
Sefton	25,374	19,160
Sheffield	1,266,016	1,210,780
Shropshire	10,877	10,877
Slough	3,421,279	2,817,100
Solihull	10,936	10,640
Somerset	28,220	17,520
South Gloucestershire	132,234	82,284
South Tyneside	23,499	22,557
Southampton	140,048	104,048
Southend on Sea	611,023	611,023
Southwark	9,288,505	8,534,740
Staffordshire	281,125	279,140
Stockport	73,125	73,125
Stockton on Tees	18,889	18,889
Stoke on Trent	51,842	48,576
Suffolk	87,992	81,754
Sunderland	17,683	17,683
Surrey	801,783	616,380
Sutton	1,613,975	1,405,400
Swindon	152,652	152,652
Tameside	4,607	3,500
Telford and Wrekin	28,485	24,401
Thurrock	860,371	842,400
Torbay	—	—
Tower Hamlets	1,940,910	1,796,280
Trafford	111,728	97,368
Wakefield	116,607	107,473
Walsall	46,737	40,664
Waltham Forest	5,528,618	5,528,618
Wandsworth	4,256,996	2,621,705
Warrington	40,426	35,000
Warwickshire	274,806	269,381
West Berkshire	5,655	5,655
West Sussex	451,646	422,860
Westminster	9,725,783	6,714,560
Wigan	5,502	5,502
Wiltshire	108,915	101,944
Windsor and Maidenhead	53,401	46,840
Wirral	630	630
Wokingham	53,028	53,028
Worcestershire	336,953	200,953
York	6,251	6,251
St. Helens	—	—
Wolverhampton	36,728	36,728
Isle of Wight	—	—
Isles of Scilly	—	—
Total	205,877,613	183,177,970

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many appeals against asylum decisions were *(a)* lodged and *(b)* heard in each of the last five years for which figures are available. [115968]

Mrs. Roche: Information regarding asylum appeals for each of the years 1994–98 is given in Table 8.1 of the Home Office statistical bulletins, "Asylum Statistics

United Kingdom" 1995, 1996 and 1998, issues 9/96, 15/97 and 10/99, copies of which are available in the Library.

Information for 1999 will be published in the latest issue of the bulletin in June of this year.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum seekers left the United Kingdom in each of the last five years for which figures are available. [115978]

Mrs. Roche: Information is not recorded centrally on the numbers of in-country asylum applicants who depart voluntarily before enforcement action is initiated against them. Nor is it known how many asylum applicants leave the country voluntarily without notifying the Immigration and National Directorate of their departure. It is not, therefore, possible to give a total figure for asylum seekers leaving the United Kingdom.

The available information, relating to removals and known voluntary departures for 1995–99 under port and enforcement procedures of persons who have applied for asylum at some stage, is given in the table. For port asylum applicants, the figures include persons departing voluntarily up to and including the point of notification of the decision on the asylum application and those persons who have had their asylum application refused and leave the country before they have exhausted their rights of appeal. For in-country applicants, the figures exclude persons departing voluntarily before the initiation of enforcement action.

Failed asylum seekers are removed only once all their rights of appeal in the United Kingdom have been exhausted. It should be noted that the figures may include some persons who withdrew their asylum application or appeal before a decision or determination had been reached.

Removals and voluntary departures [1] of asylum applicants, excluding dependants, 1995–99

Year	*Number*
1995	3,180
1996	4,840
1997	7,160
1998	6,900
1999[2]	7,645

[1] For port asylum applicants, the data include persons departing voluntarily up to and including the point of notification of the decision on the asylum application and those persons who have had their asylum application refused and leave the country before they have exhausted their rights of appeal. For in-country applicants, the data exclude persons departing voluntarily before the initiation of enforcement action.

[2] 1999 data are provisional.

Note:

Data are rounded to 5.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the monthly cost of maintaining *(a)* adult asylum seekers, *(b)* child asylum seekers and *(c)* asylum seeking families (i) in detention, (ii) under the new support arrangements to be brought in from 3 April and (iii) under the interim arrangements made under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. [115973]

Mrs. Roche: The monthly direct cost of an available place in an immigration detention centre comes to just under £2,500. No differentiation is made between the cost of holding adults, children or families.

The total average cost to the immigration service of holding a detainee is slightly over £5,000 per month. This represents the full cost of immigration detention, including the cost of escorting detainees, the cost of holding people in police cells and secondary examination areas, and management and other overheads.

Unaccompanied children who claim asylum are not included in the interim arrangements made under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, nor are they included in the new support arrangements.

Under the interim arrangements made under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, the Home Office makes available to local authorities against certified claims a grant of up to £650 per month for a single asylum seeker and up to £950 per month for a family unit.

Under the new asylum seeker support arrangements to be phased in from 3 April 2000 destitute asylum seekers will be provided with accommodation and essential living needs, in the form of vouchers. The value of vouchers provided will be decided on a case-by-case basis. The maximum weekly levels of voucher support for asylum seekers under the new arrangements are shown in the table.

£

	Maximum amount of weekly voucher support including £10 cash voucher
Single person aged 25 or over	36.54
Single person aged at least 18 but under 25	28.95
Lone parent aged 18 or over	36.54
Qualifying couple	57.37
Person aged under 16	26.60
Person aged at least 16 but under 18 (except a member of a qualifying couple)	31.75

Costs associated with accommodation under the new support arrangements being phased in from 3 April 2000 are commercially confidential.

Immigration Control (Illegal Workers)

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the number of persons subject to immigration control who have been employed in contravention of section 8 of the Asylum and Immigration Act 1996 in each of the last three years; how many prosecutions have been brought; what is his policy in respect of such prosecutions; and if he will make a statement. [113974]

Mrs. Roche: No reliable estimate can be made of the number of persons subject to immigration control who have been employed in contravention of section 8 of the Asylum and Immigration Act 1996. Prosecution of suspected offenders is a matter for the Crown Prosecution Service. One prosecution has been brought thus far, in 1999, when a company was found guilty on nine counts, and fined £500 on each count and ordered to pay costs. In addition, more than 40 people have been served with a

warning of their liability to prosecution under this part of the Act. As my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. O'Brien) announced in the House last year, it is no longer our policy to issue a warning of liability to prosecution before proceeding to prosecution in appropriate cases.

Home Detention Curfew Scheme

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proportion of offenders released on the Home Detention Curfew scheme have re-offended after completing the scheme; and if he will make a statement. [115967]

Mr. Boateng: Information about offences committed by offenders who have completed a period on the Home Detention Curfew scheme is not held centrally. However, an evaluation of the Home Detention Curfew scheme is being carried out by the Research, Development and Statistics Directorate of the Home Office. It will include an analysis, based upon a sampling exercise, of reconviction of curfewees both during and after the curfew period. Results will be published later this year.

Press Office

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department further to his answer of 17 March 2000, *Official Report*, columns 380–81W, on the Press Office, for what reason disproportionate costs would be involved in calculating the average number of persons employed in the Home Office Press Office in 1998–99 and 1999–2000; what was the cost of the calculation of the statistics for 1996–97 and 1997–98; and if he will make a statement. [115990]

Mr. Straw: Press Office staff levels have varied considerably over the last four years, have been augmented by seconded staff, by long and short-term attachments and there have been large numbers of vacancies at different times. Detailed staff number profiles for the periods in question are not held within the Communication Directorate. Central pay records would have to be searched month by month for the periods in question and these would not include all the attachments and secondments, many of which were not funded within the Directorate. The cost would, therefore, be disproportionate. No-one currently employed in the Communication Directorate was involved in providing the statistics for the Public Administration Committee and there is no record of the cost of obtaining the data.

Special Advisers

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 17 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 381W, on special advisers, if a record is kept of the contact with the Press that Mr. Ed Owen has in connection with his role to support Ministers in the presentational aspects of policy. [115989]

Mr. Straw: No.

Global Cultural Diversity Congress

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 17 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 376W, on the Global Cultural Diversity Congress, what level of Government funding he understood would be discussed at the Commission for Racial Equality's meeting on 7 February; whether that actual level was discussed; and if he will make a statement. [115991]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We understood that potential costs to public funds in the region of £1 million might be discussed and were very concerned by this. The details of what was actually discussed on 7 February is a matter for the Commission for Racial Equality.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 17 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 376W, on the Global Cultural Diversity Congress, what Ministerial policy issues related to the production of the accountants' report into the financial affairs of Global Cultural Congress 2000 Ltd. [115993]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The policy issues related to the appropriateness of injecting public funding into the Global Cultural Diversity Congress.

The report for consultants was an oral report to officials accompanied by a bullet point presentation originally on slides which was relayed to Ministers.

As the hon. Member has requested in a letter, I hope to be able to disclose shortly the substance of the report in accordance with the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information, but I am awaiting advice on how that can be done.

I will place a copy in the Library, when available.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 17 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 376W, on the Global Cultural Diversity Congress, from what Government funds he understood that the potential sources of additional funding for the Global Cultural Diversity Congress to be discussed at the Commission for Racial Equality's meeting on 7 February were to be sourced; who gave authorisation for the Government funding to be discussed at the Commission's meeting; when he was informed that additional funding from Government funds would be discussed at the meeting; and if he will make a statement. [115992]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Ministers were briefed on a request for Home Office funding of the Global Cultural Diversity Congress on 4 February but did not agree to give any then or later.

The detail of discussion at Commission meetings is a matter for the Commission for Racial Equality.

Prisoner Accommodation

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps are being taken to accommodate prisoners closer to their homes. [115623]

Mr. Boateng: In its management of the prison population, the Prison Service aims to hold prisoners in establishments which provide the degree of security that they require, are suitable to their gender, age and legal status and which are near to their homes, or for unconvicted and unsentenced prisoners near to the courts dealing with their cases.

However, high population levels throughout the prisons and remand estate can lead to prisoners being transferred from their home area to establishments with a greater number of vacancies.

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prisoners are held in prison establishments *(a)* over 25 miles, *(b)* over 50 miles and *(c)* over 100 miles from their homes. [115625]

Mr. Boateng: The Prison Service does not have home address records for every prisoner in its custody. The centrally available information is based on the distance that prisoners are held from their committal court town and is set out in the table in the nearest format to that requested. This information is based on data collected on 30 November 1999. There are in the region of 24,000 prisoners held under 25 miles from their committal court town.

Distance from home area	*Number of prisoners* [1]
Between 25 and 50 miles	16,000
Between 50 and 100 miles	14,000
Over 100 miles	11,000
Total over 25 miles	41,000

[1] Rounded to nearest thousand

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to implement the recommendations in "Prison Disturbances 1990: report of an Inquiry by the right hon. Lord Justice Woolf and His Honour Sir Stephen Tumim", that *(a)* no establishment should hold more prisoners than is provided for in its certified normal accommodation, and *(b)* Parliament be informed if there is a material departure from this rule. [115616]

Mr. Boateng: There are no plans to introduce a new prison rule to limit the maximum number of prisoners an establishment can hold to the level of its certified normal accommodation, also known as uncrowded capacity.

This is because there is no immediate prospect that overcrowding will be ended. However, by a combination of providing additional accommodation and the introduction of new legislation (for example Home Detention Curfew), the Government are ensuring that overcrowding is contained within the maximum safe operational capacity of establishments.

Prisoners

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the average time per week spent out of cell by prisoners in the last two years for which figures are available in *(a)* each local prison and *(b)* each young offender institution. [115615]

Mr. Boateng: The average time spent out of cell for local prisons and young offender institutions for the years 1997–98 and 1998–99 are given in the table.

Time out of cell 1997–1999

Function name/Prison name		*1997–98*	*1998–99*
Male closed YOI			
Aylesbury	Weekdays	9.4	8.5
	Weekends	5.6	5.5
Castington	Weekdays	9.9	9.9
	Weekends	6.8	6.8
Deerbolt	Weekdays	10.4	10.2
	Weekends	7.2	4.3
Dover	Weekdays	9.3	9.3
	Weekends	5.0	5.0
Feltham	Weekdays	8.0	8.0
	Weekends	6.0	6.0
Glen Parva	Weekdays	9.2	9.3
	Weekends	5.8	5.8
Guys Marsh	Weekdays	13.3	13.0
	Weekends	10.3	10.2
Huntercombe	Weekdays	11.0	10.7
	Weekends	6.5	6.7
Onley	Weekdays	11.5	11.5
	Weekends	9.7	9.7
Portland	Weekdays	10.7	8.7
	Weekends	6.0	4.4
Reading	Weekdays	9.1	8.5
	Weekends	7.9	7.2
Stoke Heath	Weekdays	11.2	10.3
	Weekends	8.0	7.2
Swinfen Hall	Weekdays	8.6	8.8
	Weekends	6.5	6.9
Wetherby	Weekdays	10.8	10.8
	Weekends	10.1	10.0
Male Juvenile			
Werrington	Weekdays	13.5	13.0
	Weekends	13.0	12.5
Male open YOI			
Hatfield	Weekdays	13.3	13.3
	Weekends	13.3	13.3
Thorn Cross	Weekdays	12.5	12.5
	Weekends	12.5	12.5
Male remand centre			
Brinsford	Weekdays	10.2	10.3
	Weekends	9.3	9.3
Hindley	Weekdays	8.8	9.1
	Weekends	7.8	5.0
Lancaster Farms	Weekdays	9.9	8.1
	Weekends	8.1	5.6
Northallerton	Weekdays	10.2	9.9
	Weekends	8.8	9.5
Male local			
Altcourse	Weekdays	—	13.0
	Weekends	—	13.0
Bedford	Weekdays	10.8	9.3
	Weekends	10.8	7.5
Belmarsh	Weekdays	9.0	6.6
	Weekends	8.0	4.8
Birmingham	Weekdays	5.5	6.0
	Weekends	4.1	4.5
Blakenhurst	Weekdays	10.7	10.8
	Weekends	9.3	9.6
Bristol	Weekdays	10.3	10.4
	Weekends	8.8	8.8
Brixton	Weekdays	10.0	11.0
	Weekends	9.7	8.7
Bullingdon	Weekdays	10.1	10.2
	Weekends	8.2	8.2
Canterbury	Weekdays	10.8	10.8
	Weekends	7.0	7.0
Cardiff	Weekdays	11.9	10.4
	Weekends	9.0	7.3
Chelmsford	Weekdays	9.2	7.8
	Weekends	8.0	7.8
Doncaster	Weekdays	11.1	10.3
	Weekends	11.8	10.3
Dorchester	Weekdays	8.4	8.1
	Weekends	6.7	7.0

Time out of cell 1997–1999

Function name/Prison name		*1997–98*	*1998–99*
Durham	Weekdays	8.3	8.3
	Weekends	6.5	6.2
Elmley	Weekdays	10.0	8.8
	Weekends	8.0	8.0
Exeter	Weekdays	9.8	6.3
	Weekends	8.2	5.3
Gloucester	Weekdays	9.5	9.5
	Weekends	7.5	7.5
Haslar	Weekdays	12.0	12.0
	Weekends	11.0	11.0
Highdown	Weekdays	10.3	9.0
	Weekends	10.3	6.0
Holme House	Weekdays	9.5	9.5
	Weekends	9.5	9.5
Hull	Weekdays	10.5	10.5
	Weekends	8.1	8.3
Leeds	Weekdays	8.2	8.5
	Weekends	6.4	7.5
Leicester	Weekdays	11.5	11.3
	Weekends	10.5	10.1
Lewes	Weekdays	9.4	9.3
	Weekends	7.3	6.3
Lincoln	Weekdays	10.3	10.4
	Weekends	9.5	9.3
Liverpool	Weekdays	6.9	6.6
	Weekends	4.1	4.1
Manchester	Weekdays	10.3	10.0
	Weekends	8.4	8.3
Norwich	Weekdays	9.3	8.8
	Weekends	9.3	8.8
Nottingham	Weekdays	9.8	9.8
	Weekends	9.5	9.5
Parc	Weekdays	1.2	11.2
	Weekends	1.1	10.4
Pentonville	Weekdays	9.0	9.0
	Weekends	7.0	7.0
Preston	Weekdays	8.2	8.0
	Weekends	7.3	7.0
Rochester	Weekdays	11.7	10.5
	Weekends	10.9	11.4
Shrewsbury	Weekdays	13.4	11.1
	Weekends	14.3	11.1
Swansea	Weekdays	7.3	7.3
	Weekends	6.8	6.8
Wandsworth	Weekdays	8.2	8.0
	Weekends	6.6	7.0
Winchester	Weekdays	8.4	7.9
	Weekends	7.3	6.7
Wolds	Weekdays	12.0	11.7
	Weekends	12.0	11.9
Woodhill	Weekdays	10.9	10.2
	Weekends	11.1	10.2
Wormwood Scrubs	Weekdays	8.7	7.8
	Weekends	7.1	4.2
Female local			
Brockhill	Weekdays	10.7	10.0
	Weekends	10.5	10.0
Eastwood Park	Weekdays	10.5	11.6
	Weekends	10.3	10.3
Holloway	Weekdays	10.5	10.5
	Weekends	10.0	10.0
Low Newton	Weekdays	9.5	8.6
	Weekends	8.2	8.0
New Hall	Weekdays	11.6	10.5
	Weekends	10.6	10.3

Prison Officers

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps have been taken to enhance the role of prison officers since the publication of "Prison Disturbances 1990: report of an Inquiry by the right hon. Lord Justice Woolf and His Honour Sir Stephen Tumim". [115617]

Mr. Boateng: Over the past 10 years, prison officers have become involved in a wider range of tasks, relating in particular to the rehabilitation of prisoners.

The personal officer scheme has sought to develop the relationship between staff and prisoners. The personal officer discusses and agrees a sentence plan with the prisoner; and also contributes to the risk assessment processes associated with release on temporary licence and with home detention curfew.

Prison officers play a key role in identifying those at risk of suicide or self-harm; and in supporting them through closer supervision and multi-disciplinary progress reviews. They act as tutors to the Prison Service's accredited offending behaviour programmes, where their training is integral to the accreditation process. Within the Service's drug strategy, they contribute to the multi-disciplinary counselling, assessment, referral, advice and throughcare (CARAT) teams and to the voluntary testing units, which support prisoners who wish to live in a drug-free environment.

The development of the prison officer's role has been supported by a range of training programmes, including in sentence management, substance awareness, suicide awareness, race relations and combating bullying. The Prison Service has developed a National Vocational Qualification in custodial care, which provides a systematic map of the range of skills and knowledge an officer needs. The enhanced role of an officer is reflected in rigorous job simulation selection procedures, now used to select and promote all officers.

Prisoners (Voting Rights)

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what arrangements are in place to enable *(a)* eligible remand prisoners and *(b)* people imprisoned for (i) contempt of court and (ii) failing to pay a fine to exercise their right to vote in the elections for a London mayor. [115624]

Mr. Boateng: Prison Service Instruction which will explain how eligible prisoners can exercise their right to vote in the elections for a London mayor will shortly be sent to prison establishments.

Eurojust

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) which officials would be seconded to Eurojust under the terms of the proposals agreed at Tampere; [115553]

(2) what assessment his Department has made of the advantages and disadvantages of extending the powers of the Anti-drugs Co-ordinator to include participation in Eurojust; and if he will make a statement; [115556]

(3) what is his policy regarding the crimes to be covered by Eurojust; and what is the Commission's policy; [115709]

(4) if he will list those elements of the Eurojust proposal which are components of Corpus Juris; and what is his policy on this matter. [115555]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I welcome the decision taken at the Tampere Special European Council to set up Eurojust, as a means of improving judicial co-operation with the European Union. There is very little connection or similarity between Eurojust and the proposals in the "Corpus Juris" document: the Government's view, in line with the Tampere conclusions, is that the role of Eurojust will be to facilitate and support investigations and prosecutions by national authorities, not to act as a European Prosecutor in its own right. The European Council mandated the Justice and Home Affairs Council to adopt the necessary legal instrument establishing Eurojust by the end of 2001.

In line with the conclusions of the Tampere European Council, Eurojust is to be composed of

> "national prosecutors, magistrates, or police officers of equivalent competence, detached from each member state according to its legal system".

The Government believe that Eurojust should deal with serious crime, in particular organised crime offences and the offences for which Europol has responsibility. I understand that the Commission also supports this approach.

I do not believe that it would be necessary or appropriate for the United Kingdom Anti-Drugs Co-ordinator to join in Eurojust's operational work in relation to individual investigations. It would, however, be open to him to make contacts with Eurojust on the same basis as contacts he has made with other international organisations, in pursuing his strategic role.

Schengen Convention

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department further to his answer of 6 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 545W, on bogus drug deals, if he will deposit in the Library a copy of the document referred to in Community Document 10846/99, page 8, on the Schengen Manual on Bogus Drugs Deals. [115575]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I understand that the Manual on bogus drugs deals referred to in the 1998 Annual Report on the implementation of the Schengen Convention (10846/1/99 REV 1 CATS 23 ASIM 36 COMIX 223) is a confidential document which has been made available only to states which currently participate in the provisions of the Schengen Convention. The United Kingdom has yet to participate in any of the provisions of the Convention. In the circumstances, it will not be possible to lodge the Manual in the Library.

Freedom, Security and Justice

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on his policy on the Scoreboard on the Creation of an Area of Freedom, Security and Justice in the European Union. [115576]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Government consider the "scoreboard", requested at the Tampere European Council, to be of central importance as a means to monitor progress, prioritise the work and provide greater transparency in the implementation of an area of freedom, security and justice in the European Union.

Prostitutes' Cards

Mr. Caplin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department from which organisations he has received submissions in response to the consultation paper, "New Measures to Control Prostitutes' Cards". [115589]

Mr. Charles Clarke: We have received 60 responses to our consultation paper, "New Measures to Control Prostitutes Cards in Phone Boxes". Those who submitted comments include:

the three police staff associations—the Association of Chief Police Officers, the Police Superintendents' Association and the Police Federation;

the regulator Oftel;

the telephone box operators—British Telecom, IPM and New World Payphones;

other licensed operators—One2One, Vodafone, British Telecom Cellnet, and Orange;

the Local Government Association and the Association of London Government;

local authorities—Westminster City Council, the London Borough of Camden, the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, Brighton and Hove Council, North Lincolnshire Council and the Corporation of London;

the London Tourist Board;

the London Chamber of Commerce;

the Justices' Clerks' Society;

advertisers—the Advertising Association, Outdoor Advertising Association, Phonesites, and the Committee of Advertising Practice;

groups representing sex workers and Europap, the Sexual Freedom Coalition, and the Praed Street Project;

the organisation CARE;

residents associations representing areas badly affected by the presence of cards, a number of local businesses and concerned members of the public.

Mr. Caplin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the financial impact of measures to control prostitutes' cards on *(a)* the police, *(b)* local authorities and *(c)* telecommunications operators in the last 12 months. [115588]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Home Office consultation paper 'New Measures to Control Prostitutes' Cards in Phone Boxes' invited respondents to submit information about the existing and potential costs caused by the nuisance of prostitutes' cards.

A number of organisations including some local authorities and telephone operators responded with figures. Their responses referred to the costs incurred in cleaning the boxes and removing cards and the cost of court action against carders. They also included lost advertising revenue, although this was not calculated separately. The total figure amounted to around £750,000, but not all those likely to incur costs at present responded to the question in the consultation paper.

Police (Wandsworth)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what were police numbers in the London Borough of Wandsworth *(a)* on 1 March, and *(b)* on

1 March in each of the previous four years; and if he will make a statement. [115550]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis tells me that the number of police officers in the London Borough of Wandsworth was 570 on 1 March 2000; 576 on 1 March 1999; 605 on 1 March 1998; 630 on 1 March 1997; and 662 on 1 March 1996.

Metropolitan Police Grants

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what financial grants have been allocated to the Metropolitan police in each of the last four years. [115551]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Grants to the Metropolitan police in the last four years are given in the table:

£

	1996–97	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*
Specific grant	846,761,947	900,344,546	931,430,758	949,070,118
Capital grant	27,749,000	24,774,000	21,892,000	21,892,000
Loan charge grant	1,778,546	6,049,591	5,916,813	4,783,118
Revenue support grant	436,413,559	457,598,818	461,893,809	461,556,352

Category A Prisoners

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* male and *(b)* female category A prisoners were held in prisons in England and Wales on 1 March. [115549]

Mr. Boateng: The latest available provisional information is for 29 February. On that date there were 886 male and three female category A prisoners in prisons in England and Wales.

Animal Experiments

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many animals were killed in experiments at Wickham Research Laboratories, Wickham, Hampshire, in each of the last five years. [115749]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Section 24 of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 prevents me from disclosing detailed information of this nature about an individual establishment licensed under the Act.

Service Personnel (Absence)

Mr. Denis Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department who has the responsibility when a member of the armed forces goes absent without leave, for ensuring that information relating to the absentee is placed on the Police National Computer. [115559]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information is placed on the Police National Computer by the National Identification Service at New Scotland Yard once they have been notified by the Royal Military Police that a member of the armed forces has gone absent without leave.

Assault

Mr. Rammell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the average time from arrest to referral to the Crown Prosecution Service in the case of accusations of assault, in each of the last three years. [115598]

Mr. Charles Clarke: This information is not collected centrally.

Prisoner Releases

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will initiate an inquiry into the process by which prisoners are released from prison, with specific reference to enabling them to avoid former criminal inmates. [115622]

Mr. Boateng: No. All adult prisoners serving sentences of 12 months or more are released on licence and required to comply with whatever conditions may be contained in the licence. Young offenders (those under 21) are mostly subject to licence, if sentenced to a month or more. A standard licence condition is to be of good behaviour and not to do anything to jeopardise the aims of supervision. A licensee who mixes with criminal elements may be regarded as breaching this condition and recalled to custody. It is the responsibility of the probation service to supervise prisoners released on licence to ensure that the public is protected, further offences are not committed, and that the offender is successfully rehabilitated.

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what arrangements he is making to ensure that vulnerable female prisoners on release from prison are not met and coerced by former associates. [115609]

Mr. Boateng: If, prior to release, a prisoner of either sex, or prison staff, has or have information to suggest that the prisoner concerned is at risk of being met and coerced by former associates outside prison, this would be a matter for the local police. The prison's police liaison officer would be responsible for passing on the information. In the case of a prisoner who is released on licence, the supervising probation officer would be able to provide advice, support and assistance. The supervising officer may also need to liaise with the police if it is feared that offences may be committed as a result of such associations.

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what measures he is putting in place to ensure that prisoners on release are given appropriate assistance with transport to their homes. [115612]

Mr. Boateng: Under Standing Order 11 (Discharge of Prisoners), all discharged prisoners are entitled to receive a travel warrant, or payment of fares where a warrant is inappropriate, to their home or destination within the United Kingdom, Channel Islands, Isle of Man and the Republic of Ireland. The issue of a travel warrant, or payment of fares, is in addition to the discharge grant which is paid to the majority of released prisoners, to help them meet their immediate needs on release.

Domestic Violence

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps he is taking to ensure that perpetrators of domestic violence are successfully prosecuted and punished. [115611]

Mr. Boateng: Earlier this month, we launched new Multi-Agency Guidance for Addressing Domestic Violence. This sets out considerations to be borne in mind by agencies across the criminal justice system, and in local authorities and the health service, to ensure that domestic violence is tackled effectively and that appropriate services are provided to its survivors. The guidance also gives good practice examples and advice on partnership working. We shall be supplementing it shortly by specific guidance to the police.

The violence against women initiative within the Crime Reduction Programme invites bids for the funding of projects to address domestic violence, and these will be monitored and evaluated to see what is effective and cost-effective.

Information on all the Government's initiatives to tackle violence is available via our website: http://www.gov.uk/domesticviolence/index/htm.

Prisoners (Visits)

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps are being taken to enable women prisoners to receive visits from relatives who live long distances from their prison. [115610]

Mr. Boateng: The Prison Service places great importance on prisoners maintaining close ties with their families as part of their rehabilitation. Population pressures have resulted in some prisoners being allocated a long distance away from their families, and this has been a particular problem for women prisoners because of the relatively small amount of accommodation for them. The allocation of women prisoners may also be restricted by the need for them to attend specific offender behaviour programmes or if they have been allocated to a mother and baby unit. This is being addressed by the continuing programme to increase the capacity of the female estate, mainly by re-roling male facilities, resulting in a greater spread of female accommodation across the country.

For relatives who live some distance from a particular prison, the Assisted Prison Visits Unit offers financial assistance for those who meet the relevant criteria. The Prison Service is also working to improve the quality of visits, with particular emphasis on ensuring that imprisoned parents have productive visits with their children. An increasing number of establishments are providing creches and play areas, as well as making provision for extended family visits to take place away from the normal visits area.

Police, Probation and Prison Services

Sir Peter Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps he is taking to involve the Office for National Statistics in the planning, production and presentation of statistical information relating to the performance of the police, probation and prison services. [115361]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Office for National Statistics (ONS) is represented on a committee established by my Department's Research, Development and Statistics Directorate which is co-ordinating a programme of reviews of the business requirements, scope and production of all regular Home Office Statistical series, including those relating to the performance of police, prison and probation services.

In addition, the ONS is involved in specific discussions on ethnic monitoring statistics for police, prison and probation services and has provided census and mid-year population estimates for a study comparing crime and related figures in two types of areas, namely Basic Command Units within police forces and the areas in which Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships operate.

For the future, the planning, production and presentation of those statistics that come within the scope of National Statistics will be subject to the arrangements described in "Building Trust in Statistics". It is envisaged that this will include the setting up of a new inter-departmental Crime and Justice working group that also involves representation from the ONS.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Unqualified Claims Advisers

Mr. Kenneth Clarke: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when he expects to receive the report of the inquiry into the activities of unqualified claims advisers who contract on a no-win, no-fee basis to pursue claims for compensation for personal injury in return for a percentage of any sum recovered; if he will publish the report as soon as he receives it; and if he will make a statement. [115936]

Mr. Lock: The Committee established by the Lord Chancellor to investigate the activities of non-legally qualified claims assessors and employment advisers who act for reward reported to the Lord Chancellor at the end of February. The report will be published shortly.

Asylum (Judicial Reviews)

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what, during the last five years for which figures are available, what was the *(a)* longest and *(b)* average time an ultimately (i) unsuccessful and (ii) successful application for judicial review of an asylum decision was before the courts. [115976]

Jane Kennedy: This information is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many applications for judicial review of asylum decisions were made in each of the last five years for which figures are available; how many were granted a substantive hearing; how many

applications were granted *(a)* initially and *(b)* on appeal; what was the total cost to public funds of such applications and appeals in each year; on how many occasions Queen's Counsel were employed by (i) him and (ii) the applicant; and if he will make a statement. [115971]

Jane Kennedy: The information on the numbers of applications received in 1999 and 1998 is set out in the table. The remaining information is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

	1998	*1999*
Receipts	1,874	2,170
Leave granted on initial application	308	436
Leave granted on oral hearing	36	42
Applications allowed (following substantive hearing)	173	175

Immigration Appeals Adjudicators

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what qualifications are required for appointment as an Immigration Appeals adjudicator; and if he will make a statement. [115986]

Mr. Lock: Schedule 3 to the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 states that a person is qualified for appointment as an adjudicator only if:

(a) he has a seven year general qualification, within the meaning of section 71 of the Courts and Legal Services Act 1990;

(b) he is an advocate or solicitor in Scotland of at least seven years' standing;

(c) he is a member of the Bar of Northern Ireland or solicitor of the Supreme Court of Northern Ireland of at least seven years' standing; or

(d) he has such legal and other experience as appears to the Lord Chancellor to make him suited for appointment as an adjudicator.

Written Answers to Questions

Friday 24 March 2000

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Rome Convention

Mr. Duncan: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (1) what *(a)* committees and *(b)* working groups his Department has set up to consider the revision of the Rome Convention; and if he will list the members of each such group and meetings scheduled; [116059]

(2) what consultation *(a)* he has undertaken and *(b)* is planned by his Department on the revision of the Rome Convention; [116601]

(3) if he will list the meetings his Department has held with outside bodies on the revision of the Rome Convention; what conclusions were reached; and if he will deposit these in the Library; [116064]

(4) what discussions on forthcoming legislation have taken place with the Department of Trade and Industry on the implications of the revision of the Rome Convention for electronic commerce; and if he will make a statement. [116128]

Mr. Lock: Negotiations within the European Union for the revision of the 1980 Rome Convention on the Law Applicable to Contractual Obligations have not yet started. Officials in my Department have not consulted outside individuals or bodies about any aspect of any such revision exercise. When the negotiations start, officials in my Department will ensure that there is full public consultation on all aspects of the review during the course of these negotiations. Officials in my Department and the Department of Trade and Industry have had a number of general discussions about the 1980 Rome Convention and electronic commerce. When the plans for the review are known the Departments will work closely together on all the policy issues raised in the review, including those affecting electronic commerce.

CABINET OFFICE

Crown Immunity

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will review the range and application of Crown Immunity across all Government Departments. [115706]

Mr. Stringer: The Government have no plans to review the range and applications of Crown immunity across all Government Departments.

Knowledge Network Computer System

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office (1) when she will be in a position to place material stored on the Knowledge Network computer system on the internet; and if she will make a statement; [115095]

(2) if the work of the unit of the Cabinet Office responsible for the Knowledge Network computer system is to be placed on the internet; [115050]

(3) if information on members of the Shadow Cabinet will be held on the Knowledge Network Computer system; [115606]

(4) if she will place the technical specifications of the Knowledge Network Computer system in the Library; [115608]

(5) what information relating to the work of political parties will be held on the Knowledge Network Computer system. [115607]

Marjorie Mowlam: Phase 1 of the Knowledge Network Project commenced in December 1999 and is currently at an early stage of piloting, scoping and evaluation of a range of possible technical options and associated improvements in working methods, before the work of building and placing information on the Knowledge Network begins in earnest, in line with normal and established Cabinet Office practice.

From the beginning of the Project, it has been envisaged that as much information as possible which is eventually held on the Knowledge Network will be made publicly available over the internet. That remains the case. It has never intended to be used, and will not be used, for party political purposes.

The results and findings of Phase 1 of the Knowledge Network Project, including the Phase 1 work programme of the Knowledge Network team, will be submitted to me by July 2000 and will subsequently be made available on the internet.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Annual Tax Returns

Mr. Winnick: To ask the President of the Council if she will consult with representatives of political parties in the House on the feasibility of requiring hon. Members to submit their annual tax returns to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards. [116096]

Mrs. Beckett: No. Financial affairs of Members which are unrelated to their parliamentary activity are not a matter for the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, nor do they form part of her remit from this House.

Pension Scheme

Mr. Winnick: To ask the President of the Council if she will ask the authorities of the Members' Pension Scheme to increase the pensions of those former hon. Members who receive the lowest levels of pensions under the Members' Pension Scheme. [116095]

Mrs. Beckett: The Senior Salaries Review Body periodically reviews arrangements for Parliamentary pensions. Recent reviews have made recommendations for scheme improvements but have advised that these changes should be restricted to serving Members. This is because it is a long-standing policy of successive administrations not to make retrospective improvements to public service pension schemes, although the Members' Fund exists to

relieve individual cases of hardship among former Members and their dependants. Applications for assistance should be made to the Trustees.

DEFENCE

Zinc Cadmium Sulphide

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what progress has been made on the independent review by Academy of Medical Sciences of the open-air trials in the UK using zinc cadmium sulphide carried out by the former Chemical Defence Establishment between 1953 and 1964. [116659]

Dr. Moonie: I am pleased to announce that Professor Lachmann and his team have now completed their review and reported. The study compared the population's possible exposure to cadmium from the open-air releases during the trails conducted between 1953 and 1964, to the cadmium exposure which people would otherwise have encountered from the environment. The material used for the trials was zinc cadmium sulphide, which is not itself an agent of biological or chemical warfare. It was used as a tracer to simulate the dispersion in the open air of biological warfare agents.

The Ministry of Defence welcomes the main conclusion of the report that there was no danger to public health arising from the use of zinc cadmium sulphide for the trials. The report also concludes that there was no evidence to show that the land based trials produced any higher level of cadmium concentrations in the soil than would normally be observed in the UK. Nor was there any evidence to show that cadmium released into the atmosphere during the airborne trials would have caused any ill effects. No increased incidence of diseases associated with cadmium toxicity was found in the areas where the trials took place.

The report by Professor Lachmann and his team is being published and I will arrange for copies to be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Radio Systems

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to develop a UK-manufactured radio system to replace AN/PRC-138 125W HF radios. [115541]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Robert Walmsley to Mr. Mike Hancock dated 24 March 2000:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence on what plans he has to develop a UK-manufactured radio system to replace the AN/PRC-138 125W HF radios previously acquired by the Ministry of Defence. This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

The AN/PRC-138 HF radio equipment with 125W power amplifiers was acquired to meet an Urgent Operational Requirement (UOR) for a secure data messaging capability in support of operations in the Balkans. This capability will be superseded when the BOWMAN HF data radio is introduced into service. There are no plans to develop another system in the interim.

Blankets

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) how many blankets have been declared surplus to requirements by each of the armed forces in each of the last 10 years; [115805]

(2) how many surplus blankets have been *(a)* sold, *(b)* destroyed and *(c)* donated to aid agencies and charitable organisations in each of the last 10 years; and if he will make a statement. [115806]

Dr. Moonie: Comprehensive records for the last 10 years on the gifting, destruction or sales of surplus blankets are not available. Information that is available shows that since 1995, surplus blankets have been collected from Service depots by a Disposal Sales Agency (DSA) appointed contractor for marketing and sale. The contractor estimates that some 160,000 blankets were declared to them during this period but is unable accurately to break this estimate down by year or by Service. Almost all the blankets collected by the DSA appointed contractor over the five years have been sold. Prior to 1995, surplus blankets were delivered to auction site by Service transport and then lotted by auctioneers prior to sale. Records for the number of blankets sold by public auction between 1990 and 1995 are no longer available.

Military Support (EU Member States)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is his policy on the commitment of military support to other EU member states proposed by the President of the European Commission on 10 February; and what representations he has made on the issue to the Commission. [115560]

Dr. Moonie: Collective defence of those EU member states who are also members of NATO is provided by NATO in accordance with Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. This will not change. There is no such provision for countries that are not NATO members.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence has not made any representations to the Commission on this matter.

Zimbabwe

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which British Army personnel *(a)* have served during the last six months and *(b)* are currently serving, in Zimbabwe; and for what purpose. [115931]

Mr. Spellar: A total of 11 (nine British Army and two RAF) UK military personnel currently serve in Zimbabwe as part of the British Military Advisory and Training Team (BMATT) Southern Africa. On one occasion in the past six months the BMATT was augmented for a two week period by a further four British Army personnel to assist in the running of a training programme.

The BMATT's main role is to provide regional peacekeeping training in countries throughout the Southern Africa region.

In addition, two Army personnel (the UK Defence Adviser and his assistant) provide advice to the British High Commissioner in Harare on defence issues.

Married Quarters

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what has been *(a)* the rise or *(b)* the fall in demand for each grade 8 married quarters, in each quarter since January 1997. [113759]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 13 March 2000]:* The number of married quarters of each type occupied at the beginning of each quarter since January 1997 is as follows:

Number of occupied properties

	Type								
	I	*II*	*III*	*IV*	*V*	*D*	*C*	*B*	*Total*
1–1997	70	329	1,791	3,263	4,868	3,225	24,804	14,258	52,608
2–1997	69	346	1,809	3,244	4,833	3,232	24,711	14,047	52,291
3–1997	67	342	1,819	3,206	4,842	3,257	24,408	13,914	51,855
4–1997	66	345	1,800	3,241	4,764	3,248	24,145	13,777	51,386
1–1998	67	336	1,804	3,254	4,651	3,281	23,848	13,402	50,643
2–1998	65	335	1,814	3,307	4,597	3,308	23,718	12,984	50,128
3–1998	65	343	1,799	3,346	4,640	3,256	23,591	12,794	49,834
4–1998	65	331	1,778	3,311	4,640	3,207	23,289	12,765	49,386
1–1999	65	336	1,769	3,317	4,577	3,167	23,112	12,509	48,852
2–1999	68	344	1,776	3,330	4,640	3,235	23,083	12,421	48,897
3–1999	67	344	1,774	3,402	4,690	3,221	22,967	12,444	48,909
4–1999	67	331	1,757	3,320	4,608	3,169	22,870	12,419	48,541

Reserves

Mr. Viggers: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the hon. Member for Gosport will receive the letter on reserve categories and capacities promised by the Minister of State for the Armed Forces in his holding answer of 15 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 215W. [106322]

Mr. Spellar: I wrote to the hon. Member yesterday and a copy of my letter has been placed in the Library of the House.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Viggers: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the hon. Member for Gosport will receive a substantive reply to his Parliamentary Question 102828, tabled on 10 December. [109591]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 11 February 2000]:* I wrote to the hon. Member yesterday and a copy of my letter has been placed in the Library of the House.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Slaughterhouses

Mr. Hurst: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the methods for charging and the cost of hygiene and veterinary inspections of slaughterhouses in other EU countries. [114948]

Ms Quin: In late 1998, we carried out a survey of meat inspection charges in other member states via our Agricultural Attachés in those countries. The Meat and Livestock Commission subsequently carried out a separate inquiry (the Pratt Report) into meat inspection charges and other enforcement costs. Both have been published and copies are available in the Library of the House.

Copies have also been provided to the European Commission. The Government have made clear to the Commission their concerns over the lack of transparency in the charging arrangements applied in other member states and their doubts as to whether such charges are being set on a common basis throughout the European Union, in accordance with Community law.

My right hon. Friend the Minister and officials continue to press the Commission to carry out a thorough investigation of the way in which the EU Charges Directive has been implemented in all member states, and to establish the level of inspection charges in each country. We understand that, as a result, the Commission will shortly be issuing a questionnaire to all member states as the first stage of such an investigation.

Dairy Farming (Employment)

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many people are directly employed in dairy farming in the *(a)* United Kingdom and *(b)* Morecambe and Lunesdale constituency. [115717]

Ms Quin: The total number of people working on dairy holdings in the UK is 81,027.

The total number of people working on dairy holdings in the Morecambe and Lunesdale constituency is 387.

Notes:

1. Dairy holdings are those on which dairy is the predominant activity.

2. Data for England, Scotland and Wales are for main holdings only. Northern Ireland data relates to all active farm businesses.

Source:

June 1999 Agricultural and Horticultural census.

Dairy Produce

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps the Government are taking to promote the sale of British dairy produce. [115754]

Ms Quin: In response to calls from representatives of dairy farmers the Government are widening the remit of the Milk Development Council to allow it to engage in

the generic promotion of milk. The Milk Development Council is funded by a statutory levy paid by all milk produces in Great Britain.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

LEA Funding (Northumberland)

Mr. Alan Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much funding was awarded to the Northumberland local education authority in each year from 1997–98 to 1999–2000 in respect of *(a)* reduction in infant class sizes, broken down by (i) revenue and (ii) capital, *(b)* the National Grid for Learning, *(c)* literacy programmes, *(d)* numeracy programmes, *(e)* books for schools, *(f)* truancy initiatives, *(g)* school security, *(h)* Standards Fund, school effectiveness, *(i)* excellence in cities, *(j)* new deal for schools, *(k)* voluntary aided schools capital grant, *(l)* energy efficiency, *(m)* music programmes, *(n)* year six booster classes and *(o)* education standard spending assessment. [116013]

Ms Estelle Morris: The figures requested are shown in the following table. For Standards Fund grants, the figures include both the Government's and the local education authority's contribution where appropriate. The figures shown for Education Standard Spending Assessment also include provision for the authority's contribution to the Standards Fund.

£

Northumberland LEA allocations	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*
(a) Reduction of infant Class Size:			
(i) Class Size revenue (within SF in 1998–99 only)	n/a	324,000	766,000
(ii) Class Size Capital	n/a	224,000	896,834
(l) Energy efficiency Capital	n/a	103,000	n/a
(k) Voluntary Aided Schools Capital	287,000	259,000	203,000
(j) New Deal for Schools Capital	542,000	1,985,000	1,908,000
(o) Education Standard Spending Assessment'	114,394,966	123,314,681	129,270,536
(b) National Grid for Learning	n/a	489,288	525,000
(c) Literacy Programmes	0	344,687	420,552
(e) Books for Schools	194,100	193,473	386,946
(f) Truancy Initiatives	125,800	43,100	162,756
(g) School Security	168,400	168,630	173,105
(h) School Effectiveness	1,082,600	1,209,921	1,857,250
(i) Excellence in Cities	n/a	n/a	0
(m) Music Programmes	n/a	n/a	0
(n) Year six Booster Classes	n/a	68,901	230,534

' In 1997–98 £527 million was removed from Education Standard Spending at national level for the Nursery Voucher Scheme, when Nursery Vouchers are added back for comparability the 1997–98 SSA equates to £118,090,000.

Notes:

n/a = Not applicable

All figures are in Cash terms.

Threshold Status

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the average length of time it will take a primary school headteacher to assess an application for threshold status from a teacher. [116040]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Department has carried out a number of pilot studies with a variety of schools. These studies showed that the length of time required by a headteacher to assess an application varied depending on a variety of factors. These factors included the nature of the appraisal system in a school, the input provided by other members of staff and the extent to which headteachers used the Department's support materials.

Standards Fund Grant 35 will provide £20 million (at a 60 per cent. grant rate) to assist with the implementation of the new threshold assessment and performance management arrangements. Headteachers can use the Standards Fund grant to cover the costs associated with approved training or support activities. The grant has now been supplemented with a further £20 million (at a 100 per cent. grant rate). The intention of this additional support is to allow schools to free up time for key members of staff to participate in the assessment of threshold applications and in the preparations for the new performance management arrangements.

Local Initiatives

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what was the annual expenditure on centrally financed local initiatives in the *(a)* Northern, *(b)* Yorkshire and Humberside and *(c)* North-West Region for each of the last five years. [114905]

Mr. Wills: Many of the Department's programmes could be considered as centrally financed local initiatives. The following table gives details of planned expenditure in the North-East, Yorkshire and the Humber and North-West Government Office regions on some of the Department's area-based initiatives. None of these programmes were running before 1997–98.

£ million

Programme	Year	Government office region: North-East	Yorkshire and the Humber	North-West
Education Action Zones	1998–99	1.303	1.811	1.288
	1990–2000	2.868	4.309	2.951
Employment Zones	1998–99	0.672	0	1.402
	1999–2000	1.507	0.254	3.405
Information, Advice and Guidance	1999–2000	0.325	0.776	0.952
Inward Investment	1998–99	0.254	0.014	0
	1999–2000	0.077	0.011	0.236
Millennium Volunteers	1999–2000	0.117	0.188	0.354
New Start	1997–2000	1.100	1.100	1.700 c
Skills Development Fund	1999–2000	1.912	3.852	5.056
Skills Initiative supporting:				
Centre of Technology and Excellence	1998–99	2.823	4.086	5.513
Skills Challenge	1998–99	1.268	2.098	2.701
Sure Start	1999–2000	0.615	0.202	0.758
Union Learning Fund	1998–2000	0.150	0.750	0.850

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Accident Reduction Targets

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list those local authorities *(a)* which have met Government accident reduction targets and *(b)* which on current trends are (i) likely and (ii) unlikely to achieve them. [114889]

Mr. Hill: Earlier road safety targets were not established in such a way that local authorities were required to meet specific targets, so it is not possible to measure local authority performance in this way. The Road Safety Strategy, "Tomorrow's Roads—Safer for Everyone", includes new national casualty reduction targets to be met by 2010, which local authorities must reflect in their local casualty reduction targets. However, authorities have different road traffic casualty records which reflect their local circumstances and how well they have addressed these problems in the past. Those with a poor record should be setting themselves stringent targets, because they must make major improvements, while those with an already good record may not be able to achieve similar levels of casualty reduction. Whatever the local circumstances, local targets should be demanding and reflect the aims of the national targets. We will be monitoring performance and the publication of road safety Best Value Performance Indicators will give local people the ability to compare the performance of their authority with other authorities and to measure how it improves over time.

Road Haulage Companies

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will increase the required deposit to establish financial probity for road haulage companies from £5,000 to £20,000. [115084]

Mr. Hill: I refer my hon. Friend to my answer of 20 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 391W.

Driving Test Centres

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what improvements to levels of public service have been made in consequence of driving test centre closures. [115779]

Mr. Hill: Savings achieved from restructuring the test centre estate have helped to pay for £1.8 million invested in test centre improvements during 1999–2000 and the cost of the new driving test booking system.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the driving test centres which have remained open because the Driving Standards Agency has determined the costs of closure to its customers as too high; and if he will place details of the cost analysis in the Library. [115778]

Mr. Hill: No proposal to close a practical driving test centre has been abandoned on this basis.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the criteria which the Driving Standards Agency applies to the closure of its practical driving test centres, indicating when those criteria were *(a)* proposed and *(b)* implemented; and what were the factors which influenced the Driving Standards Agency to use such criteria. [115776]

Mr. Hill: Practical driving test centres must meet the operational needs of the Driving Standards Agency, including the viability of test routes, and provide a safe environment for staff and customers, all in a cost efficient manner. The criteria that apply to the location of test centres have evolved over time in the light of experience gained from earlier estate rationalisation cases, responses to the Agency's customer surveys, and following advice from independent property advisers.

When reviewing the Agency's property requirement, and considering possible test centre closures, the Agency needs to be assured that: average waiting time targets will continue to be met; if a test centre is to close, there are neighbouring centres with sufficient excess capacity to meet the anticipated demand, within a reasonable travel time; and candidates should not have to travel too far to take their test.

In denser populated areas of the country the vast majority of candidates will have a centre within a seven-mile radius. In the least densely populated areas of the country the vast majority of candidates will have a centre within a 30-mile radius. And in other areas the practical test centre should be located such that the vast majority of its candidates will have a centre within a 20-mile radius.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the Driving Standards Agency decided to analyse and quantify the costs to its customers of closing a driving test centre; and what methods the Agency uses to determine such costs. [115777]

Mr. Hill: The Driving Standards Agency normally consult interested parties about a proposal to close a driving test centre, including a cost benefit analysis. It is not, however, practicable to analyse the costs to individual customers of a proposed closure.

Driving Instructors

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans the Driving Standards Agency has to allow driving instructors the right of appeal against the result of a check test. [115780]

Mr. Hill: The Road Safety Strategy, "Tomorrow's Roads—Safer for Everyone", which was published on 1 March, announced that we intended to reform the supervision and appeals arrangements for driving instructors. The Driving Standards Agency will be consulting interested parties with proposals to ensure instructors cannot offer tuition when there is a risk to public safety. Appeals will be in the hands of an independent tribunal.

Byker Heat Station

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the Environment Agency has approved the variation in the operating licence of the Byker Heat Station; and what assessment he has made of the possibility of consequential health effects to the people of Shieldfield, Newcastle Quayside or Lower Heaton. [115502]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 21 March 2000]:* The application for variation BH 2596 has not been approved. The local Health Authority has been consulted on this application. Further discussions are planned with the Health Authority regarding studies that could be made to investigate health effects from the operation of this process.

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what breaches of the present operating license for the Byker Heat Station, Newcastle, have recently been reported to him; and what is the outcome of his investigations. [115501]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 21 March 2000]:* The records have been checked back to the beginning of 1995. The operator has reported two breaches of the authorisation.

On 30 April 1995, a major grid power failure caused the process to run for 15 minutes without controls in place or monitoring facilities operational. A non-quantified release to air was made during that period. The then regulator HMIP took no action.

On 20 February 1997, dry lime powder was released during a road tanker delivery, due to failure of a seal on a hatch. The operator cleaned up the spillage and repaired the seal. No regulatory action was taken by the Environment Agency.

Coach Passenger Safety

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to improve the safety of coach passengers under the age of five years. [116001]

Mr. Hill: Currently minibuses and coaches used to carry more than three children aged between three and 15 on organised trips are required to be equipped with a forward facing seat fitted with a seat belt for each child carried. In addition to this it is planned, following a consultation, to make the fitting of seat belts compulsory in new buses, coaches and minibuses which are not permitted to carry standing passengers.

Pleasure Boats

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when details of the new Code of Practice governing passenger-carrying pleasure boats which come into force on 1 April were sent to *(a)* local authorities with enforcement responsibilities and *(b)* skippers of vessels affected by the Code of Practice. [116044]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 23 March 2000]:* The Code of Practice was developed with the advice and participation or organisations representing local authorities and skippers of vessels affected.

During the formal consultation in May 1998 interested parties, including each UK coastal authority, received a copy of the draft Code.

The Maritime and Coastguard Agency is currently undertaking a series of roadshows throughout the UK to further inform local authorities and vessel operators about the Code.

Transport Allocation

Mr. Jim Marshall: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how he intends to spend the additional resources allocated to transport in the Budget; and if he will make a statement. [116355]

Mr. Prescott: Following the announcement in the Budget of an extra £280 million for transport spending in the UK, I intend to make the following allocations in England:

£15 million for preparatory work on the £500 million extensions to the Manchester Metrolink, in accordance with the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd) on 22 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 549W.

£30 million as a contribution to the cost of extending the Docklands Light Railway to the City Airport, subject to statutory procedures.

£65 million to enable London Underground to enhance provision for escalator work and customer services across the network and improve overall frequency and reliability on the Northern, Central, District and Jubilee lines. We are also reviewing the investment programme for the core Underground to ensure it represents best value.

£14 million to abolish charges for bus passes for pensioners, so that they will not have to pay for a pass entitling them to bus travel at a maximum half fare under the provision in the Transport Bill.

£5 million extra for 20 new innovative bus schemes in rural areas.

£5 million to support child road safety education and information.

£30 million for local authorities to spend on schemes for child safety and safe routes to school, and small scale improvements including bus priority measures.

£3 million for preparatory work on four new road schemes (upgrading the A74 north of Carlisle to motorway standard, a bypass for Thorney on the A47 and dualling two sections of the A11 in Norfolk and Suffolk), subject to statutory procedures.

£20 million for 80 new schemes for safety and congestion stress points and other improvements on the trunk road network.

£16 million for a hold-up warning system to reduce accidents on our most congested sections of motorway.

£25 million to fund the acceleration of six road schemes already being progressed in the Highways Agency's Targeted Programme of Improvements.

£2 million for integrated transport projects applying new technology to public transport ticketing and improved traffic management in towns.

£5 million for local authorities to improve telephone information for passengers on local transport services.

£9 million to support the Powershift programme to promote cleaner fuel vehicles.

£6 million for cleaning up existing diesel buses and taxis in cities.

Ministerial Overseas Visits

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list his official foreign trips planned for the rest of the year, stating in each case the itinerary and the purpose of the visit. [116261]

Ms Beverley Hughes: It is not the normal practice of Governments to give details of forthcoming engagements.

Cumberland Gap

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will announce the start of construction on the Cumberland Gap. [107577]

Mr. Hill: Following the Road Review, a lower cost option for upgrading of the A74 between Carlisle and Guardsmill to motorway has been identified. We are today adding this scheme to our targeted programme of trunk road improvements and it will now be developed by the Highways Agency. Subject to the completion of statutory procedures the aim will be to let a contract for the scheme in 2004.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Anti-social Behaviour Orders

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many anti-social behaviour orders have been imposed in *(a)* Hertfordshire and *(b)* England and Wales. [116098]

Mr. Charles Clarke: As I said in my reply to the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins) on 21 February 2000, *Official Report*, column 824W, records of the numbers of anti-social behaviour orders applied for are not currently held centrally. We understand that about 30–35 orders have been made in England and Wales since the relevant provisions of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 came into force in April last year. None of these, as far as we are aware, have been in Hertfordshire.

Press Releases

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps he is taking to improve access times to his Department's press releases posted on the COI website; if he will place his Department's press releases on the main Home Office website when they are released; and if he will make a statement. [116259]

Mr. Straw: The Home Office press releases from January 2000 are now available on the main Home Office website. This means that Home Office press releases are now posted on the main departmental site on the day they are released. Previous press releases will remain on the Central Office of Information site with a link from the Home Office website.

Firearms

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will take steps to ban the sale of R-44 Magnum handguns to those without a Class 1 firearms licence. [116097]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Long barrelled firearms of this kind are already subject to Section 1 of the Firearms Act 1968. Anyone wishing to purchase such a firearm must obtain a firearm certificate from his local police. The police will issue a certificate if they are satisfied that the applicant has a good reason to wish to possess such a firearm and can be trusted to keep and use it without danger to public safety or to the peace. Simple possession of a Section 1 firearm without authority is a serious criminal offence carrying a maximum penalty of five years imprisonment.

Registered firearms dealers are required to keep detailed records of their purchase and sale of firearms. It is itself a criminal offence to transfer a firearm to an unauthorised person, carrying a maximum penalty of five years imprisonment.

Peace-keeping Missions

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on continuing discussions at European Council level regarding the deployment of police forces in peace-keeping missions. [115578]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The European Council agreed at Helsinki last December that, in support of the Common Foreign and Security Policy, the European Union should be able to resort to the whole range of instruments from diplomatic activity, humanitarian assistance and economic measures to civilian policing and military crisis management options (Annexe IV of the Presidency Conclusions).

Follow-up discussion are now under way in European Union subsidiary bodies. Her Majesty's Government will seek the closest possible co-operation among the

European Union, the Organisation on Security and Co-operation in Europe and the United Nations in civilian policing.

Public Bodies

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the expenditure incurred by his Department, agencies and non-departmental public bodies on *(a)* the setting up and *(b)* the operation of websites, indicating the cases in which the expenditure has been above that budgeted; and if he will list for each website (i) the topics covered, (ii) the average number of hits per month and (iii) the estimated expenditure on each website for each of the next three years. [115088]

Mr. Straw: The available information for the websites of the Home Office and its executive agencies is shown in the table. Staff costs are not included and the figures are approximate in some cases. The non-departmental public bodies have set up their own websites independently of the Home Office in most cases. The information requested for these bodies is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

	Home Office	*Fire Service College*	*Forensic Science Service*	*Prison Service*	*UK Passport Agency*
Expenditure on setting up website	£1,000 approx. (in-house development costs, 1995–96)	£4,000 approx. (in-house development costs, 1999–2000)	Less than £5,000 (in-house development costs, 1998)	£34,780 (site design costs, 1999)	£20,000 (site design costs, 2000)
Operation of website: cost per year (current)	£17,575	£1,000 approx.	£10,000	£3,000	£9,000
Topics covered	The subjects covered by the Home Office	The work of the Fire Service College	The work of the Forensic Science Service	The work of the Prison Service	The work of the UK Passport Agency
Current average number of hits (page impressions) per month (approx.)	1,036,700	2,034 (first month, site is not yet widely advertised)	30,000	91,600	211,200
Estimated expenditure for next 3 years: cost per year	£17,575	£3,000 approx.	2000–01: £20,000 2001–02: £10,000 2002–03: £15,000	£3,000	£9,000

Jonathan Woodgate and Lee Bowyer Case

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will order a report from the Chief Constable of the Yorkshire Constabulary on the reasons why Jonathan Woodgate and Lee Bowyer were afforded special arrangements to attend their court hearing on 17 March by entering the court building via the neighbouring police station; and if he will make a statement. [115807]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I understand that the decision was taken in order to avoid possible risks to public order and the safety of the accused persons and others; and to prevent any prejudice to the legal proceedings arising from publicity at the entrance to the court.

WALES

Elected Mayors

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has had with the Deputy Prime Minister with regard to the introduction of elected mayors in Wales. [115580]

Mr. Paul Murphy: My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State and I meet Whitehall colleagues on a regular basis to discuss a wide range of issues, including the proposals for the introduction of elected mayors.

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has had with the First Secretary with regard to the introduction of elected mayors in Wales. [115582]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I meet the First Secretary regularly when we discuss a range of issues, including local government issues. Our discussions have covered the Local Government Bill, which provides for new executive structures in England and Wales, including the option of an elected mayor.

TREASURY

Working Families Tax Credit

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if student loans are considered as income for the purpose of claiming Working Families Tax Credit. [115722]

Dawn Primarolo: Student loans are considered as income for the purpose of assessing entitlement to Working Families Tax Credit, subject to certain flat-rate income disregards.

£10 a week of the student loan is disregarded as income, as are the £250, and £303 a year included in the loan for the cost of travelling, and books and equipment, respectively.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

British-produced Films

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many British-produced films were made in the UK in 1999. [115919]

Janet Anderson: There were 72 UK-produced films and UK-majority co-productions shot mainly or wholly in the UK in 1999. In addition, there were a further six films that had some UK-producer involvement.

Athletics Stadium

Mr. Faber: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if it is his policy that any Lottery grant made by Sport England for a venue for the 2005 World Athletics Championships should comply with the financial and policy directions which he has issued to Sport England. [116099]

Kate Hoey: All Lottery awards should comply with the Directions issued by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, which are in force at the time of signing any associated Lottery Funding Agreement.

Mr. Faber: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, pursuant to his answer of 15 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 250W, on the Athletics Stadium, if he will list the criteria agreed by his Department, the Government Office for London, UK Sport, UK Athletics, the 2005 Bid Team and the British Olympic Association concerning a venue for the 2005 World Athletics Championships. [116126]

Kate Hoey: Sport England submitted an evaluation to my Department of a number of sites in London against the following criteria: site compatibility; location; potential to be part of an Olympic bid; regeneration potential; transportation; planning issues; cost; and ownership structure. We are now considering this work with all the parties involved. I have also placed copies of the brief submitted by UK Athletics in the Libraries of the House.

Millennium Dome

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) how much Live Productions are being paid for their role in the opening ceremony of the Dome; if the penalty clause in their contract has been activated; and if he will make a statement; [104523]

(2) if he will set out the remuneration package for Michael Lockett in respect of his role as Project Director for the opening ceremony of the Dome, including details of bonus payment arrangements. [104522]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 13 January 2000]:* Early on in the considerations about the Dome Opening Celebration (DOC) NMEC decided that the event should be developed and managed in-house. The main factors influencing this decision concerned security, budget and the need to work closely with many of NMEC's existing creative and technical team whose duties also included delivery of the public opening of the Dome on 1 January. Mr. Michael Lockett (Chairman, Live Communication) was consultant project director. Fixed monthly fees were negotiated for Mr. Lockett and for those of his staff who supported him. NMEC established from the outset that the agreed fixed fees compare favourably with those applying in the major event organisation market. In developing and managing the delivery of the DOC, Mr. Lockett and his team worked as an integral part of NMEC's in-house team. Bonus payments are not applicable to any of the Live Communication personnel; final payment for the DOC work they undertook is being made following the normal process of invoice approval by the client. The contract is subject to normal resolution procedures.

Peat Compost

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will estimate the amount of peat compost used in the last year by *(a)* Historic Royal Palaces, *(b)* the Royal Parks Agency and *(c)* English Heritage; and if he will make a statement. [115718]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The amount of peat compost used in the last year by these bodies is as follows:

(a) Historic Royal Palaces used 36 cubic metres of peat. This is approximately 50 per cent. less peat than was used 10 years ago.

(b) The Royal Parks Agency did not use any pure peat. However, in two of the Royal Parks the Agency did make use of a compost which had peat as a sub component. The volume of peat involved was minimal and unquantifiable.

(c) English Heritage used 20 cubic metres of peat. This is expected to drop to seven cubic metres next year.

Wembley Stadium

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, pursuant to his answer of 17 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 370W, on Wembley Stadium, how many revised proposals were received by January 2000. [116042]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 23 March 2000]:* Wembley National Stadium Ltd. (WNSL) has responsibility for the development and operation of the new National Stadium. They have told us that following the invitation to three contractors to submit revised proposals by January 2000, two bidders declined to bid except on a construction management or other non-conforming basis. The remaining bidder, although non-compliant, was invited to enter into negotiation for appointment as the preferred contractor for a period of 20 weeks. I have asked Sport England to confirm that they are happy with the appointment under the terms of the Lottery funding agreement.

Lotteries

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what recent discussions he has had with interested parties about establishing a lottery for London. [115942]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 23 March 2000]:* My Department has received no formal representations on this issue.

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has to extend the current regulatory provisions relating to the promotion of the National Lottery to regionally based lotteries. [115933]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 23 March 2000]:* The Government have no current plans to do so.

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what undertakings in respect of exclusivity were given to applicants for the National Lottery franchise renewal. [115934]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 23 March 2000]:* Issues relating to the procedures for the award of the National Lottery licence are a matter for the National Lottery Commission. Under the National Lottery etc. Act 1993 there can be only one body licensed to run the National Lottery at any one time.

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will undertake an assessment on the likely impact of a lottery for London on the funds available to the National Lottery distribution bodies. [115935]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 23 March 2000]:* The Government have no current plans to undertake such an assessment.

Television Licences (Prosecution)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many people were prosecuted for not having a television licence in the United Kingdom in 1999. [115552]

Janet Anderson: I understand from the BBC that there were 76,524 prosecutions for television licence evasion in the United Kingdom in 1999.

HEALTH

Cigarette Consumption

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the impact on cigarette consumption of the withdrawal of Gratis points; and if he will make a statement. [114530]

Yvette Cooper: No separate assessment has been made of the impact on cigarette consumption from withdrawal of Gratis points. We have estimated that the ban on advertising, promotion and sponsorship of tobacco will result in a 2.5 per cent. reduction in consumption. This would mean that about 3,000 lives a year could be saved in the long term.

Natal Intensive Care Unit

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what provision has been made by the Neo-Natal In-services Commissioning investigation for NHS North Thames Region in their examination of the most suitable locations for natal intensive care unit services in the region, for audit of the cost and current usage data being submitted to them by the individual trusts. [114572]

Yvette Cooper: The London Regional Office of the National Health Service Executive was established on 1 January 1999 and this covers most of the health authorities of the old North Thames Region. Under the auspices of the London Regional Specialised Commissioning Group, a consortium of London health authorities has recently been established to commission neo-natal intensive care services for the residents of London.

This new consortium is gathering information about the cost and volume of neo-natal intensive care activity currently provided by NHS trusts in order to identify the amount of money needed from health authority budgets to fund the required level of service.

Information provided by trusts is being cross-checked with information provided by health authorities to ensure that appropriate levels of service are funded to meet the needs of the London population. The consortium is not at this stage considering changes to the configuration of neo-natal intensive care services.

Oncology Consultants

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* clinical and *(b)* medical oncology consultants there are per 100,000 population for each health authority in England; and if he will make a statement. [115190]

Yvette Cooper: The latest available information is shown in the table.

Number of hospital medical consultants in clinical oncology and medical oncology, per 100,000 population by health authority in England at 30 September 1998

Numbers per 100,000 population

Health authority	*Clinical oncology*	*Medical oncology*
England	1.37	0.66
Avon	0.90	0.10
Barking and Havering	1.04	0.00
Bedfordshire	0.18	0.00
Berkshire	0.37	0.00
Bexley and Greenwich	0.00	0.23
Birmingham	0.89	0.69
Bradford	0.00	0.41
Calderdale and Kirklees	0.17	0.00
Cambridge and Huntingdon	1.92	0.85
Camden and Islington	1.63	2.45
Coventry	1.97	0.00
Dorset	0.72	0.43
Ealing, Hammersmith and Hounslow	1.94	0.60
East Kent	0.00	0.67
East London and The City	0.82	0.16
East Norfolk	0.32	0.32
East Riding	0.52	0.00
East Sussex	0.67	0.00
Enfield and Haringey	0.82	0.00
Gateshead and South Tyneside	0.00	0.85
Gloucester	0.90	0.18
Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster	3.33	1.54
Kingston and Richmond	0.30	0.00
Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham	1.21	0.94
Leeds	2.34	0.82
Leicestershire	0.65	0.00
Lincolnshire	0.96	0.00
Liverpool	0.00	0.22
Manchester	4.19	0.93
Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth	0.00	0.48
Morecambe Bay	0.00	0.32
Newcastle and North Tyneside	2.55	0.00
North Cumbria	0.63	0.00
North Essex	0.56	0.00
North Staffordshire	0.64	0.00
North West Anglia	0.24	0.24
North West Lancashire	1.07	0.21
Northamptonshire	0.81	0.00
Northumberland	0.00	0.32
Nottingham	0.78	0.31
Oxfordshire	1.46	0.65
Portsmouth and South East Hampshire	0.92	0.00
Salford and Trafford	0.00	0.45
Sheffield	1.88	0.56
Shropshire	0.46	0.00
South and West Devon	0.85	0.00
South Essex	0.56	0.00
Southampton and South West Hamptonshire	1.29	0.92
Suffolk	0.60	0.00
Tees	1.08	0.00
West Hertfordshire	3.18	0.00

Number of hospital medical consultants in clinical oncology and medical oncology, per 100,000 population by health authority in England at 30 September 1998

Numbers per 100,000 population

Health authority	*Clinical oncology*	*Medical oncology*
West Kent	0.51	0.10
West Surrey	0.94	0.00
West Sussex	0.00	0.13
Wiltshire	0.17	0.50
Wirral	3.67	1.53
Wolverhampton	1.66	0.41
Worcester	0.00	0.19

Note:
Figures per 100,000 population are based on 1998 mid year population estimates
Source:
Department of Health medical and dental workforce census

Breast Screening

Ms Perham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he plans to introduce the new class of scientific screening officers for the NHS breast screening programme. [115225]

Yvette Cooper: We are currently considering with the professional bodies the capacity and workforce of the breast screening programme, in view of the growing numbers of women eligible for breast screening as those born in the post-war years reach the age of 50. Our first priority is to maintain the quality of the screening programme, and while alternative staffing arrangements are under consideration no change will be introduced until we can be confident that the quality of screening will continue at its current high standard.

Cancer Treatment Waiting Times

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress is being made on reducing waiting times for cancer treatment. [115196]

Yvette Cooper: We are determined to reduce cancer waiting times for diagnosis and treatment. In April 1999, we introduced a two-week waiting time standard for patients referred urgently by their general practitioners with suspected breast cancer. Since then, over 56,000 women have benefited by seeing a specialist within two weeks. We will introduce this high standard of care for all other urgent cases of suspected cancer by the end of this year.

We are also introducing "On the spot" style booking systems for cancer treatment through the Cancer Services Collaborative. This £6 million initiative will significantly improve patient care by streamlining and re-designing care from referral through diagnosis and treatment thus reducing delays at every stage.

Heart Operations

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what measures he will take to increase the number of heart operations in 2000. [115114]

Yvette Cooper: Heart disease remains a huge health burden to the country and is the biggest single cause of premature death. That is why on 6 March we launched a radical and far-reaching 10-year programme of action to transform the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of coronary heart disease. The National Service Framework will help save 200,000 lives by 2010.

As a first step, on 18 October my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced a £50 million boost to cardiac surgery to increase the number of heart operations by 3,000 by April 2002 by making maximum use of the capacity that currently exists in the National Health Service.

Bed Availability

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many beds were available *(a)* nationally and *(b)* in London in each year from 1979 to 1999. [115103]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is available in the table.

Average daily number of available beds open overnight, England 1979 to 1998–99 and London regional office area 1984 to 1998–99

Year	*England*	*London regional office area*
1979	361,670	—
1980	355,978	—
1981	351,669	—
1982	348,104	—
1983	343,091	—
1984	334,513	57,766
1985	325,487	55,518
1986	315,714	53,029
1987–88	297,338	49,403
1988–89	282,897	47,040
1989–90	270,309	44,810
1990–91	255,479	39,042
1991–92	242,677	38,914
1992–93	232,201	37,586
1993–94	219,476	35,294
1994–95	211,812	32,815
1995–96	206,136	32,683
1996–97	198,848	31,763
1997–98	193,625	31,210
1998–99	190,006	30,604

Source:
DH form KH03 and SH3

Data are collected by individual NHS trusts or units. Figures for earlier years have been aggregated to reflect the London Regional Office area introduced in 1998–99. Aggregation is not possible prior to 1984 as raw data are not available.

Microbial Antibiotic Resistance

Ms Southworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what conclusions he has reached on the recommendations made by the Advisory Committee for the Microbiological Safety of Food in their report on Microbial Antibiotic Resistance in relation to food safety which was published in August 1999. [116483]

Ms Stuart: The Government have given careful consideration to all the recommendations of the Advisory Committee on the Microbiological Safety of Food and have accepted those that call for Government action. For the other recommendations, the regulations that are already in place or the activities that are under way have been outlined in the Government's response.

The response to the report highlights the importance the Government attach to the issue of antimicrobial resistance. Additionally, it indicates the considerable amount of work that is already under way in this field to prevent, reduce or delay the development of antimicrobial resistance in food-producing animals. This includes a number of research and development projects in this area, funding for which will amount to £3.7 million over the next three years. The results from these projects will direct future policy decisions and thus further minimise the risk to public health.

Copies of the Government's response have been placed in the Library.

Breast Cancer

Mrs. Mahon: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on genetic testing relating to women who may be pre-disposed to develop breast cancer; and to what extent the results of such tests will be confidential. [115938]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 23 March 2000]:* Gene testing is only appropriate for the small minority of women who have a strong family history of breast cancer. Less than 5 per cent. of cases of breast cancer are linked to known genes. Counselling by National Health Service regional genetics centres, in liaison with other specialities, will enable women and their clinicians to determine whether genetic testing is required. In 1998–99, 15 regional genetic centres undertook a total of just under 1,200 tests for the predisposition to breast cancer.

Genetic test results are an important part of the clinical record and, as such, are covered by normal restrictions on the storage and release of confidential medical records. The Advisory Committee on Genetic Testing has issued guidance on the requirements for genetic testing for breast cancer and other disorders which appear later in life.

Chelation Therapy

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to authorise the use of chelation therapy in the National Health Service. [99274]

Yvette Cooper: Various forms of chelation therapy are licensed for use in this country for the treatment of a number of different diseases, eg Wilson's disease (a form of liver disease) and some forms of metal poisoning.

There are some proponents of the use of a particular intravenous form of this drug, called Ethylene diamine tetra acetic chelation therapy, for the treatment of cardiovascular disease. There is no objective evidence from large research trials that this therapy helps in general in the treatment of cardiovascular disease. At present chelating drugs licensed under the Medicines Act are licensed for various indications but none are licensed for use in treating heart and arterial disease, apart from in clinical trials. In the absence of good evidence of clinical effectiveness it would not be appropriate for the Department to recommend the use of chelation therapy for the treatment of coronary heart disease within the National Health Service.

Staff Bonuses

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much his Department, its agencies and associated public bodies spent in total on extra bonuses above usual payments for staff working over the new year period; what were the *(a)* maximum and *(b)* minimum bonuses paid; how many people received the (i) maximum and (ii) minimum payments; and if he will make a statement. [104481]

Yvette Cooper: The Department, its agencies and associated public bodies have to date authorised a total of £13,350 on payments to staff who worked over the new year period; the maximum bonus paid was £150 and the minimum £75. Fifty-one people received the maximum and 76 the minimum.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Israel

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps he has taken to ascertain whether, (1) prior to the conclusion of an internationally recognised final settlement ending Israel's occupation of the territories it has occupied since 1967, parties to international agreements with Israel can permit their agreements to be implemented in a manner which treats any part of those occupied territories as falling within the territory of the State of Israel without themselves contravening public international law; [115194]

(2) extending the benefits of trade preferences to enterprises established by Israeli nationals in the territories occupied by Israel since 1967 *(a)* de jure and *(b)* de facto would, prior to the conclusion of an internationally recognised final settlement ending Israel's occupation, contravene the duties on the UK and its European partners under Article 1 of the Fourth Geneva Convention. [115195]

Mr. Hain: Great care is taken to avoid contravening international law, including the Fourth Geneva Convention.

Exports (Sudan)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will take steps to restrict further exports to Sudan by Weir Pumps Ltd. and Allen Engineering until a peace agreement is reached there; and if he will make a statement. [116035]

Mr. Hain: There is an EU arms embargo, which we expect to remain for as long as the civil war continues. The export of oil pipeline pumps and ancillary equipment is not generally subject to control. We will continue to give frank and full advice to interested companies in the Sudanese oil sector.

We have pressed the Government of Sudan to use its oil revenues for development projects and to show transparency in its oil accounts. It has given public assurances to that effect.

Peace in the Sudan remains a priority. The UK has been and will continue to be, active in promoting peace in the Sudan.

Nuclear Materials (Exports)

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what correspondence has taken place between the British Embassy in Washington DC and Her Majesty's Government since October 1982 in respect of the export and import of special nuclear materials between the United Kingdom and the United States; and if he will place in the Library copies of correspondence with any national-security-sensitive information redacted. [116268]

Mr. Hain: Any correspondence of this nature is covered by Exemption 1a (Information whose disclosure would harm national security or defence), and b (Information whose disclosure would harm the conduct of international relations or affairs) and Exemption 2 (Information whose disclosure would harm the frankness and candour of internal discussion) of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information. It is the long-standing practice of successive Governments that such information is not released.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Disability Living Allowance

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how GPs' assessments for Disability Living Allowance are monitored; and what action his Department takes when dealing with general practitioners against whose decisions a high number of successful appeals are submitted. [116003]

Angela Eagle: Assessment of claimants to Disability Living Allowance is carried out at the request of Benefits Agency decision makers, by Examining Medical Practitioners (EMPs). The EMP's report forms part of the medical evidence used in making a decision on the claim.

Decisions on entitlement to Disability Living Allowance are made by Benefits Agency decision makers. In formulating their decision they take account of all the evidence before them, including the claimant's self assessment claim pack and any available evidence from the claimant's medical carer or other health professionals associated with the case. This is in addition to the consideration given to an EMP's report.

There is no direct correlation between the standard of an EMP's report and the outcome of an appeal. The Appeals Panel makes an independent judgment, again based on all the evidence before it, which may include supplementary evidence not previously submitted to the decision maker.

EMPs undertake work on behalf of Sema Group Medical Services, who hold the contract for the provision of medical services to the Benefits Agency. Doctors who work in this capacity are approved by the Chief Medical Adviser to the Department. The standard of EMP reports is monitored by experienced doctors in Medical Services. If an EMP's work is found to be below the required standard, the EMP is retrained as appropriate and further monitoring is carried out. If an EMP's work remains persistently substandard despite retraining, the Chief Medical Adviser can withdraw approval for the doctor to carry out the work.

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many complaints he has received during the last 12 months about the actions of medical examiners employed by Sema in cases of claims for Disability Living Allowance. [115653]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 22 March 2000]:* The information is not available in the format requested. Records are not kept in a format which would identify the number of complaints received by the Secretary of State about the actions of medical examiners employed by Sema in cases of claims for Disability Living Allowance.

Such information as is available is as follows: In the period 1 December 1998 to 30 November 1999, Sema Group Medical Services received a total of 1,701 complaints concerning medical examinations undertaken in connection with claims for Attendance Allowance and Disability Living Allowance. This figure includes those complaints made via the Secretary of State.

ONE Pilots

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the impact of the results of the ONE pilots on the proposed restructuring of the Benefits Agency in Liverpool, Mersey District. [115845]

Angela Eagle: The ONE pilots, which are operating in 12 parts of the country, do not currently affect Liverpool, Mersey District. No decisions have been made about whether to extend the service nationally. However, the Department for Education and Employment and this Department are currently working jointly on the design and development of a new agency for delivering labour market and benefit services for people of working age, and this will provide a better framework for delivering all of our welfare to work initiatives—in Liverpool, as well as in the rest of the country.

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the progress made with ONE pilots. [115846]

Angela Eagle: All 12 of the ONE pilots are making good progress in helping people plan ways to become independent. The level of service we provide has also been improved by the Benefits Agency, Employment Service, local authorities and private and voluntary sector bodies working in partnership.

Although it is too early to judge the level of success, we are already helping people move from welfare into work and the initial response from clients using the new service has been very encouraging.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Renewable Energy Research

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what was the budget allocation for renewable energy research made by his Department for each year from 1989–90 to 1999–2000; and what is his Department's expected expenditure for 2000–01. [115382]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 21 March 2000]:* Spend under the DTI New and Renewable Energy Programme, including research, development, dissemination and demonstration for the indicated years is shown in the table.

Year	*£ million*
1989–90	17.9
1990–91	20.8
1991–92	24.8
1992–93	25.5
1993–94	25.2
1994–95	19.1
1995–96	18.18
1996–97	[1]14.8
1997–98	[1]10.9
1998–99	[1]9.6

[1] These figures allow for the payment and recovery of VAT

The budget allocation for 1999–2000, as announced in "New and Renewable Energy: Prospects for the 21st Century" (DTI, 1999), is £11.5 million. That for 2000–01 is £14 million and that for 2001–02 is £18 million.

In addition, the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council currently funds 61 grants with a total value of £8.1 million for research in renewable and clean electricity generation. This includes the design and development of new plant and machinery for renewable and clean electricity generation (e.g. hydro, wave, solar, wind, and fuel cells). The EPSRC also launched a managed programme in 1999 entitled "Renewable and New Energy Technologies". This funds research in biomass, tidal current, wave, wind, solar, fuel cells, hydropower and energy from waste; it is also funding associated technologies such as grid interconnection and energy storage and recovery.

The commitment for new grants from 1993–94 to 1999–2000 and that planned for 2000–01 is as follows:

Year	*£ million*
1993–94	1.6
1994–95	0.5
1995–96	1.9
1996–97	2.3
1997–98	3.1
1998–99	1.7
1999–2000	2.5
2000–01	2.5

Mineworkers' Pension Schemes

Mr. Cummings: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he has received in respect of the Mineworkers' Pension Schemes surpluses; and what the nature of the representations were. [115557]

Mrs. Liddell: I have received a number of representations on the subject of coal pension surpluses. Some have called for a re-examination of the guarantee/surplus sharing arrangements established in 1994 to safeguard members' pension entitlements; some have drawn attention to pension entitlements in respect of pre-1975 service, while others have urged greater access to early pensions.

Mr. Cummings: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations have been made to him by the trustees of the Mineworkers' Pension Schemes seeking renegotiation of the agreement relating to the 50 per cent. clawback by Government of the pension funds surpluses; and on what dates these representations were made. [115554]

Mrs. Liddell: I met the Chairman of the Trustees of the coal pension schemes on 20 January to discuss the proposals in the recent Coalfield Communities Campaign report "It's the Miners' Money", as well as alternative ways of building on the success of the schemes' investments.

The Trustees of the coal pension schemes (the British Coal Staff Superannuation Scheme and the Mineworkers' Pension Scheme) made no representations to me relating to renegotiation of the Government guarantee/surplus sharing arrangements established with the Schemes in 1994.

My Department is, however, in regular discussion with the Trustees over ways in which future benefits might be improved.

Mail Services

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what percentage of first-class mail was delivered the next day by the Royal Mail by constituency, in *(a)* 1996, *(b)* 1997, *(c)* 1998 and (b) 1999. [116077]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I understand from the Post Office that such data are not compiled on a parliamentary constituency basis. Quality of service statistics for first and second-class letters are published by postcode area in the Post Office Annual Report and Accounts, copies of which are laid annually in the Library of the House.

Super Jumbo Aircraft

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he made of the long-term demand for super jumbo aircraft prior to his proposed loan to BAe Systems. [115932]

Mr. Alan Johnson: In my Department there is a team which has considerable expertise in making forecast of the future demand for civil aircraft. They made an independent assessment of the likely demand for the A3XX, which concluded that there was a robust market case for this aircraft.

E-Commerce

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on progress in encouraging investment in e-commerce businesses in *(a)* Shropshire and *(b)* the West Midlands region in the last three years. [116047]

Mr. Caborn: Electronic Commerce lies at the heart of the Government's vision for building a modern, knowledge driven economy in the UK. Its importance to an area like Shropshire is recognised.

In September 1999, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister launched the PIU report "e-commerce@its.best.uk" which set out the vision and strategy for e-commerce. This built on target to make the

UK the best place in the world to trade electronically by 2002, set out in the Competitiveness White Paper "Our Competitive Future: Building the Knowledge-Driven Economy".

By 2002, this means 1.5 million SMEs connected and one million actually trading on-line, with a higher proportion of e-commerce to transactions and a higher proportion of Government services transacted through e-commerce than in the rest of G7.

In the West Midlands there are also a wide range of European Funded e-commerce related projects supporting the development of e-commerce businesses, benefiting Shropshire and elsewhere. In 1997 Business Link Shropshire was granted £100,000 to establish an Information Society Initiative Local Support Centre. This funding, spread over three years, has enabled the BL to advise and support local businesses in the introduction and use of ICT. This project has linked well with services available from the Business Link's Information Technology Adviser, who has been able to give expert advice to local companies on how to make the best use of IT and explain the benefits of e-commerce. In the last three years over 800 companies have received advice/support.

Manufacturing

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will assess the performance of manufacturing industry in *(a)* Shropshire and *(b)* the West Midlands region in the last 12 months; and if he will make a statement. [116048]

Ms Hewitt: At this stage, official figures relating to the economic performance of the regions and their sub-regions in 1999 are not available. However, we know from the most recent such figures that manufacturing industry continues to contribute a greater share of regional GDP and to provide a higher proportion of regional employment in the West Midlands than in any other region. We also know that manufacturing's share of employment in the combined areas of the county of Shropshire and the Telford and Wrekin Unitary Authority is significantly above the national average, and that GDP per head (96 per cent. of the national average) in this area is higher than that in the West Midlands region as a whole (94 per cent. of the national average).

Business surveys conducted in the West Midlands region in the latter part of 1999 all point to an improved outlook for manufacturing industry. The most recent editions of the West Midlands Regional Group of Chambers' Quarterly Economic Survey, the West Midlands Business Survey, the CBI's Regional Trends Survey and the Engineering Employers Federation West Midlands Business Trends Survey all reported improvements in manufacturing sales and orders, along with a strengthening in confidence among the region's manufacturing sector when compared to their findings in surveys conducted in late 1998 and early 1999. These results are broadly in line with the findings of national business surveys and reflects the renewed growth in UK manufacturing output during the second half of 1999.

Internet

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many people have access from *(a)* home to the internet and *(b)* their workplace to the Internet; and if he will make a statement. [116050]

Ms Hewitt: The most recent official figures show that 62 per cent. of businesses in the UK are connected to the internet[1] and 10 per cent. of households have access to the internet[2].

Achieving universal access to the internet is a priority for Government, and the Prime Minister has announced a target for achieving it by 2005. Meeting this target is vital if we are to create a successful, inclusive knowledge-based economy.

Sources:

[1] International Benchmarking Study 1999, DTI

[2] Family Expenditure Survey 1999, ONS

Small Business Service

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the role of the Small Business Service. [115862]

Ms Hewitt: The Small Business Service, which will come into being on 3 April 2000, will provide a strong voice for small business at the heart of Government, improve the quality and coherence of support for small businesses and help small firms on regulation.

The SBS will deliver a number of services nationally and establish a network of franchises to deliver high quality business support for small firms at a local level. David Irwin, the Chief Executive will have the right to be consulted on all new Government legislation presented to Parliament that is likely to affect small businesses. This includes monitoring and commenting on regulatory impact assessments from the perspective of small businesses.

Gas-fired Power Stations

Shona McIsaac: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many applications there have been for the construction of new gas-fired power stations since the imposition of the moratorium; how many have been given approval; and how many are outstanding. [114157]

Mrs. Liddell: Since the October 1998 White Paper, 19 applications for the construction of new gas-fired power stations have been received. Forty-eight applications were under consideration at the time of the White Paper, of which four were subsequently withdrawn. Eighteen proposals have been approved since October 1998, mainly for combined heat and power projects. Fifteen proposals have been deferred and a further 30 proposals are at various stages of consideration.

Nuclear Installations (Safety)

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many special safety inspection visits have been paid to *(a)* Sellafield and *(b)* Dounreay by environmental safety experts from the Euratom Agency in each year since 1990; and if he will place copies of reports in the Library. [115359]

Mrs. Liddell: The Euratom Treaty does not give the European Commission any responsibility for carrying out safety inspections of nuclear installations. However, Article 35 of the Treaty gives the Commission a right of access to facilities necessary for continuous monitoring of the level of radioactivity in the air, water and soil. Commission visits to verify the operation and efficiency

of such facilities were made to Caithness (Dounreay) in May 1993 and March 1999 and to Cumbria (Sellafield) in December 1993. Copies of the reports of the two visits made in 1993 have already been placed in the Library of the House. The report on the 1999 visit to Caithness (Dounreay) has still to be finalised by the Commission.

Electricity Services

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the capacity of the work force of the electricity supply companies to maintain supplies to consumers following severe weather conditions. [115385]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 23 March 2000]:* The Office of Gas and Electricity Markets (OFGEM) establishes distribution price controls based on levels of service, which incorporate the frequency and duration of interruptions, including those due to all but the most severe storms. In addition, OFGEM has asked companies to prepare storm strategies and has stressed the importance of maintenance of supplies under all conditions in future. It is for the management of companies to determine the most appropriate strategies in response to these incentives and concerns.

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will refer the Electricity Distribution Price Review to the scrutiny of the Health and Safety Executive; and if he will make a statement. [115386]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 23 March 2000]:* Safety is of paramount importance in the electricity distribution industry and an issue which transcends price controls. Companies have statutory obligations, enforced by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), as well as the Electricity Supply Regulations 1988, which is the responsibility of the Engineering Inspectorate in my Department. The Office of Gas and Electricity Markets, in proposing price controls, takes account of these obligations and companies, in accepting the price controls, accept their obligations to operate safe networks with the revenues provided.

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will place in the Library the consultant's report to the Regulator of OFFGEM on the Electricity Distribution Price Review. [115426]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 23 March 2000]:* A summary of the consultant's reports to the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets (OFGEM) has already been placed in OFGEM's library.

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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

SIXTH SERIES **VOLUME 346**

SESSION 1999–2000

13th March—24th March 2000

Printed indexes to Hansard

The volume index is one of three printed indexes to Commons Hansard produced from the House of Commons Library's Parliamentary On-Line Indexing Service (POLIS). It contains references to material in the bound volumes of Hansard. The other indexes produced are:

- The fortnightly index to Hansard. This covers the same date range as the volume index but references are to the column numbering in the daily parts and weekly edition of Hansard.
- The sessional index to Hansard. This contains references to material in the bound volumes for a whole session.

Indexes on the Parliamentary website

Fortnightly, volume and sessional indexes covering material from the beginning of the 1999/2000 session will also appear on the Parliamentary website at http://www.parliament.uk with links to the full text of Hansard.

SCOPE

The indexes include entries covering:

- The content of all material recorded in Hansard, including debates, procedural motions and questions.
- The names of all Members contributing to the Parliamentary business recorded in Hansard.
- The names of some types of Parliamentary business whenever they occur in Hansard. These are 'Ministerial statements', 'Business statements', 'Opposition days' and 'Estimates days'.

ARRANGEMENT

- All headings are in one word-by-word alphabetical sequence, with Members' contribution entries distinguished from other entries by italics.
- Where a Member contributes to Parliamentary business and is the subject of Parliamentary business there are separate contribution and subject entries, the subject entry coming first.
- Entries beginning 'Mac' and 'Mc' are sorted in one sequence as 'Mac'.
- 'St', when abbreviated for Saint, is filed as 'Saint'.
- Numbers are filed as if spelt out, e.g. '10 Downing Street' as if 'Ten Downing Street'.

HEADINGS

Choice of headings

- *Specificity*—Entries summarise the overall content of a debate or question as specifically as the various POLIS thesauruses allow. For example, Education, Higher education, Universities or the name of a particular university is used depending on the breadth of the item.
- *Name headings*—Specific entries are included for the names of people, places, institutions, organisations, committees, programmes, initiatives, publications and legislation when these constitute the overall subject of an item.
- *Organisations and subjects*—Organisation entries are preferred for material about the general performance, administration and staffing of an organisation (for example, United Kingdom Passports Agency, Standards). Subject entries are preferred for what organisations do as part of their duties (for example, Passports, Fees and charges).

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- *Subject headings*—Subject headings are assumed to refer to the whole of England, Great Britain or the United Kingdom unless otherwise stated.
- *Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales*—Material relating to the whole of Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales is indexed under these headings.
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- *Foreign countries*—Most material relating to foreign countries is collected under the name of that country. Some additional material may be found under the names of—groups of countries, areas within countries, geographical features, place names associated with particular issues, politicians and heads of state, international bodies, and institutions and companies operating in those countries.
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Parliamentary material and business

- *Material about Parliament*—This is indexed under 'Parliament', the names of the two Houses, the 'Palace of Westminster' and parts of the Parliamentary estate (such as 'Portcullis House').
- *Committees*—Material about committees is indexed under 'Committees', types of committee (such as 'Select committees') and the names of individual committees (such as 'Home Affairs Select Committee').
- *Parliamentary proceedings/procedures*—Material discussing these is indexed under the specific type of proceeding (such as 'Parliamentary questions' or 'Oral questions'), procedure (such as 'Calling of Members') or issue (such as 'Unparliamentary expressions').
- *Legislation*—Entries for Parliamentary proceedings on bills and statutory instruments are entered under their titles. Where the lead word of the bill or statutory instrument does not provide a full or clear indication of the subject there are additional subject entries when the bill or instrument is debated. For example, debates on the 'Child Support Pensions and Social Security Bill' have entries under 'Pensions' and 'Social security benefits' as well as under the title of the Bill.
- *Members' names*—These are given in the form by which the Member prefers to be known.
- *Speaker and Chair*—Contributions by the Speaker and deputies are brought together under the heading 'Speaker and deputies'. Contributions from the chair during Committees of the Whole House are brought together under 'Chairman of Committee of the Whole House'. Significant rulings and statements (as opposed to routine comments) are indicated by the sub-heading 'Rulings and statements' in both cases.

Guidance on headings

- *Cross references*—'See' references indicate all the material has been entered under another heading. 'See also' references indicate that additional information may be found under another heading.
- *Concept thesaurus*—A copy of the subject thesaurus to POLIS, listing the concept entries used in the index, is available on the Parliamentary website. A hard copy is available from the Head of the POLIS Unit, House of Commons Library, 1 Derby Gate, London, SW1A 2DG (020 7219 6456).

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- References in the indexes are to columns rather than pages.
- References to debates, but not questions, are accompanied by the date of the item.
- There are separate sequences in Hansard for the material taken on the floor of the House, Westminster Hall sittings and written questions:
  - References consisting of a number by itself indicate material taken on the floor of the House.
  - References ending in 'wh' indicate Westminster Hall sittings.
  - References ending in 'w' indicate written questions.
- References under all headings except the names of Members contributing to Parliamentary business and the titles of legislation are listed in one numerical sequence irrespective of whether the material is taken on the floor of the House, is discussed at a Westminster Hall sitting or is a written question.
- References under the names of Members contributing to Parliamentary business and the titles of legislation are listed in numerical sequence under the following headings:
  - *Debates etc.* (which includes interventions and points of order as well as significant contributions to debates);
  - *Sittings in Westminster Hall* (covering all debates held as part of the Westminster Hall sittings); and
  - *Questions* (which includes written, oral and private notice questions).

ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations are used in connection with the progress of bills:

- 1R=First reading
- 2R=Second reading
- Com=Committee stage
- Rep=Report stage
- 3R=Third reading
- res=resolution
- amendt(s)=amendment(s)
- *=matter taken formally without debate or division.

Parliamentary background

- The Parliamentary website at http://www.parliament.uk contains a range of information about Parliament and the full text of some Parliamentary papers and proceedings including Hansard.
- Information on current Parliamentary business is provided in the House of Commons Information Office *Weekly Information Bulletin*, available on the website and from The Stationery Office (020 7873 8499).
- Further information on Parliamentary proceedings and procedures is available from the House of Commons Information Office (020 7219 4272).

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